

infinite sky

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infinite sky

by [idkintired](#)

Summary

jean's first year with the trojans as they try to teach him life

Here even the shadows hold colour, a blend of royal purples, midnight blue, blood red and winter green like expensive ink. In the Nest the shadows were just black, a shade darker than the rest. Maybe he's imagining things. Maybe there aren't any colours in the shadows. Shadows are the same everywhere, why should California be any different? He stops looking. But he does let himself breathe in the sky as they walk, infinite and dark and right up there above them.

Notes

a few trigger warnings - vague mention of rape, mentions of violence / abuse, mention of suicide attempt, jeans just pretty depressed, i dont think itll be this bad the whole way through but i dont actually know

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

before

Panic has been building in Jean's chest since he was 12 years old and he first realised what his father did as a living. Something uncomfortable and tight that takes him years to acknowledge and even longer to name, something that makes it hard to breathe sometimes and even harder to eat, something that feels like the moment before you burst into tears, but the tears never come. It starts as something small, making sure he checks that all the doors and windows are locked, something that has him waking up in the middle of the night and checking his little sister is still there, still breathing, something that has him clutching her hand a little too tight on their walk to school.

Then he turns fourteen and he's being used and he knows it, used to deliver messages mostly but it feels like betrayal anyway and suddenly he has a better weapon against the tightness squeezing the breath from his lungs at the back of his throat. He wields his anger like a sword, too heavy for his young hands, clumsy and sharp, as likely to hurt himself as others. It's a roaring sound of emptiness crashing in his ears, making his heart pound, but it pushes the fear back, snarling teeth bared so he gives in, letting it drag him through days on its adrenaline, falling into bed exhausted each night. He gets into more fights than even his school approves of and when they phone home he comes into school the next day with bruises that aren't from those fights. But it doesn't stop the hole deep inside filled with a storm. He still checks the locks at night, still reads his little sister her bedtime story.

He turns fifteen and it doesn't stop, the panicked uneasy tension in his shoulders wherever someone looks at him twice and he doesn't know whether he's angrier at the world or himself, can no longer tell if he can't breathe because he wants to hit something or break down and cry, if he's clenching his fist because he wants to swing or to hold himself together. His older brother laughs at his anger and takes him out, hands him a bottle and a cigarette and tells him to have fun. He finds it's the perfect way to drown out both the panic and the anger and lets himself fall. He no longer cares if someone opens the door or the window to drag him away. But he still holds his little sister's hand as he walks her to her piano lessons.

Then he's sixteen and he thinks that maybe this is it. The climax of his story, where his panic stops building but breaks instead. He's wrong. He's sold and he's leaving his country for the first time with a man he can't understand and for the first time he's so angry he doesn't just want to hurt. But there's nowhere for that to go so it turns into him and it's eating him alive, angry, angry, angry and he doesn't even know at what anymore. He doesn't remember what it felt like to breathe anyway. But now it's so much worse, the panic justified because even his father didn't hurt him like this. Now the panic is suffocating and he's jumping at each sound because now when he wakes up it's to injuries and blood and memories he doesn't want. But he still has all this anger. Anger that's beaten brutally down until even he knows not to show it, so it buries down, deep inside where it can hurt the places that never should have been touched. He no longer has a lock on his door or a window to close. He doesn't even have a little sister.

Still Jean thinks the feeling in his stomach like nausea, tingling in his finger, setting his shoulders on edge, tightening his lungs, waking him at night, it must be building up to

something. It builds and builds and he's drowning in it as it gets worse and worse and worse and no one notices and there must be a limit, surely it can't keep going. There are moments, moments where he thinks this is it, the limit, what the feeling has been leading him to because nothing could get worse than this. Moments like the first time he really believes he is going to die, gasping for breaths in between minutes without, like the first time Riko ties him to a bed and smiles as he tells the upperclassmen to take and take and take, like the first time he tries to die or when he wakes up afterwards, still alive, found before could be gone completely. But it just keeps going, keeps rising, keeps building and he keeps drowning keeps sinking deeper and deeper into the feeling.

And then that night. It's not the first time he thinks Riko might kill him, but it is the first time he thinks he might be trying to. And afterwards Jean is alone. All alone with no one to even try to mop up the mess of blood and bruises and burns and worse and he might just die anyway. From blood loss or infection or something as equally pointless and useless and that anger, the anger that he thought maybe had died, is back, strangling him so hard it might kill him first. So angry because what was the point? What was the point of even making it so far, of existing at all if this is the end? It's anger and bitterness and something else that makes his broken throat want to scream at the entire world that makes him pick up the phone, muscles and skin and everything in between barely able to grip it, to type a number, but he makes it, sheer spite forcing his broken body just far enough. For the first time in his life Jean Moreau asks for help and for the first time, he gets it.

He's barely conscious, drifting half out of the world when Renee walks in, phone in hand. Barely conscious during his entire rescue, half carried out. All he can make out is pain, exhaustion and the bright flash of Renee's hair and her soft voice speaking a language he is too far gone to understand.

Pain is a strange word, a strange concept. It can't really be summed up in one word, or even a sentence. It can't really be explained at all, not even with paragraphs and pages of time. Everyone has reached their own level of pain, the level by which they judge, be it a scraped knee or a broken bone. It's strange because once it's gone our brains try to get rid of it completely, tucking the memory away and acknowledging only that it was bad and to be avoided but the feeling itself is forgotten, lost, pushed hurriedly aside. But what if you've spent the past seven years in pain? What if your body has instead forgotten what it feels like to be painless? What if the scale you abide by is different from anyone else's simply because you have known so much worse? If a scraped knee doesn't even count on the scale? What then?

What if the kind of agony you have suffered can't simply be forgotten?

Jean is flying high above reality. No. He is drifting. Flying suggests a purpose, a direction, flying suggests that he is making an effort in the movement. Instead he is drifting in a cloud of painkiller and sleeping pills, his mind somewhere far away from the broken body, unmoving in a bed for days, that it usually finds itself attached to. It's ok. He drifts off, detached and indifferent. Watching, as if from a cinema seat, events of his life twisted into

dreams by the drugs floating through his system. Watches, as if watching a stranger on a street, his older brother play against Riko, both wearing crowns of blood and dust, until crows sweep in, sweeping them both away like chess pieces on a hollow board. Watches a younger him driving his father's old car, small legs too short to reach the brakes, hands too small to turn the wheel, his little sister singing in the back as they race through the highway going too fast with no way of stopping. Watches dream after dream circle above the lifeless form of what used to be him. He keeps his eyes closed, allows whoever to keep feeding him those drugs, and drifts.

He's told eleven days have past the first time he gets out of bed. He nods unable to bring himself to care, but it doesn't really seem right. Time had kept going but Jean hadn't, it didn't seem right that eleven days had passed when he felt like it had been no time at all, that he had never really been here, but also that it had been forever, that he had spent infinity wandering through dreams.

He goes outside, still in pyjamas, old ones borrowed from someone, too small on his legs but a too big t-shirt, and lies in the grass of the garden. Behind the haze of pills, he can still feel the pain, dulled and distant but there, easily ignored. He lies on his back and breathes in the smell of the grass, how it clings to him cold and wet, drowns out the sounds of the cars on the street in favour of the soft rustling of the wind and occasional chirp of a bird, he looks up and he drinks in the sight of the sky rolling on and on above him, an endless expanse of blue, broken by the odd cloud. The sky never stops. He takes comfort in that. That the sky never stops or changes. He never thought he would miss the sky but he has. He's missed the sky and now there it is. Just above him. He closes his eyes and lets the knowledge of the sky above calm him down just for now.

Someone comes out and tries to get him to come inside but when he gives no indication to having heard they leave him be. He watches the sky darken slowly, a grey pulling away the soft blue to replace it with gold and red, tinting the world below, tinting Jean. He watches the sun leave, taking its golds and reds and letting the sky have its blue back, darker now but deeper too, littered with stars, an opening into the universe. Maybe Jean isn't looking up, maybe he's at the bottom of the earth, looking down into the universe below with only gravity holding him down. If only it would let him go, let him tumble softly into the stars, falling down into the deep blue sky, away, away, away. For a second, he feels like it will, like he's about to fall, to be dropped off the face of the earth. But gravity is too proud, too vain, too greedy, to let him go. He remains stuck to the grass, staring into the heavens and wishing they wouldn't stare back.

The very next day he's told he's free. He has to play, he has to pay but he is free. His payment is money, nothing else, he doesn't have to go back. He doesn't have to go back. And it's too late. He doesn't have to go back but it's too late, years too late, because now he doesn't know what to do. Doesn't know how to be a human anymore, how to be anything more than a number, than a possession, doesn't even know how to breath without feeling like it's something he's only being allowed for the time being. It's too late.

He takes a sleeping pill and tries very hard not to think. Goes to bed.

The Trojans are a good team, says Kevin, Jeremy Knox is a good captain. They will be perfect for Jean since he doesn't want to play with the Foxes. Jean ignores him, ignores his relief at Jean's refusal to play with him and his hurt, ignores it all so he doesn't have to think about the crashing panic that threatens to pull him down and hold him there until he drowns at the thought of transferring. A new team, a new captain. If he pretends none of this is real it can't hurt him. But he lets Kevin do it anyway. Lets him make that decision, lets him plan and organise it. He's too used to someone else planning his life, deciding what he will do and when, he no longer cares. Probably can no longer do it by himself anyway. He tells himself the reason he doesn't get out of bed is because he's still recovering from his injuries.

He doesn't watch the match.

But he watches the news afterwards. The news full of baffled reporters repeating the Foxes won? like it's a question. Like they still aren't sure, like it might be a trick, a joke, too stunned to even properly explain how. Jean has to go empty his stomach into the toilet, unsure if the laughter that follows is hysteria or genuine. So Riko lost then, the crownless king, thrown ripped from under him. He retches again, his laughter turning into sobs and back again. He's gone, he's far away and gone and he's not going back. If he was there he would be dead. If he was there they might not have lost. If he was there... but he wasn't. Riko would be... more than mad, more than raging, more even than livid. Jean doesn't think he has a word in either of his languages for it. He doesn't think that Riko's sane, never has, but the past year has been worse, the past year Jean has been able to watch anything Riko had leave his eyes, replaced by something he can't name. Madness maybe. Even before Kevin left, but that was what sent him over whatever ledge was left. Jean doesn't want to think about his reaction. Losing... it feels foreign, impossible. And yet.

He goes back into the sitting room. And there it is - his answer, Riko's reaction. Suicide feels wrong for him, out of character. Jean feels impossibly tired. This too feels too late. Too late for him, too late for the person he could have been. Riko is too real, a ghost he won't get rid of, even by his death. He doesn't think this was Riko's doing. Riko took his anger out on others, not himself, he wouldn't even consider this his fault. Should Jean feel glad someone shot him? That he's dead? All he feels is tired, so tired. Empty.

Jeremy had met Jean before of course. Several times even, they had exchanged a nod, a handshake, they had collided and fought for possession on court. Even if they had never met, he would know Jean, know him as number 3, the third member of Riko's 'perfect court', know him from the times on tv, in sports magazines and newspapers. Always in the shadow of numbers 1 and 2 but there none-the-less.

But he still feels like he met Jean for the first time at Abby's house. The contract had already been signed and confirmed, all the details ironed out for the next year but he had driven over after the sports season's end, just before his exams anyway. Kevin had said Jean had badly injured, had implied worse, stuttering and stumbling over his words like he wasn't sure how much he could get away with. Jeremy had wanted to see Jean himself before the summer took him away, had wanted to see the extent of his injuries but also the man bearing them, unable to quench his curiosity. So he had. He'd driven in Abby's driveway, knocked on the average-looking house's door, beamed at her when she answered. He's not sure, now, what he had been expecting, but it wasn't what he saw. And it sure wasn't, even at the time, to be unable to rid his mind for the whole summer of the image of Jean at the kitchen table.

He can remember the whole half-hour he spent there as clear as day, most likely due to his brain playing it on loop for months. He exchanged the usual pleasantries with Abby in the hall, greetings, enquiries of health, the weather, her house, the drive down, before asking how Jean was, at which she sighed, her gaze going suddenly infinitely sad and led him to the kitchen. It was a nice normal kitchen, small but tidy and clean, a cream counter and wooden table, sunlight warming and lighting the room. Jeremy can even remember what he'd been wearing- a light grey tracksuit and a Trojan jersey. In that alone he'd been hot but the boy sitting sideways at the table didn't seem to notice the heat, couldn't have if he was wearing that huge purple jumper, hood pulled over his head. Jeremy had stopped just inside the doorway, unsure what to do when the other boy didn't bother look over, hating the sudden, unfamiliar awkwardness that overcame him. Abby came in after him and seemingly unimpressed by the boy's silence had called his name, reproach clear in her voice as she went to the kettle to prepare some tea, waving at Jeremy to take a seat. He did, gladly, offering her a bright smile of thanks.

They sat on opposite sides of the small table with Jeremy nearest to the door and Jean to the window, but sitting as he was, Jean had to turn his head to look at him. Which he did only as soon as Jeremy was sitting. Jeremy got a flash of grey eyes, the rest of his face hidden by the shadow of his hood, seizing him up before a bandaged hand pushed his hood back. Jean had turned back around, clearly not bothered to deal with Jeremy's reaction, had asked, voice hoarse from disuse, for black coffee. Jeremy had barely taken note of Abby's surprise, he'd been too busy trying to hide his own shock. It was clear that Jean had not, as the news had said and Kevin had tiptoed around, suffered from an accident, sports related or not. The black hair visible from under the hood still half on, had been shaved short, but it was clear chunks had been ripped out. His nose was clearly still healing from where it had been broken, taped up as it was, and bruises still coloured his face and neck despite it being over a month since. A brutal red line sliced through his skin from the side of his nose running under his eye over to his ear and a bandage still covered the 3 on his cheek. But the worst, the absolute worst by far, had been his eyes. Framed by long delicate lashes and dark circles betraying exhaustion, they looked... empty. Jeremy had not noticed, before that moment, that eyes were in any way 'full' but Jean's eyes, even as they darted around and assessed him, were vacant and hollow like something was missing.

Oh.

Oh. oh, oh, oh, oh, oh.

Oh.

Jeremy felt nauseous as pieces fell into place. Kevin's anxious evasion of specific answers and jittery attitude to Jean, the accusations of abuse within the Ravens, Kevin leaving the Ravens, Jean leaving them, the way they both watched Riko before. By the time Jean looked back at him, he had forced a smile back on, building it up piece by piece as fast as he could. Jean didn't seem to care. He wanted to know, needed too, but it hadn't been the moment. So he had put on a smile, accepted his tea and chattered through his time there, mostly with Abby as Jean had remained quiet, not speaking unless spoken too and then giving only one word answers, but watching him carefully the whole time.

This is the image that haunted him through the summer, the one his mind fixated on through each day: Jean Moreau sitting at the kitchen table, one leg tucked under the other, looking down at his coffee as the afternoon sun carved his outline out in warm gold, bathing him in colour, bruises and worse carved out starkly on his face like a watercolour painting, grey eyes drifting up to meet Jeremys then holding his stare coldly, with something that looked like stubborn defiance. Somewhere in Jean Moreau, locked and hidden away, raged an ocean of anger.

Summer: swimming, the beach, surfing, exy, his teammates, his family, his girlfriend, icecream, the sun, the sea, late nights, laughing, old friends... that goddamn image he can't get out of his head.

Summer: wondering about texting Kevin but putting it off at lack of words to say. He isn't used to being unsure on how to express himself but he has no idea what to say, what to ask, when surely he should just ask Jean himself. He doesn't end up having to do anything. The day before Jean is due to arrive, Kevin texts him himself.

He can't be alone.

Jeremy doesn't have to ask who 'he' is.

arriving

Chapter Notes

(dont have the energy for a proper chapter name)
slightly less depressed than the last chapter :)

Traffic wages it's usual war against Jeremy's less-than-perfect time keeping skills and he groans in frustration at the snaking line of cars in front of him, stretching beyond the end of the road. He had actually left *early*, determined to be on time for once, but he had once more forgotten the universe's persistent grudge against him, ensuring he was somehow always losing little pockets of time. How you could lose time, Jeremy didn't know but it was the theory he was sticking to. The universe was stealing little minutes here and there and then dumping them on him as soon as he was in traffic or already late. How was it possible otherwise, that he had left an entire half hour early and is still going to be late? The line of cars, shimmering in the heat, inches forward with excruciating slowness. He drums on the steering wheel, trying not to fidget too much and to get rid of the urge to get out of the car and just run. It was Coach's car and he would murder Jeremy if he left it - it had actually been a condition of Jeremy's borrowing of the car, *don't leave it somewhere because you got bored of traffic or suddenly wanted to walk*, at the time Jeremy had thought it an exaggeration or a joke, but he now realises that the Coach knows him far too well.

He parks badly, much to the disgust of an elderly couple walking past, and, giving them an apologetic grin, near-runs into the airport. It's packed, people coming or going home as the end of the summer holidays looms, and he finds himself weaving through a crowd, cursing them all and the oppressive heat as he tries to figure out where he should be. Sun soaked families argue as they struggle with more bags than any of them can carry, elderly couples judge people's parking skills as they hobble through the parking lot and excited groups of friends hang off of each other, talking too fast and too loud for any of them to be heard, but nowhere does he see a lone french backliner. He runs a hand through his hair, a habit that makes sure his curls are in constant disarray, and checks his watch again, groans, foot tapping as he considers where Jean could be. He's twenty minutes late... maybe he went to get a coffee while waiting for Jeremy to bother to show up? Or maybe his flight was delayed? Or what if he assumed Jeremy wasn't going to show up and he's already gone? Worst case scenarios after the others have been checked, he tells himself dryly, no need to panic yet, it's not like you're not both responsible adults... in theory. That haunting image comes back to him but he pushes it away and goes to check the arrivals listings.

Jean's flight *was* delayed, much to his guilty relief, so he goes to buy himself a coffee consisting of mostly cream, milk and sugar, and even has the time to finish it before the new estimated arrival time. He sits at the front of the café, watching people pass as he drinks and

tries not to worry about Jean's arrival and Kevin's text and the upcoming season and getting his team in shape from playing full matches. Adding Moreau to their line up was a good decision, actually it was more like an amazing stroke of luck that he wanted to transfer at all, but not one without consequences for the team and backlash from the press. At first he had simply been delighted that the best backliner of college exy probably anywhere wanted to join his team and had accepted without thinking much beyond that. Five minutes after talking to Kevin however, he had begun to consider it in a little more detail. As good as Jean was, is, his style is very different from that of the Tojan's, far more violent than they accept as tolerable and it would take some adapting to fit him into the team, but Jeremy had pushed this aside, figuring that even if it was a challenge, they would make it work. He hadn't thought beyond that until seeing Jean way back before summer. Now he realises that Jean's style might not be the only problem. But it was the right decision, for the team and Jean, and he was sticking by it. He nods to himself, getting an odd look from a passing waitress and offering a smile in return.

The ringing of his phone comes as a sudden jolt from his thoughts and for a second he panics, sure he's forgotten something important. Reality interrupts and the second stops, defeated by the more reasonable part of his brain telling him it's most likely one of his teammates wondering if he has Jean yet and how it's going. He hums along to the tune of the ringtone, his favourite song, as he tries to figure out from which pocket it's coming from. He finds it in his left pocket and wishes he hadn't. He bites his lip as the screen demands that he either pick up or hang up and decides on neither, placing it carefully on the table as far away as possible. Waits for his mother to give up while drumming on his knees, telling himself the funny feeling in his stomach is from the excessive sugar he just drank. He can tell her he was picking someone up from the airport. It wouldn't even be a lie.

Picking Jean out from the flood of bedraggled passengers of the late flight, all looking like they just made it through a warzone and back, is easy. Gazes turn his way, a gaggle of teenage girls giggling hopelessly and a small boy looking from his sports magazine and back. He's got a plaster covering his number three tattoo but it doesn't do much for his highly recognisable face. Although whether or not all the stares are because he's being recognised is debatable. Once more he seems oblivious to the heat, with an oversized grey jumper drowning him in fabric, although he does wear shorts. The only baggage he has is a sports bag slung over one shoulder, Jeremy decides not to ask. He makes his way over, grinning warmly, and gets a blank look in return, so blank that for a beat he thinks Jean hasn't recognised him until he gets a wary nod.

"Hey, welcome to USC." He waves dramatically to the tired, grey airport around them and hides his own wince when Jean takes a step backwards, eyes tracking his hand instead of what it's showing. No sudden movements then. Noted. "Ah - how was your flight?" Jean shrugs, eyes dropping to his shoes. He looks exhausted. Up close Jeremy can see his bruises have had the time to heal but scars crisscross his nose and one traces his cheek, another his jaw.

"I'm sorry for the delay," he says so quietly it might just be a whisper. He sounds like he hasn't spoken all summer, voice even hoarser than the last time Jeremy saw him. Jeremy

should not have had all that sugar, he's jittery, too much excess energy spilling out in the form of a fidgeting hand and shuffling feet.

"It's ok," he says, shrugging it off, "I was actually running late so really you saved me from looking bad." Jean says nothing, doesn't even look up. Right, ok ok, this is going fine. He offers to take the other boy's bag but Jean clutches it closer, shaking his head, mistrust flashing clearly on his face before it's replaced once more with the dead mask. Message received. He leads the way to the car, Jean following him, always at an arm's length away and a beat behind.

They climb in and he takes off, chattering away about the plan for the next week - Jeremy and Jean are both a week early for classes but the rest of the team will be arriving over the next two days to settle in before term begins, so they aren't the only ones early. Practise, he explains, will begin once everyone is here. Jean remains silent, giving little to no indication that he's listening to a word but for the occasional nod, never even looking over at Jeremy, much less meeting his eyes, instead choosing to stare out the window. When he runs out of things to say about the upcoming week, Jeremy starts to point out various attractions visible as they pass by. Still no reaction, but it makes him feel better if one of them, at least, is talking.

He pulls into his usual parking space, sparing Jean a grin before getting out of the car with some relief. Jean had not said a single word the entire ride and it felt odd to be talking at someone as opposed to with someone. Jean follows him out, closing the door carefully behind him with a soft click and pulling his bag once more over his shoulder. This time Jeremy doesn't offer to take it. Instead, he leads the way, once more, to the athlete's apartments, handing Jean his new keys as they walk and explaining what each one is for. Jean seems surprised, taking them slowly, uncertainly, with a small frown, his mouth opening like he wants to say something before shutting tight, his jaw clenched. Jeremy tries not to look like he's watching too closely at how the other boy swallows, his fingers curling around the keys, thumb running up and down the one to their rooms. Did he not have any at the Nest?

Jeremy shakes himself out of his wonderings with a smile, hoping it doesn't look fake, to show Jean first the gym at the bottom floor and then their rooms on the fifth.

"Older students get a room each," he explains as Jean looks around their shared kitchen and sitting room, "It means that they're small but it's worth it," he pauses, remember Kevin's text and wonders if he just made a mistake, "I mean... if that's um ok with you? You can share a room if you'd like of course." Jean looks over at him from his place by the windows, hand on the glass, eyebrow slightly arched. He looks like he thinks Jeremy is an idiot. Oh. He has made a mistake. But then Jean nods and looks away again, back to the sky outside starting to darken. "Yes, as in you don't mind having your own room?" hazards Jeremy and gets another blank look accompanied by a nod. "Right," he sinks with relief. "Right, cool, well, this is it then." He pushes the door and steps back to let Jean look in. The other boy glances over with minimal interest but doesn't move from his spot at the window. Ok then.

Jeremy wonders if he should just leave and let him settle in alone without Jeremy hovering but Kevin's text is still burning a loop in his mind. He follows Jean's gaze to the setting sky

and jumps, checking his watch, as he realises how late it must be getting. Jean must be starving and his own stomach growls reminding him he isn't the only one.

“Hey,” he clears his throat, “Um - do, i know you must be tired but uh do you want to get something to eat? We don't have anything in the fridge or cupboards... have to go shopping tomorrow actually,” - he turns towards the kitchen, momentarily distracted - “But yeah anyway so if we want to eat tonight, it's gonna have to be out. Unless - takeaway... which would you prefer?” He should really have foreseen the shrug he gets in response. “Ok, um. Do you mind going out?” He can't really see himself sitting in silence here through dinner and a restaurant offers more conversation topics, as well as reducing awkwardness levels with the presence of other people. Jean shakes his head.

“Perfect!” he tries not to sound too relieved, “Now?” A nod. “Cool, cool, cool, uh you can leave your bag, I'll pay - take it as a welcoming feast.” Another nod, less certain and slightly more reluctant. He waits while Jean leaves his bag in his new room, closing the door carefully behind him. “There's a key if you want to lock it.” Jean freezes and he wonders if that was the wrong thing to say, flustered when the boy takes a minute to move again but when he does it's to select a key and lock his room. Good. Good, good, good. This is going fine. Summoning his courage, Jeremy smiles and decides on the place to go have Jean's welcoming dinner.

Jean had spent the entire plane ride rotating between panic so strong all he could do is try desperately to remind his lungs how to breathe and an emptiness so deep that the last minutes panic felt like an unreal dream, distant and faded. He played old french songs at full volume on the phone Renee bought him, earphones pouring the beat straight into his ears. Did his best to concentrate on the lyrics singing in a language full of memories of a childhood he hasn't let himself think about in years and the melodies dragging him out of the stranger-filled plane and away into the sky he could see out of the small window, begging him to dream of racing through the clouds, soft and white, and being free under the sky above, a prince of the world far above anyone he's ever known, a world only few look at and only for hours at a time. It almost worked. But he knows that clouds are just droplets of water, defying gravity for a chance to fly, that they are not strong enough to hold him up, no matter how hollow he feels. So instead he couldn't rid his mind of the image of falling. The cold, the wind, his lungs giving up when the air rushes past instead of stopping for them, his hands reaching one last time for the sun before the earth, too cruel to let him go, has him once more. Would he even feel the pain? Would it be worth it to feel the freedom of the fall?

He was glad when they touched down. Although some part of him still longed to be up, flying in the sky, far away from the world.

He clings to whatever calm he can get from numbness as he passes through the airport, trying not to think about being late. How long has it been since Jean was late for anything? It was

something his father and Riko had in common, the need for punctuality, and he had learnt it quickly. Late, late, late. If only he could turn his music up further, if only it was doing anything against the voices in his head. He takes a moment to stop his hands from shaking. He wants to crawl back into bed and pretend none of this is happening.

Jeremy Knox is so bright it hurts, as if he's been soaking up the sun and now, just like the moon, is reflecting it back, it's heat and light, too bright, too bright, too bright. There's a reason no one ever looks directly at the sun and Jean is relearning it now. Kevin and Renee and even Abby's repeated affirmations that Jeremy Knox is nothing like Riko march through his head but they fade with the wide gesture he makes and the involuntary step Jean takes back, protective instincts kicking in. He speaks for the first time in months, his tongue strange and unused to the feel of the words rolling around his mouth, and it's to apologise and if he had any energy left he would hate himself, he really would. Already apologising for things the rational voice, growing smaller and quieter over the years, in his head knows aren't his fault. But Knox laughs it off with ease and Jean wonders what that must be like, laughing, smiling so easily, like it costs nothing. Maybe it doesn't. He's not sure anymore.

Knox talks and talks and talks. Even when Jean refuses to let him take his bag, even when Jean doesn't say a word back, he talks about the team and their surroundings and his favourite pizza place. Jean lets it wash over him, relieved when Knox doesn't seem to mind when he doesn't answer, but makes sure he's taking it all in, all the information handed to him for free. It's hot, even with the windows partly down, air blowing his short hair back when they move, and he almost wants to take his jumper off. Almost.

Arriving at the athletes rooms Jean stops hearing what Knox is saying for a minute. Windows, there are windows everywhere. Skylights, floor to ceiling ones in the sitting room and smaller ones dotting through the halls. Window and windows and windows. The sky pours into the building, painting it with all of it's colours and filling it up with the sun. The sun drenching every corner in heat and light, filling each crevice and dancing through each breath of air. Everywhere he looks, Jean can see the sky, endless and infinite and *here*. Here, here, here, touching his skin, his hair, reaching through the windows to fill him up. No wonder the Trojans all seem to flourish. They live in the sky.

When Jeremy asks him if he would prefer to share a room he can't fathom complaining so long as he too gets to live in the sky. He slept alone in Abby's and, even if it was because of the drugs he had pumping through his system, he would prefer not having to share a room with any of his new teammates. Would rather not have to put anyone else through the trauma of Jean trying to sleep. He starts to count the amount of sleeping pills he has left. Knox interrupts before he can calculate the exact amount. Food. The thought of going out is exhausting but the thought of speaking or going against Knox's decision feels even more draining so he finds himself following his new captain out onto the campus.

It's cooler now, the sun darkening into reds and purples, pulling it's heat away with it. It makes wearing a jumper infinitely more comfortable even if it hasn't dropped enough to be necessary. Knox is quieter now, calmer, humming a song as they walk and giving the occasional comment or explanation of something they are passing by. It's the first time Jean

has been out, just casually out on a walk to get food, since... years actually. Maybe once or twice with Kevin? Maybe? Maybe he hasn't since France. Really, come to think of it, maybe he never has. He looks around now, feeling like an imposter in the calm streets, the occasional laughter of other early college students or chatter of tourists impossibly far away from him. Shadows spill from the sides of the street. Here even the shadows hold colour, a blend of royal purples, midnight blue, blood red and winter green like expensive ink. In the Nest the shadows were just black, a shade darker than the rest. Maybe he's imagining things. Maybe there aren't any colours in the shadows. Shadows are the same everywhere, why should California be any different? He stops looking.

But he does let himself breathe in the sky as they walk, infinite and dark and right up there above them.

breakfast and dinner

Chapter Notes

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

Even the dreamy haze of sleeping pills can't save Jean from a dawn wake up, his body moving sluggishly to fight off someone who isn't there when he gasps awake with a jolt. He isn't allowed as many pills now that he's mostly healed, meaning they don't last the full night. He tries to avoid thinking about what he'll do when they run out. Sitting up in a tangle of sheets, slowly regaining the ability to breathe, he wishes he could go on a run. He can remember the long runs he went on as a teenager in France, the steady drum of his legs, the eventual sharpness to each breath, how at a certain point all he could think of was of keeping going, of not stopping, and every other concern or thought seemed insignificant and far away. He hasn't been a real run like that since those days and isn't sure why he's thinking of it now but, god, he needs the sense of freedom those runs gave him, freedom from his own head, freedom from everyone and everything, as much of an illusion as it was.

He struggles to his feet, unravelling himself from the sheets wrapped around his legs, fending off the unease of being trapped, even by something so innocent, and trying to do it as calmly as possible instead. In this heat the sheets were useless, worse - suffocating, but he has never been able to shake the small and false sense of protection they offer, no matter how many times it has been proven wrong. Carefully selecting a jumper from his bag and pulling it on, again suffocating in the heat but a small protective measure that costs him almost nothing, he scans the room for any change since last night. He knows, really he does, that no one came in during the night, that he would have woken up, that the bed lamp was on and he would have seen them, but it's just another habit he can't shake. The room is, as Knox had warned, small, the bed on one side taking up the entire length of the room. Facing him is a light wooden desk and swivel chair with a cork board hanging above and matching drawers and a wardrobe stand to his left opposite the door. At his back, above the bed, a huge window pours the soft dawn light into the room, stretching across the wooden floorboards and drifting lazily over his open bag. It's all light and bright colours, a nice bedroom. It feels wrong. The normality of it, how nothing is off, everything right how he left it, everything in the open light, simple, easy, wrong. He closes the door quietly behind him as he leaves.

It's quiet, the only breathing his own, the only sound the distant chatter of birds outside the windows. It feels calm, the world not yet awake, even the sun only shining a few lazy beams into the pink morning. The world seems at peace, one whole being, complete and gentle, with Jean unsure how he fits in, feeling like a broken shard in a world where nothing else is even crumpled. If everything else is whole, what was he broken off of? If he were normal, unbroken, he would relish in the freedom of alone, bask in the early morning light and birdsong like it was made for him. As he is, Jean can't be alone without the conflicting desire to never see another human being again and the need to find someone, anyone, before punishment came for not having his partner, before his mind went into a spiral of panic at the empty space where someone should be. As he is, Jean knows all too well that the world was not made for him.

His feet bring him to the window, to the world just outside, the sky pink and orange and blue stretching out before him, the blue of the night falling to let the morning take its time in waking the city up. He sits down, cross legged, and presses his forehead to the glass, eyes on the light of the rising sun, hand tracing the shapes of the clouds. He won't go on a run, can't, not really, not when even just one door between him and Knox makes him feel bad enough. Instead he waits and watches the sunrise, letting it fill up the empty hole inside with gentle rays of light.

He's on his feet before Knox has even finished opening his door but the other boy doesn't seem to notice, stumbling in with a yawn. He stretches still looking half asleep before spotting Jean and, running a hand through his messy golden locks sticking up at every angle, giving him a sleeping smile.

"Hey," he chirps before a second yawn, rubbing his eyes with a groan, "Good morning. Sleep alright?" Jean nods, looking away when Knox's eyes meet his. Knox hums, seemingly pleased with his response, minimal as it was. "What time is it?" then - "God, already?" he goes into the kitchen, throwing cupboard after cupboard open but doesn't seem to find whatever he's searching. "Hey, you wouldn't mind going out again for breakfast? We can do a grocery shop on the way out." He waves at the empty cupboards, an openly earnest expression on his face. Jean looks away again, choosing to focus on the worn wooden floorboards, sun faded and scratched. As much as having another presence in the room calms a panicked voice in the back of his head screaming at him to find a partner, Knox is too much. Too bright, too... he doesn't even know, too much. Jean shrugs and Knox takes it as acceptance so he goes to get dressed.

Today, as much as Jean hates it, he craves something, anything, familiar so, despite memories that he wishes he could burn along with anyone in them, he dresses in black. Somedays, nothing could get him near an item of even dark clothing, others black is all he can wear, somedays, like today, emptiness claws at his throat and the world is unsteady under his feet and even if all he has is cruelty, he needs something to stabilize the ground underneath him before he loses his footing completely. To his relief Knox says nothing about how he's wearing a black long sleeve when the day is already starting to show heat.

Breakfast. Breakfast means two things to Jean Moreau. It means winking at his little sister as he steals an extra croissant from under the cooks nose over the kitchen table before school. It means her giggles and her delight when he steals her a pain-au-chocolat. It means proper bread, a baguette, with butter or jam, it means a bowl of hot chocolate and a glass of apple juice made fresh by a neighbour, cook humming as she bustles around, bringing breakfast up to his parents in the dining room, singing off key to the croaky radio. It means his favourite part of the day. But breakfast also means nothing, nothing unless Riko deemed he earned it, waking up earlier than anyone else just to do whatever drills Riko had decided on so that he could get a scrap of food, half the size of anyone else, usually oatmeal that tasted of nothing and then waiting, the food right there in front of him until Riko said he could eat. It means not enough, never enough, for the hole in his stomach, it means pain and exhaustion before

the day has even started, it means restraining every aching bone from eating it before he was told, faking calm. It means forcing down a cold slime. He's not sure his expectations are ridiculously high or ridiculously low.

Knox brings him to a small coffee shop tucked behind a cluster of buildings on campus, chattering comfortably as they walk and grinning delightedly when they arrive with the explanation that this is the best coffee shop anywhere on the planet. Jean just nods along with whatever he's saying. The barista and Knox are clearly well acquainted so he hangs back while they talk, taking in the shop and its occupants with detachment. It's mostly empty, large armchairs and low tables taking up most of the space, but a girl works away at a laptop by the window and an old man reads his newspaper in the corner. Chill music hums through the air and the strong smell of coffee drifts towards him. Knox orders 'the usual' with a laugh before turning to Jean expectantly. His smile falls slightly when Jean levels a blank look at him but he fixes it and orders something for Jean instead while sending him an is this ok? look. Jean ignores him, wandering off instead to get a table beside the window, hands in his pockets, aware and uncaring of the hurt look on Knox's face.

He doesn't look up when Knox brings over whatever he ordered, dumping half of it in front of Jean, hands clenched tight enough that his nails are hurting his palms in his pockets. Knox hesitates then sighs and sits down without saying anything. Jean waits until he's started to look at his own food, a black coffee and enormous muffin.

"That's how you take your coffee, right?" asks Knox when Jean doesn't make a move to try anything in front of him, "You had it last time... at Abby's?" His voice flatters and he bites his lip, frowning until Jean nods and he visibly relaxes. "Oh good." Knox goes back to his own food, avocados on toast and a drink that looks like it's more cream and sugar than anything else. Maybe, hazards Jean, because the season hasn't started yet they can eat and drink what they want and that's why Knox seems so relaxed about the amount of sugar and caffeine he's consuming, maybe he's taking advantage of it for now. The past few years of never refusing food and taking whatever is offered kick in and he tentatively tries some muffin, aware of and annoyed by Knox's careful eyes watching him but doing his best to ignore it. It's unbelievably sweet. He gets through his entire coffee but halfway through his muffin starts to feel sick and stops.

Here's the thing - Jean knows, he knows, he knows, he knows he's been abused for years, that Riko, that even his family in France, that none of it was normal, that some parts weren't even legal. But. But that doesn't mean he knows the line. What is to be expected and what isn't? What is normal, what isn't? That line blurred a long time ago for him, leaving him with just a guess at what is acceptable. It's harder to figure out than he would like and he's too tired, too angry that he even has to, to put that much effort into it.

So. So now, looking at his half eaten breakfast, he doesn't know if that's something Knox will, or even can according to whoever decided these things, be annoyed by. Doesn't know if it's just in his messed up world, his messed up head, that this deserves punishment. He knows his parents would have been furious, that it would have been considered ungrateful, insolent and rude. He knows that Riko would have decided that it meant that he didn't need to be fed for a few days because he was clearly overfed or that, just like his parents, it would have been seen as ungrateful and he would have been punished in another manner. But he also knows

that these are both terrible examples to be following. He feels weary, drained, as he tries to figure it out. Should he just eat it despite the nausea in his stomach to avoid conflict? Or test his limits? The decision is made for him by Knox when he cheerfully asks if Jean is finished, no threat to his voice, and doesn't react beyond offering to leave when Jean nods. Jean follows him out of the shop, feeling both impossibly heavy and inexplicably like the smallest thing has been lifted from his shoulders.

Jean doesn't know how to meet new people anymore. He knows all of their stats and numbers but none of their faces and few of their names. Faces blur and he isn't bothered to try to learn names, instead spending his energy on fighting waves of exhaustion crashing down on him. They tower above, crashing down with crushing force, leaving him soaked with weariness and the taste of salt in his mouth. To fend off the unrelenting ocean of emptiness trying to drag him down to its depths he would need an island and a wall but all he has is a battered piece of driftwood barely able to take his weight. His head just about stays above water gasping for precious air while he can.

He stares down repeatedly offered handshakes and ignores friendly smiles, at loss at how to respond and too tired to try. He can't imagine willingly touching anyone, even just palm to palm for a handshake and he's not even sure he still knows how to smile. Even his paparazzi smile faded long ago. How is he supposed to explain that to the Trojans, normal and smiling and bright? He can't. So he doesn't.

He can't even bring himself to care when they frown, hurt and angry, smiles fading at his rudeness and start to avoid him already.

Jeremy is in a particularly good mood by the dinner, having spent his afternoon helping the older Trojans move back in, a help that was more of a hindrance when he inevitably fell into long, enthusiastic conversations, delighted at reuniting with his teammates after the summer. Most he had seen at least a few times but not all and anyway it wasn't the same as seeing someone everyday. The rooms are once more filled with clashing music and loud talking, doors wide open as everyone wanders in and out as they please. Tomorrow the new members to the team, minus Jean, will arrive but for now he's surrounded by people he knows ridiculously well to whom he doesn't have to establish his authority as captain. For now the atmosphere is casual and comfortable and his smile hasn't left his face since lunch. It is generally agreed that dinner will be a communal affair, with all of them heading down to their favourite diner together.

Leaving Alvarez laughing as she tries to wrestle sheets onto her girlfriend's bed, Jeremy goes to find Jean. He's not very difficult to find, sitting on the floor at the sitting room window, one side pressed against it as he stares out into the blue sky. Jeremy tries not to think too much about each of the disastrous introductions throughout the day where the most acknowledgement Jean had given was a vague nod and a bored stare, saying nothing to the friendly offers of friendship that had been laid at his feet. Worry about that tomorrow. Maybe Jean just needs to adjust to a new environment.

“Hey.” Jeremy sits in front of him, too self aware to have a conversation with him standing and Jean sitting. He gets an uninterested glance in response to his efforts. “We’re going out to dinner soon - you gonna come?” Jean stiffens, legs curling into himself but nods, biting his lip and not looking at Jeremy. “Right, cool um -” Jeremy searches desperately for something else to say but is saved by Hector wandering over and announcing that the rest of their teammates are leaving now. Thank god. He scrambles to his feet, relieved to be pulled out of that conversation. Once up, he turns and offers Jean a hand making the other boy flinch before refusing it, getting up to his feet smoothly and with seemingly no effort. Jeremy wonders if he just isn't as fit after a summer without a strict exercise schedule, but no, he doesn't remember ever being able to get to his feet from the floor that easily. Jean trails silently after Jeremy and Hector as they make their way to the others waiting for them on the floor below, ignoring an attempt to be pulled into conversation until they give up.

Jeremy charms the waitress at the diner into letting them pull several tables together to let them all sit together and finds himself sitting between Jean and Alvarez, facing Hector who launches into a long spiel about a girl he had met over the summer, jumping from time to time into an eager rambling story of his various surfboarding expeditions. Jeremy joins forces with Alvarez to tease him about anything even mildly amusing in his stories. The waitress's reappearance takes him by surprise but he gives her his best smile before ordering the same thing he's been having for four years now.

“Maybe try changing it up a bit,” teases Alvarez, poking him with a roll of her eyes.

“Never,” says Jeremy, putting a hand to his chest as if offended by the mere suggestion. And then the poor unsuspecting waitress turns to Jean.

“What will you be having?” she asks cheerily, blushing when he slowly looks up at her. Her smile falters when he says nothing, leveling a hard gaze at her, face blank. The pause stretches and heads along the table turn to see the delay. The poor waitress looks flusters clearing her throat with an anxious, “Um” but Jean just turns away, eyes going to the window as if to look for an escape.

“Sorry,” cuts in Jeremy before things get awkward enough that they could never come back, hoping his face is apologetic enough to make up for it, “He’ll have uh... he’ll have what i’m having.” The waitress beams with relief, noting it down and hurriedly moving on but Jeremy can see his teammates exchanging looks. He sighs but Jean is staring down at his plate, avoiding the looks of everyone else and anyway what can he do? He should probably have realised that if Jean wasn't going to talk to any of his new teammates, he wasn't going to talk to a random stranger. Jeremy turns back to Hector and at his prompting, conversation starts once more.

Jeremy is helping Alvarez bully her girlfriend about the way she pronounces bagul when the waitress returns with their orders, putting Jean's quickly down before moving on as fast as possible. He doesn't even seem to notice, expression unchanging, the only hint he's even aware of his surroundings at all that he moves out of her way when she gives him his plate.

Jeremy is about to tuck in eagerly, starving after a hectic afternoon when his phone rings. He pulls it out with a groan, guessing it's Coach, but the name on the screen cuts his appetite.

"Who's it?" asks Hector through a mouth already full of food but Jeremy just swallows, frozen and off balance. Now? Really? Alvarez leans over to see the screen and winces sympathetically.

"Just ignore it," she says gently, nudging him when he doesn't reply but Jeremy shakes his head.

"I already did yesterday," he explains, hating how small his voice sounds, "I forgot to call her back. I - if i don't again-" Alvarez squeezes his arm and he takes a deep breath, accepting her support. "I'm gonna reply, I'll be back in a sec." He gets up flustered, his chair scraping gratefully against the floor. When he leaves, hurrying without paying enough attention, he nearly knocks it over but it's caught by Jean who looks surprised by himself before meeting Jeremy's eyes with a frown. Jeremy turns away raising the phone to his ear.

"Hi Mom." The cheeriness in his voice sounds false to him but his mother never picks it up and it's turned into default when speaking to her.

"Jeremy?" Why ask when she knew what number she had called? Who else would answer with 'hi mom'? He pinches his nose, glad that she can't see him so the only thing he's faking is his voice.

"Yeah, it's me. Mom, now's not really a great time-"

"Oh but surely you can spare a quick minute for your poor mother?" Jeremy closes his eyes. "I tried to call you yesterday..." she wines, sounding both mornfull and like a very young child.

"Yeah, sorry i was collecting a new teammate at the airport." He leaves the diner and leans against the wall beside to escape the noise but it just makes him feel even more removed.

"Oh. I wish you wouldn't play that sport Jeremy." Jeremy feels his throat and stomach tighten and does his best to breath past the rising anger. It doesn't matter he tells himself, her opinion is irrelevant right now. If she doesn't want to support her eldest son in his career choices that's on her when he's on court making millions a year.

"It pays college," he reminds her, clenching his teeth and wishing being this angry didn't want to make him cry.

"I know but... it's so dangerous. Running around and hitting people with sticks... why couldn't you be a doctor? The neighbour's grandson is going to be a doctor..." Jeremy doesn't reply, not bothered to try explain that exy doesn't actually involve hitting people with sticks. "Have you spoken to your father?" his mother asks when it becomes clear he won't reply to tell her that he's changed his mind and is going to apply to medical school straight away.

“No.” Not in a while. Maybe he should, it generally wasn't as painful as speaking to his mother. Well actually... nevermind. “I spoke to the kids though, yesterday morning.”

“Oh.” Jeremy leans his head against the wall, wishing to the appearing stars for patience. “Did you go to service this Sunday?” It would be so much easier to lie. He should just lie... but Jeremy dislikes lying when avoidable.

“I was busy.”

“Jeremy. No one is too busy for the word of the Lord. We had a lovely service, the new Reverend is so much better now, he knows exactly what passage suits the mood of the week. You should talk to your local church, maybe you can join the choir. The choir here is so -”

“I have to go Mom,” interrupts Jeremy, unwilling to continue the direction the conversation is heading, “I'm eating with my friends, my food is going cold.”

“Oh. Ok, Jeremy. Goodbye then.” Jeremy ignores the plaintive note to her voice.

“Bye.”

“I'll call you again soon.”

“Ok, bye Mom.”

“Bye.”

He stands alone for a moment, unsure of how he's feeling other than it's not great, hating the tears still tickling the back of his throat, clutching his phone a little too hard before heading back inside. Alvarez gives him a concerned look and Hector raises his eyebrows in question but he shakes his head in an 'i'm good' gesture at the two of them, aware that they know him too well not to see that his smile is forced but grateful when they leave him be. He sits down and Laila begins a joke to take the attention off him, giving him time to start shoveling down food despite his sudden lack of hunger, glad of something else to focus on. He looks up to find Jean watching him closely. The backliner, of course, says nothing when he meets his eyes but frowns a little, his mouth twisting. Jeremy's eyes fall to his untouched plate, feeling his eyebrows raise a little as he looks back up. Jean hesitates but slowly picks up his fork and begins to pick hesitantly at his food. Jeremy turns back to his own plate feeling strangely boosted by the silent exchange.

They pay for dinner with the team's card, joking about making the most of it before the season starts and Coach boosts his strictness levels. Jeremy leaves with Laila who slings her arm around his shoulders, taking a deep breath of the night air, glad of it's chill after the crowded diner.

“We should have a plan for tomorrow and the newbies,” says Laila and he looks down at his vice captain with a groan.

“I know - we should probably do an introductory meeting of sorts in the evening i guess. How many of them are there?”

“Four,” she says with a nod, “That's smart, we should.” Eight players had graduated last year, leaving them with a slightly smaller team, even with these new players, which was good considering how he wanted to get them all to playing full games.

“Right, four, yes of course, i remember.” Laila laughs, shoving him good naturedly and he shoves back, stumbling with her to the side when she drags him with her.

“One of them...” Laila hesitates and he frowns, trying to remember what problems had come up with any of them but he had gone through that at the start of the summer and can no longer remember much. He should go over their files tonight. “Well, she might be... um it could be a little difficult, the european one?” Jeremy squints, european? Who?

“I don't remember,” he admits, “It's too late for this, I'll look over their files tonight and we can talk about it tomorrow morning before they arrive?” Laila nods in agreement before skipping off ahead to find her girlfriend and Jeremy finds himself falling into stride alongside Jean. He finds the other boy's quiet unusually calming and lets himself relax, falling into thought and planning for tomorrow for the rest of the walk back to their rooms.

Chapter End Notes

ugh this took me forever to write :/ and when im procrastinating from writing something i start writing something else and let me tell you its a vicious cycle
at least my utter disregard for editing speeds things up! :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

Jean wakes up early again and checks his room for a sign of intrusion, despite the locked door, once more. Finding nothing he wanders out to the sitting room, where he finds someone else already up in the kitchen. The other boy looks up in surprise when Jean enters and he freezes. Is he allowed to be up and out of his room yet? Is there a set time he has to get up at now that most of the team has arrived? Will he be punished for it? Excuses build up in his head, a pile of lies for why he might be here, but his mouth won't open to voice them.

“Oh hey,” says the boy with a smile, “Good morning, didn't expect anyone else up for a while.” Jean nods slowly back at him, cautious but a little relieved at the lack of menace in the boy's tone. Friendly and relaxed, he doesn't look like he thinks Jean shouldn't be there, instead accepting his nod as an acceptable answer and getting up to make coffee when the kettle announces the water boiled with a sharp beep. Jean studies the boy carefully, using the moment of distraction to look at him a little more openly without being caught. Tall and broad shouldered he has a physical advantage over Jean who, although a little taller, is more on the slim side, muscled but also half starved, but his dark skin is soft and unscared. He doesn't look like he's ever been in a fight. Jean can't remember his name but he recognises him from dinner the night before. He had sat near Jean and talked as much as Knox, the two of them a constant stream of words. Now, in the early morning, he seems more relaxed, more content to remain quiet as he busies around fetching himself breakfast. Somewhat reassured, both in his permission to be here and that one of his teammates is present, Jean wanders back to his position from yesterday morning by the window.

He's left mostly alone by the gradual gathering in the kitchen, Trojans coming into the kitchen to chatter quietly as they all make their own breakfasts, even those not a part of the five boys for whom the kitchen is reserved and who have their own kitchens. Girls and boys spill out of the kitchen with the smell of toast and coffee, hushing each other occasionally when someone makes a sound too loud for the morning. They sit together on the chairs, the sofa, the floor, casually hanging off one another as they talk and eat, the hum accompanied by the occasional burst of laughter that always succeeds in making Jean jump. Every so often someone will come over to him to say hello or try lure him into conversation but still too sleepy and tired they don't try for long, giving up quickly when he ignores them. He assumes that this communal breakfast is some sort of a rule, similar to the Ravens, who only ever ate at the dining hall at strict times, although this seems more lax on both the timing and what they can eat. But the season hasn't started yet, he reminds himself, things will change.

The day rises and with it rolling clouds of grey, racing each other to cover up any hint of blue. Jean thinks back to his airplane ride, to how the clouds looked like a soft snow kingdom from above and finds himself wishing he was up there, flying above the world once more.

He hears and feels someone walking up behind him and tenses up, sinking deeper into his jumper as if he can disappear into its fabric, but it's just Knox, who steps around to be in his

line of vision and is interrupted in the middle of a cheery good morning by a phone ringing. Knox frowns, patting non-existent pockets on his pyjamas but he relaxes before looking surprised when Jean pulls his own phone out of his jumper pocket. Jean frowns at the name on his screen but answers anyway. He lets Kevin say - "Jean-" - before hanging up and, reassured that the message was clear enough, puts his phone back in his pocket. Looking up at Jeremy's startled laugh, he sees that the other boy looks almost impressed.

"Cold, Moreau," he says, tone a mix of shocked and amused. Jean shrugs defensively and looks away, unwilling to explain any part of his history with Kevin, who really should just have gotten the message and should leave Jean alone. He had done it an entire year, why not continue now that Jean actually wanted him to? Knox waits for a minute, shuffling from foot to foot and setting Jean's nerves to extreme anxiety, his shoulders so tense it hurts. Finally he speaks again. "Um, i was just... wondering if you had eaten?" Jean can tell from one glance at him that he knows Jean hasn't, his eyes glancing away before meeting Jean's so fast it was barely noticeable. Knox is a good liar and he hates it, hates that he only noticed last night at dinner that not all of his smiles are real. Why is he lying now? Jean shakes his head, stomach hollowing out as he considers that maybe he was supposed to have.

But Knox only smiles, real Jean thinks, "Right, well sorry if we don't have, you know, real French bread or whatever but you sure you aren't hungry?" Jean hasn't had real French bread in years. He realises he's tracing the outline of his foot with his hand and stops, avoiding Knox's eyes as he considers. Is this permission? Or an offer? Or is Jean supposed to say no? He thinks of all the options for breakfast the Trojans seem to have, from various kinds of sugary looking cereal to toppings on toast and realises he would have to make a choice between them all. So he shakes his head, pushing away the voice in his head hissing at him to never turn down an offer of food and embracing the louder one telling him that he would somehow mess up his choice. Another voice, niggling and quiet, lost from his teenage years comes back to join the louder voice in agreement, whispering that the thought of food is sickening anyway. Knox frowns but accepts his refusal and leaves to go get his own breakfast, having only just woke up, a fact clear from the state of his hair alone.

Jean has just finished getting dressed, black again today, panic balking at the sight of a blue shirt in his still unpacked bag and forcing him into an oversized knitted jumper instead (at least today is cooler he supposes), when Renee calls. This time when he answers he doesn't hang up.

"Hi, Jean." Her voice is sweet and soft, a soothing relief from his thoughts and he manages a hum in reply. "How is it going?" When he doesn't reply, she gets the hint and talks instead about herself, the Foxes, the weather, little stories and snippets of her life. He lets himself relax, lying back in his bed and listening to her talk, gradually offering mostly one word comments and answers to her careful questions. Renee is easy, a calming presence in the storm of his mind to whom he owes his life several times over. He doesn't love her, doesn't think that that's something he can do anymore, but it's close. Maybe he will one day.

"I have to go," she says at last, "When can i call you again?" She waits a beat and he can feel her about to offer replies to her question so he doesn't have to speak but he summons the

energy for one word.

“Tonight?” It's a little too desperate, a little too quiet, but he can hear her smile when she replies.

“Of course. Until tonight then, Jean.”

Jeremy juggles the newcomers files and his third coffee of the morning as he and Laila make their way to the Coach's office, a less than two minute walk from their rooms. Rolling her eyes at him, Laila takes the files from his arms and he gives her a grateful smile.

“Did you even read them?” she asks with a long suffering sigh.

“Did I even - of course I did,” says Jeremy, offended, “Who do you think i am?”

“Hmm.”

“Rude.” He turns his nose up indignantly and she laughs. “I did. What are your thoughts on best integration methods?”

“Are you serious?”

“Almost.” He pauses. “Well that's what you said last night no? That we should have a plan?”

“Yeah, like a ‘let's decide on doing one thing as a team’, like another dinner together, type plan, not ‘Best Integration Methods’, you absolute nerd.” She uses air quotes *and* puts on an inaccurate imitation of his voice which, Jeremy feels, is a bit much. He sticks his tongue out at her before taking a gulp of his mostly cream and sugar coffee.

“You know you're talking to your captain?” he asks, “Show maybe, even just like *some* respect.” But she just laughs, shaking her head. Well it was a battle lost in advance anyway. “Fine, I think another dinner is the best way to go. It's chill enough and they get to talk a bit with us before practise tomorrow.” She nods.

“Agreed.”

He dumps his coffee cup in the bin as they enter Coach's office, wincing at the disposable nature of it and swearing to himself to remember his reusable one next time.

Coach ruffles Jeremy's hair affectionately and bows to Laila who curtsseys back, a long standing joke between the two that no one else understands before deciding that he would rather talk to them outside, despite the looming threat of rain. They set off to do a loop of the mostly empty, apart from a few stray professors, campus.

“So,” he says, “You ready for the newbies?”

“What’s there to be ready for?” asks Laila, “We’re bringing them out to a team dinner. Figured we’d give them the afternoon to settle in.” Coach nods his approval before eyeing Jeremy.

“And how’s Moreau doing?” Jeremy bites his lip, unsure how to put it.

“He’s been ignoring everyone actually,” says Laila with a frown, “He’s a bit rude honestly. Do you think he was just able to get away with it before because he’s pretty and famous?” Jeremy winces. He hasn’t told his vice, or anyone except Coach, about what he had seen of Jean before summer, figuring it the other boy’s business, but he can see that maybe he should have mentioned something. “Or,” continues Laila, “He’s just really shy?” Jeremy sighs and shakes his head.

“He’s...” Jeremy starts then stops, “I don’t know Coach, he hasn’t said a single word except to apologise for his flight being late and...” Jeremy shrugs helplessly and Coach’s eyes darken.

“Is there something I don’t know here?” asks Laila frowning between the two of them. Jeremy stops walking. He feels bad, guilty, but not sure if he should - Jean hadn’t seemed to care if Jeremy saw his injuries at Abby’s but did that apply to everyone? Can he tell Laila what he barely knows himself? Coach nods sadly at him.

“You know the accusations against Edgar Allen?” begins Jeremy and Laila’s eyes widen.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Jeremy swallows and nods. That, he feels, is enough said on his part. “I don’t know what happened but yeah.”

“Oh,” repeats Laila, “Ok, well I - oh now I feel bad. Ok.” She nods and Jeremy can almost see Protect Jean Moreau being added to her mental to do list for the year.

“You’re good kids,” says Coach, who refuses to view them as anything older so long as they’re on his team, “He’s just gonna need some time.” They both nod and move onto lighter topics for the rest of the walk, discussing plans for tomorrow’s practise.

Jeremy borrows Coach’s car for the second time since coming back after summer to go fetch one of the newbies at the train station, somehow finding himself running late as he tries to find the keys, eventually found by an unimpressed Jean.

“Make a good first impression,” Laila tells him before he leaves and he gives her his best paparazzi grin.

“I always make a good first impression.”

But, despite his outward confidence, the interaction, with Laila who knows him better than that honestly she should know Jeremy tries to charm anyone he meets, leaves him uneasy and, despite the music he plays to try drown it out, it's a tense ride, made tenser when, per usual, he's late. Which, he reflects as he hurries through the crowded station, is decidedly not a good first impression. Doing his best to push his way through the crowd without actually pushing anyone, he cranes his neck over the sea of heads in an attempt to pick out the sole girl newbie but, with only a vague idea of what she looks like, only succeeds in getting lost. He ends up having to ask a station master to find the station where her train had left her off at and, when he finally arrives, he's so late she's the only person left waiting in the deserted space. At least it's obvious which one she is.

She sits on an enormous grey suitcase, toes brushing the ground, head tilted back, gaze somewhere far away from the empty station. A slim scrap of a person it's hard to believe that this is the girl he had seen play with such viciousness on the videos her coach had sent in. As he approaches, her head whips around and she watches him come over without moving. He has the uncomfortable feeling of being seized up and carefully considered by her hooded gaze. She seems to decide on something and takes her phone out to pause her music and slips her headphones down to her shoulders. Up close he gets a better look at her face. Mostly forgettable features, pale skin with a freckle splattered nose, thick black hair down to her shoulders, the only thing that stands out are her eyes, tired and angry.

"Hi, I'm so sorry I'm so late. I'm Jeremy Knox." He's about to launch into a paragraph of excuses but she speaks before he can begin.

"I know." She still has a clear English accent unsoftened by the two years he knows she's been in America. "And I'm Blue." He relaxes a little and nods.

"Blue. Ok. Can I take your luggage?"

"No." She doesn't bother refuse politely, just jumps lightly off it and grabs the handle before looking at him expectantly. He nods again and leads them back to the car feeling slightly off centre but unsure why. She ignores him for most of the car ride back and he gets a flash of déjà-vue from his car ride with Jean. Except this feels like more of a pointed leave me alone kind of silence and he stops talking when it becomes clear she doesn't want to talk to him at all.

Blue hauls her enormous suitcase up the stairs to her room alone, seemingly out of pure fury, something like spite on her face every time she drags it up a step and it thumps against the next step. Despite himself Jeremy is impressed she manages it at all, small and slim as she is, when even he would have difficulty doing so. He begins to talk again as he waits for her, giving a brief runthrough of the building's layout and who she's going to be sharing a room with. With something else to focus her anger on, she nods along without looking like she hates him. No wonder she plays exy with all that pent up rage needing a release.

Jeremy feels a little guilty by the relief that washes over him when he sees Alvarez waiting at Blue's new room, grinning at her maybe a little too enthusiastically by the way her eyes narrow. He would have missed Jean also there, sitting in the corner beside her, playing with his shoelaces, but the other boy scrambles to his feet as soon as he sees him, a brief flash of

something like panic flashing across his face before being replaced by a deep exhaustion and finally the blank mask he always wears.

“You're late,” Alvarez tells him, tapping an imaginary watch.

“As always,” he replies with a dramatically mournful sigh, “Blue - this is Alvarez. Alvarez, Blue.” He waves a hand between them.

“Hey,” says Alvarez, opening her mouth to say more but Laila calls her from within the room and with an apologetic grimace, she disappears inside in search of her girlfriend. Jeremy is left to introduce Jean and Blue, which feels a bit like introducing two time bombs set to go off at the same time and hoping it will go well. He hopes it doesn't show on his face.

“Blue, Jean Moreau. Jean - Blue. Blue, um you might have heard but Jean is new here too, he transferred from Edgar Allen this season. You're both the new backliners.” Jean looks a little more interested upon hearing this, or at least he looks up from the floorboards to study the girl a little incredulously. Blue nods sending Jeremy a look that says she clearly did know that before looking Jean over thoughtfully. It takes her all of a second to decide she doesn't care, dragging her suitcase after her as she heads into the room, not even bothering to look behind her when she speaks.

“This my room?”

After that harrowing pick up experience, Jeremy and Laila get together to decide on what they need to say during Jeremy's intro talk with the entire team. Jeremy, a big lover of making things up on the spot and an enemy of planned speeches, lies on the floor unhelpfully while Laila tries to convince him to at least come up with bullet points.

“New names, numbers and positions, practise tomorrow, this week's plan and normal practise schedule,” he says ticking each point off on his fingers as he speaks, “There we go, four bullet points see?” Laila raises an unimpressed eyebrow.

“Yeah? What about dinner tonight? And your great plan for the season?”

“Right yeah dinner.”

“And your plan.”

“Ah.”

“Jeremy.” He groans and rolls away from her. “Stop delaying telling everyone and get it over with already.” He sighs. She's right, he knows she's right. But it doesn't make him want to do it any more.

“Fine. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll do it. I'll tell them. Might as well make everyone hate me right from the start.”

“Oh stop being so melodramatic.”

He goes to find Jean once more sitting by the sitting room window in silence and settles down beside him, needing some of the silence that comes with his presence and finding himself relaxing in the evening hum around them. Most of his teammates are still sorting themselves back into their rooms but at this time most of the noise has died down to a calming murmur of voices and footsteps. With a half hour left until his speech, he has nothing to do but wait, his own stuff already tossed carelessly into his drawers and his suitcase, bags and boxes shoved under his bed. Jean doesn't even look over at him but he sees his shoulders slowly begin to relax in his presence. Good. Even if it's just because Jeremy has shut up for once. They tense right back up though, when Jeremy's phone rings. He groans, ready to ignore it if it's either of his parents but the name on the screen makes him swear softly and answer hurriedly. He knew he had forgotten something.

“Hi.”

“Really Jer? You’ve been back for four days. Come one.”

“Sorry, i’m so sorry, i've been distracted and busy and -”

“Too busy for your girlfriend?” He winces.

“Babbby, no i-”

“It's ok,” she half laughs, half sighs, “I'm joking. I know you and your team, it's ok. I'd just like to talk to you and also, you know, see you.”

“Tomorrow, after practise. Say six? I'll bring you out for dinner?”

“Trying to buy me back?”

“Is it working?”

She laughs. “Yeah, it's working, i'll meet you at the stadium.”

“Ok cool i-” he glances behind him to see some of his teammates already gathering “- I have to go now but i'll see you then. Love you.”

“Bye. Love you too.”

When he hangs up, he sees Jean watching him curiously, as if puzzled by something, but he looks away when Jeremy meets his eyes.

Jean stays by the window and watches as the rest of the team pile into the small sitting room for Knox's talk, wondering if he could ever be as comfortable with touching others as they are with each other and doubting it. Dermott, the vice, stands in the middle of the room with Knox, looking a little exasperated by him as he bounces up and down, nodding energetically at whatever she's saying, but the rest find somewhere to sit. Seven people somehow manage to cram onto the small sofa that sinks under their weight and chairs are grabbed from the kitchen but most people find themselves sitting on the floor. He stares out the window rather than any of them, smiling and loud and alive and too much.

The new girl is the only one to sit on his side of the room, flopping down a little bit away from him without a word. She looks too small, too flimsy to play exy, much less be a backliner, he thinks but at least she seems as unlikely as him to try start a conversation.

"Hello, good evening, good evening, ladies and gentlemen," announces Knox spreading his arms and bowing to the giggles and cheers of some. "So straight into it cause we're all hungry. Firstly - well, actually speaking of hungry and food, mandatory team dinner tonight, straight after i shut up, no protests and no paying. It's on the team." He gives the strangest talk Jean's even heard, rambling and lighthearted, full of jokes and teasing but somehow effective. Clearly a natural speaker, Knox keeps them all listening and quiet except for the odd remark he keeps expecting will be punished with seemingly no effort. Firstly going over the new additions to the team by name and number, then a brief overview of practise times for the following week, he ends with a pause, his expression going serious.

"I have one last announcement." Jean feels his stomach sink and draws his arms around himself protectively, sure it can't be good to merit seriousness on Knox's face. "I want to try a new... system this year." Just remember to breath, Jean tells himself. "I'm sure you all remember, or at least have heard of, our game against the Foxes last season." Oh. "And as you all know, they won the season with the barest minimum of players, playing at the very least full halves, some of them playing full games." He pauses and hesitates, clearly trying to think of how to explain himself. "Whereas when we tried the same, we fell apart in the second half. In order to improve us all, as individual players but also as a team, I want us all able to play, well, at least full halves but the aim is full matches by the end of this season." Oh. Interesting. A challenge at least he supposes. From the faces of most of his new team, he can see most of them aren't as relaxed as him about the decision, nor are they all pleased. "I know," continues Knox, "That this means reduced game time for some of you, but I think it's the best, the *only* , way to improve to where we *can* be and I will try to get everyone in for a couple of matches anyway. It means a lot of stamina work mostly but I'll talk more about it at practise tomorrow." He stops to a stunned silence. "...questions?"

The Trojans had not had any questions and dinner and continued ahead at the same place as the night before in the same relaxed manner, although with more whispers and a few small arguments after their captains talk. Knox had been tense but had relaxed as the evening progressed and had remembered to order for Jean, asking beforehand if he wanted the same thing as before or something different. Jean had shrugged, unwilling to explain that he didn't know what most of the menu was and no longer remembered if he had any way in preference.

Knox had ended up choosing something different for him and Jean had nodded when he had asked if he had liked it, surprised at how happy Knox had seemed by his reply.

Now, back in his room, he calls Renee. She answers immediately and he falls asleep to her soft voice and gentle laughter.

Chapter End Notes

posting this at 2:06 am and per usual no editing done so i apologise

Practise

Chapter Summary

mention of brutality / violence :/

Chapter Notes

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

Jean wakes up feeling tired. He gets up and dresses all in the blackest black he has, feeling tired. He ignores any attempt to have him fed, tired. He sits at the window, head pressed to glass, eyes closed, floating away through a mist of nothing, hanging around him like a prison he knows doesn't exist. He feels heavy, muscles and bone and tissue and blood weighing down, pulling him towards the greedy earth that just won't let him go. Tired.

Around him, the Trojans start the day the same way as before, the offers of food and coffee already fewer and further in between but still made with friendly smiles. He can't even summon the energy to be horrified by their diets of caffeine, sugar and dairy but refuses each attempt with a shake of his head, trying not to look too sickened by the thought of food at all. The sun baths the room in gold and pink as the team gradually pours in, once more trying to be quiet and this time dragging the other new players in after them and pulling them gently into conversations. One tries to join Jean by the window but scurries away at the look he gets in return for the effort. Jean doesn't watch him leave, aware of the mix of disappointed and disapproving looks of the upperclassmen, watching him closely, and ignores their narrowed eyes and pointed whispers, too relieved by his self-isolation to want to breach it, thankful for the peace it offers.

Until Dermott marches over. He wonders if he should stand up for his new vice but, seeing as no one else had and that standing feels like a colossal effort, stays where he is, cross-legged on the floor. Dermott feels serious, long dirty-blond hair kept back away from her face and a thoughtful frown as she looks down at him, with a presence of steady authority about her. He lifts his eyes up to meet hers and for a while they say nothing, sizing each other up in silence. He waits.

“You don't want to eat breakfast with us?” A question. Straightforward, blunt, an honest voice. Strong. He looks down, away, swallowing, excuses like raindrops falling to his lips where they hang like heavy storm clouds. She takes another step forward and he's shuffling hastily backwards before he even realises what he's doing, freezing as soon as he does. She's barefoot, one toe painted purple. He focuses on that instead of it's owner in the silence that follows.

“That's ok,” her voice hasn't softened, for which he's grateful, but it is more careful and warmer, “But you're going to have to interact with us at some point, you know.” Jean can't

help the sigh that escapes him as his shoulders slump and he looks back out the window. "Hey - we're not that bad." When he looks up, she's smiling, a determined air about her. Unsure what to do, he nods hesitantly in response.

"Whenever you're ready," she says, "Come and join us." And with a decided nod, she leaves him be.

She must know. Why else would she be kind when all he had done was ignore them all? Knox must have told her what little he saw last spring, what little he could have guessed from Jean's injuries. He doesn't know why he feels disappointed in his new captain as he watches her walk back to her friends, doesn't know why he thought he wouldn't have, doesn't know why he even cares. If possible, he feels even more exhausted as he turns away, pulling his knees up to his chin to wrap his arms around them.

His peace is short lived.

Of course.

He doesn't react when Knox sits down beside him, happily flinging himself down, a near-white coffee in one hand and a croissant in the other. Not until he yawns a good morning, at which Jean glances pointedly at the croissant before lifting his eyes to Knox's with a raised eyebrow. Knox smiles sheepishly and shrugs.

"I eat better during the season. Usually." Jean goes back to looking out the window but Knox seems content to sit in silence, eating with a peaceful, child-like joy, head leaning back against the window, his curls turning gold in the rising light.

Jean doesn't realise that he's relaxed until Knox stands up and he startles, heart jumping in shock.

The day drags by, both a blur and each second exhaustingly long. Until Knox comes to find him once more by the windows to offer him a ride.

"To practise," clarifies Knox when Jean stares at him blankly, "You might still have the time to walk if you're fast but... well, i mean, there's space in my car so..." Jean nods slowly. Practise. His fists clench tight enough to hurt and he has to unravel his fingers carefully, placing them spread out on his knees, stretching each one away from the others. Knox blinks and drums his fingers against his leg while tapping one of his feet, his overflowing energy setting Jean on edge.

"...yes?" he asks slowly, hesitating as he looks down at Jean, who nods again, "Ok, cool. Leaving in five." When Jean doesn't reply he wanders off again, shoving his hands in his

pockets and humming off key.

Practise. Exy. Jean can remember the last time he held an exy racket all too well, can remember his last practise with too much clarity. Months ago, it's been months, he knows it's been months, but it feels too soon, a still tender wound.

He doesn't want to play.

The realisation is stark and sudden, shocking. He doesn't want to. He doesn't... his stomach clenches, his throat closes and he feels as all the breath has been knocked out of him as it sets in like a frantic kind of panic. He doesn't want to play exy. It might be liberating, the opinion, but he has to. He has to play. He doesn't want to. He really doesn't want to. The feeling reminds him of being very young and the injustice he felt at being forced to go to school or not being allowed into his father's office. He takes a deep, shuddering breath, surprised at the frustrated tears he can feel rising. When was the last time he cried? And now he wants to because of this? Really? Because he has to play some stupid sport for the rest of his life? Ridiculous. He's being stupid and ridiculous and spoiled and he knows it... and it doesn't help.

When Knox comes to get him, he gets up without giving the other man time to speak and trails him out to his car in silence.

Jean finds himself in one of the backseats, avoiding the curious looks of Alvarez, whose name he knows because of her position as a fellow backliner, by staring determinedly out the open window. In the front, Knox and Dermott argue over which radio station to play, an argument quickly won by Knox shouting 'my car!', changing the station back to one with an old sounding song playing that Jean doesn't recognise and keeping his hand on the radio, driving with only the other, until Dermott gives up for the sake of their safety. Beside him, Alvarez groans as Knox begins to hum tunelessly along.

He grips the car door handle tightly the entire way down.

Knox stops him before they enter the changing rooms and Jean freezes, sure everything is about to go very very badly, until Knox hands him a large red and gold sports bag with a smile.

"All your new gear," he says, not seeming too disappointed when Jean doesn't reply but gradually looking confused when he makes no move to take the bag. "Sorry I forgot to give it to you earlier." Numbly, Jean accepts it and Knox opens his mouth with a frown as if to say something but is stopped by one of his teammates passing by and slinging an arm over his shoulders to drag him inside. He goes with a laugh but glances behind his shoulder to meet

Jean's eyes for a second before the door swings shut. Jean is left standing alone behind it, holding his new bag.

It's red and gold. Of course it is. Of course it's red and gold and not black. Of course the number on it says 29 and not 3. Of course. He runs a careful hand over his name, enblazoned gold capitals. MOREAU. Him. He takes a deep breath and tries, uselessly, to make his shoulders relax back down from his neck.

Jean slips into the changing room and does his best to remain mostly unnoticed as he finds his locker and carefully places his bag inside. His hands are shaking and he can't make them stop. He opens it slowly and pulls out his new jersey, silky and soft in his hands. Moreau, number 29. Thoughtlessly, he reaches instinctively to take off his hoodie but freezes with one hand on the fabric. He rests his head against the top of the locker and leans against it, closing his eyes with a sigh as the reality of where he is, and mostly who he's with, hits him once more over the head.

If they all already know... well, even if they don't, better now than later right? This way maybe they'll leave him alone. Jean refuses to hide in the toilets. He pulls off his hoodie and chucks it into the locker with more force than necessary. Takes a deep, calming breath and runs a hand through his hair, growing back messily, just long enough to start to curl, before carefully going through his bag to find something with long sleeves he can wear, making sure to keep everything well folded as he piles it over to one side.

He can tell the exact moment someone notices, the sharp inhale somewhere to his left. He pauses, hands freezing in the air just above his bag, but forces himself to ignore it and continue on. It doesn't matter anyway, not really. He's just confirming rumours. It can't be much worse than they were expecting. He hears a soft *shit* to his right when whoever it is turns and sees him. The locker room goes quickly quiet and his skin prickles and crawls under their stares. Breathing has become difficult. He feels sick but distant as he forces himself through each movement, muscles moving slowly, as if underwater. He stops when he feels the person beside him opening his mouth to say something and senses the entire room tense up in anticipation. Coldly, he turns and gives the almost-speaker his darkest glare before continuing to turn, ignoring his shock, until he meets Knox's eyes. Raising an eyebrow, he gives him his best *deal with this* look and turns back to his bag, pulling out a sort of under armour and tugging it on. He hears Knox clear his throat and murmur something and the locker room starts back up again, but the atmosphere has changed, uncomfortable, shocked, quiet. Jean doesn't look at anyone as he shrugs on his armour or as he tugs on the jersey in all the wrong colours over it. Breathe. All he has to do is remember to breathe.

He lets the door slam shut behind him as he stalks out.

Jean wishes he could call Renee. Instead, he stands in the stands, turning his racquet over in his hands. The weight feels strange now, setting him off-balance, but the more he spins it the more familiar it becomes. It's heavier than most, a dense, dark wood, brutal during play, with a range suited to his height, a considerable advantage on court. Jean thinks it must be difficult

to hate an object so much. He spins it over and over and over in his hands until it becomes a dizzying swirl of colour and rush of air.

He watches the Trojans start to enter the court but looks away when he catches too many looks in his direction, scowling down at the racquet in his hands. The team files in quickly, forming into loose groups milling around the court as they wait for practise to start. With everyone there, he has no choice but to follow them inside the plexiglass walls, his feet bringing him robotically nearer even as he screams at them to run instead, as far away as possible. Faced now with the court, even this strange one, draped in light browns, golds and reds, he can't stop his mounting dread, his mind choosing now to play his less than enjoyable memories of such a place on loop. Passing the door requires an effort he doesn't let show on his face, forcing himself through with trembling hands and rising nausea.

Once inside he feels trapped.

The court has never had the opportunity to feel like anything other than a prison for him, walls pressing down from all sides and enclosing him inside with people and a sport he hated. Here, all the way in California, he finds nothing much has changed. He wishes they would stop staring. Jean closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and opens them again, straightening to his full height and lifting his chin to glare arrogantly at anyone he catches watching him. He meets Knox's eyes and, when the other man doesn't look away, scowls until he does.

For once, the Trojans leave him completely alone.

It becomes immediately clear that there is a huge difference in how the Trojans and the Ravens tackle practise. He does the warm ups apart from everyone else, speeding up or slowing down any time someone tries to join him while doing laps until they all get the message. He's not as fit as he was before ... before he left EAU, but manages to keep up without too much difficulty, used to pushing himself past where he should and dealing with various injuries as he does so. Warm ups end and he hangs back as USC's four couches come onto the court while the rest of the team gathers around them, collapsing down to sit at their feet except for Knox who joins them for a short discussion before going back to the rest of the team and sitting beside Dermott. Jean stays standing. He keeps to the side of the court, away from them all but close enough to clearly hear what's being said, leaning on his racquet. Riko would hate that, it was a mark of disrespect that he wasn't careful with his equipment he said, Jean should be able to stand by himself anyway, he was weak. Weak, weak, weak. Jean leans heavier onto the racquet, bracing his weight against it in a silent fuck off to the ghost he can feel pacing around him, the one he can almost see in the corner of his eye. Kevin would hate it too, would fuss over the racquet anxiously and beg Jean to take better care of it before Riko murdered him or bossily rant about exy etiquette with trembling hands. Jean scowls.

Fuck them all.

Shit.

Jeremy is having a hard time concentrating, his eyes scanning the menu over and over without reading a word, and Sophie has to put a firm hand on his knee to stop his leg from tapping. All he can see, all he can think of is Jean's back. Athletes get hurt. All the time actually, exy, in particular, is a violent sport. He has his own scars from playing, the biggest on his knee from the time in highschool he'd completely wrecked it. This... this is something his mind has trouble processing.

Violence. Brutality. Words, words, words. There wasn't... he didn't... even when he'd seen Jean before summer, even then when he had seen the damage inflicted... he wouldn't have been able to imagine, to consider, to - how do you even think of that? How can you do that to another human being? Because this was full of purpose. Each savage line, each piece of ruined skin, screamed of purpose. A ruthless, sadistic pleasure taken in destroying, in owning, every piece, mostly clearly seen in the number three carved just below Jean's neck, a ridged, messy scar, clearly not having been given the medical treatment it needed.

Jeremy might be sick.

And all he had done was stare. He wants to bang his head off a wall. How could he have just stood there and not done anything at all? What could he have done or said? Anything. Anything at all. But he had been too shocked, too horrified to think. Even now it doesn't seem real, a distant nightmare he can't shake. Burying his head in his hands with a groan, he wishes he knew what to do but a sinking feeling says *nothing, there's nothing you can do*. There must be something. A broken record, over and over his mind loops.

Shit.

"Was practise really that bad?" Sophie tries for a joke, her face falling into worry when he looks up. "Hey - what's the matter?"

"I-" Jeremy shakes his head and waves a hand, hoping she doesn't notice how it trembles, "Nothing, I - it's fine. I'm just tired and, and i'm not hungry, i just-" he looks around the small Chinese place they found within a month of dating, feeling suddenly suffocated, "- just nothing. Eat, please." he forces a smile, "It's nice to see you." She nods slowly, unconvinced, but goes back to her menu.

"So was it? Practise?" Jeremy groans.

"Honestly? Shit. It was... it was record breakingly bad." She leans forward, interested, and her expectantly raised eyebrow reminds him of Jean, even if the accompanying smile ruins the resemblance. He buries his head in his arms, only partly for drama, as he thinks about the past two hours. "I've never - there's never been a fight on the first day before."

“Oh my god,” she says, drawing back in surprise, eyes lighting up with curiosity, “Really, a fight? The *Trojans*? That's out of character.”

“I know,” he moans, mournfully playing with his napkin, “It was one of the new kids, Blue, and you know Jean Moreau?”

“Of course.” He decides to ignore his girlfriend blushing over another guy considering she's never met him but rolls his eyes jokingly at her before continuing.

“Well yeah, the two of them. Ugh, god you should've seen it. Blue's tiny, like 5 foot, and Jean's got to be like 6 foot 3?” He can still see it clearly, turning around for one second and turning back and suddenly his two new backliners at each other's throats, Jean towering over a trembling with rage Blue, shouting up at him with curled fists and bared teeth. He doesn't know what caused it, only that he had had to get between the two of them while Laila wrestled Blue away and he shouted for a break. Jean had said nothing at all, only glared and stalked off, fists still tightly clenched. Jeremy had made them all run laps and had kept those two away from each other for the rest of practise but hadn't been able to prize a reason away from either of them, unwilling to press too much when they both looked ready to get right back to exchanging blows at the minorist offence.

“What happened?”

“We had to pull them apart. Coach spoke to them both afterwards - probably his whole ‘i know you can do better’ speech, but -” he sighs “ - Blue's talented but very aggressive, she's *looking* for a fight, you know? and Jean...” He trails off, feeling nauseous once more.

“...Jean?”

“Oh he's just... well equally aggressive.” Maybe more. It was a problem, or it was going to be and Jeremy gets a headache thinking about how much of Jean's style and play is going to have to change for him to play for the *Trojans*. They can't not play him. Not when he's the best backliner in America but... but Jean plays like exy is a war, merciless checks and harsh blows. Most of it isn't even legal play. Watching him, Jeremy had caught himself wondering if Jean even knew what he was doing went against at least five rules at any given play. More puzzling was how confused he seemed by the simple, basic drills they had set up for the first practise, mastering them easily but with the clear look of someone who had never done even the most used one before. He wonders when Jean first learnt how to play - in France or when he arrived in America?

“They just need to adjust.” He tries to brush it off, waving a hand as if to wave away his uncomfortable thoughts and looks around for a change in topic. “How about you? How was your day? Is Katie still being a bitch?”

“Oh, don't get me started,” she groans, letting him move the discussion on with a knowing purse of her lips, “She's just -”

He does his best to focus on her words, clinging to the relief of a distraction for now and forcing everything else to the back of his mind. Tomorrow. He'll deal with everything tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

we're just gonna ignore how long that took

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

Jean hasn't thought about his brother in a long time. When he first came to America he had thought about his little sister all the time, hours spent simply chanting her name over and over in his head, but never his brother. His older brother. He had spent most of his childhood trailing eagerly after him, hopeful for the barest scrap of rare attention. It was his big brother who taught Jean how to fight after Jean had gotten into an argument and had lost. Badly. Hours spent throwing punches and kicks under the hot sun on their back porch for an entire summer until his knuckles bled. An entire summer of his brother's undivided attention every evening. But that had been when they were still young, his brother still only a teen himself. It had ended. By the time Jean left it had been a while since they had spoken.

He's not sure why he's thinking of him now. The eldest child. The inheriting son. The older brother, bruised and battered, facing down his little brother, both sweating and red from the thick summer heat, and showing him how best to kick his foot and where. He hadn't been the greatest teacher, impatient and careless, too harsh in the way older siblings always are. But Jean had known how to fight by the end. Maybe it's because it's the first time in years he's thought about fighting, swinging a fist without the steady chant of consequences holding him back. Maybe it's because his brain is grasping desperately at anything to think of except practise and he has a limited amount of topics to go through.

He wonders if he should miss his brother. The-son-who-wasn't-just-a-spare. But really, by the end, they barely knew each other. And he did nothing to stop them. He did nothing. He just waved Jean off like they weren't selling him, like he wasn't the little brother he used to race to the bakery. He knew and he did nothing at all.

Jean's hand curls into a fist.

He shouldn't think of his family.

He wants to call Renee so badly he feels like an addict. But he's already tried and she didn't answer. Most likely she's still at her own practise.

Practise... it had been going fine. He had been doing fine. The drills had been simple, although not from the Ravens select list so unfamiliar. His teammates had remained wide eyed and jumpy around him, smiles now offered with something like pity and a hesitance that hadn't been there before. It had done nothing to improve his mood. But it was fine.

Everything was fine as his muscles slowly remembered how to play and he reentered his exy mind, a state of being he had developed in the Nest where his brain shut down and let his body go through the needed motions, taking a step back to let him play through injuries with a little less pain. Until the scrimmage.

Jean still isn't sure what went wrong or why. He had been tense and irritated by the looks the rest of the team, especially the boys, had been giving him but he's used to keeping his anger in check, it shouldn't have been a problem. Wouldn't have been, if not for a fellow backliner, another new recruit, number 11.

She would never have been recruited for the Ravens. Small but also slim, too easy to knock aside, he's amazed anyone would even think to let her play exy, let alone as a backliner. Not to say she isn't talented. He can see the potential in how she plays but also the amount of work it would take to get her to Class 1 exy level. She doesn't really seem Trojan material either, angry and vicious on court, eagerly jumping into a fight against Jean, who easily has a foot on her. She seems more like one of the misfits Kevin hangs around now. But then again so does Jean, he supposes.

They had been paired together, defending the goal in what was supposed to be a joint effort. All it had taken was a few irritated sighs from Jean at her repeated failures for her to be yelling at him on her tiptoes in an attempt to seem more threatening, clutching her racquet with both hands.

Jean can't ever remember causing a disruption in practise and not being punished for it. Laps do not count. He can still feel the sickening roll of anticipation in his stomach, the ache in his shoulder muscles tightening with every minute that passes without at least a beating but, to his surprise, a knot of anger remains too, snarling at the engulfing fear from its place in the corner of his head, a fierce flame longing for the unthrown punch.

Jeremy had come back late, stumbling and fumbling through the dark as he tried to find his room and then from there reach his bed, where he collapsed fully clothed. He hadn't realised how long it'd been since he and Sophie had talked without anyone else for that long. This means that he wakes up even later than usual, yawning as he staggers into the kitchen as breakfast ends, Hector rolling his eyes as he pours himself a bowl of coffee when encountered with a lack of mugs. Jeremy sticks his tongue out childishly in response and adds five cubes of sugar before drowning it all in milk.

"How are you not dead?" asks Laila, following him into the kitchen and shaking her head at his drink. He shrugs, leaning back against the counter, still not awake enough to form a spoken reply much less untangle the sleepy haze behind his eyes and takes a gulp from his bowl. Hector gives an amused snort and opens his mouth to speak but Laila clears her throat before he has the chance, sending him a look that has him awkwardly hurrying out.

"We have to talk." Jeremy groans.

"Coffee," he complains, raising his bowl. Laila remains unmoved.

"Maybe if you woke up at a reasonable time you would be able to have your breakfast in peace."

“Have you ever thought that the concept of a ‘reasonable time’ to get up is actually just a way of torturing anyone whose brain doesn't comply with the ‘normal’ sleeping schedule and a plot to keep us chronically tired and compliant?”

“Jeremy.”

He groans and slumps, looking mournfully down at his coffee before waving his hand in a you win gesture. Laila sighs, pulling herself lightly up to sit on the kitchen table. Jeremy grabs a bread roll lying beside him. It's stale.

“So obviously yesterday was...”

“Horrific,” he supplies helpfully. She rubs her face.

“Ok, yeah, it was bad. Those two... i think we're gonna have to figure out a way of dealing with them. Have you spoken to Coach?”

“They don't have to be *dealt* with.”

“No, obviously, I meant... we can't have them fighting like that on court Jeremy.”

“It was once. They're both... it's not going to be easy but that was our first practise, you can't expect it to go amazingly either. Time, after some time they'll-” he waves his hands randomly to show what time will fix. She looks unimpressed.

“I - no i agree, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't have a plan for now for what we should do.” He nods his consent. “So did you talk to Coach?” Jeremy sighs.

“Briefly. He didn't say much. I think we should talk to them both. Separately. I mean they could like... bond?” Laila gives him a Look. “Or not. But I believe in our ability to convince them to work together,” he says with more confidence than he feels. Laila looks unconvinced but nods.

“And what about...” she hesitates and his eyes narrow, Laila rarely pauses, honest to a fault, “It's just i heard - i heard that it's um, it's worse than we thought?” Jeremy closes his eyes.

“Yes. It's worse than we thought. But that's his business.”

“But-”

“No. If he asks for help, fine. But we're not going to make it any worse by butting in when he doesn't want us to. I don't want to hear anyone talking about it. He's got it bad enough as it is without whatever rumours added on.”

Someone (who knows who) orders pizza for lunch so he steals half of one to hide in his room. He stacks his pillows and winter duvet on one side of the bed so that he can comfortably use them to sink into a prop him up, putting the phone on speaker as it rings

before placing it on his windowsill. He eats as he waits, humming to the tune of a song whose name and lyrics he can't remember.

"Hello?" Jeremy swallows, grinning at the serious but high pitched child's voice picking up the phone. Thomas.

"Jeremy!" chimes in a second voice before he can reply, more enthusiastic than the first. "I told you it was Jeremy."

"Hey Izzy."

"Hi. Thomas thought it was mom calling but i told him it was you."

"Hmm," Thomas has always been attached to their mom. Jeremy doesn't know how to tell him she's a lunatic. "Is Charlie also there?"

"She went to get bread," says Thomas, "But she should be back soon."

"And sprinkles. She's also getting sprinkles. I told her to get rainbow coloured sprinkles because Thomas promised he would make cupcakes with me this afternoon and I want to put sprinkles inside them and also to decorate them. A girl in my class, Charlotte, brought in cupcakes for her birthday and they had sprinkles inside but they weren't as good as Thomas's cupcakes so i'm going to make the two of them together and they'll be the best. Didn't you promise Thomas?" Isabelle has a tendency to talk all in one breath until she can't breath at all, her voice going higher and higher as she rushes to finish without any air.

"Yes," says Thomas.

"Sounds delicious," Jeremy tells her, smiling at the ceiling. "How did she manage to drag you into this Thomas?"

"He got to chose the movie on Saturday," explains Izzy, too fast to let her brother speak, "It was my turn but i let him if he promised to help me bake cupcakes and he did but it's been a week and he still hasn't so we're going to do it today."

"I wanted to watch the first Star Wars again."

"Again?"

"It's the best one."

"You're wrong-" begins Izzy but she's interrupted by something in the background, "Oh! Charlie - did you get the sprinkles? Rainbow? Ok, good, look Jeremy's on the phone."

"Oh. Hey Jer," calls Charlie.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Nothing much. Some friend drama - dad's left again." Again? Jeremy closes his eyes.

“How long?”

“It been three days,” says Thomas seriously, “But-”

“He’s back tomorrow,” says Charlie, closer to the phone now, “Or supposedly anyway.” Jeremy takes a slow breath.

“He shouldn’t leave you like that. Is Ms Yellow home at least?” Ms Yellow was old and friendly, full of home made meals and warm smiles and had bright neon yellow hair, hence the nickname. He can’t actually remember her real name.

“Yeah,” Charlie, at least, doesn’t sound too concerned, “But we’re fine Jer, it doesn’t really change much you know. Better than mom.” Thomas makes a small noise even Izzy pretends not to hear.

“Yeah.” Jeremy wishes he went to college a little closer to them. “Ok. Call me if you need anything, you know the drill...”

“We’ll be fine,” Charlie insists, sounding irritated now.

“I know, I know, I just wish I didn’t live so far away.”

“I wish so too,” pipes up Izzy, “I miss you, you’re wayyy better at reading stories than Charlie, she just does homework or calls her friends all the time instead and Thomas only wants to read boring books about boring people.” Jeremy laughs.

“I miss you too Izzy. I even miss Charlie and Thomas sometimes.” Izzy giggles as Charlie makes an indigent noise.

“What time is it? Bullying Charlie hour?”

“Ah, poor Charlie. So, friend drama?”

Jeremy bounces out of his room, feeling a weight lifted off his shoulders after talking to his siblings. The atmosphere around the rooms is lazy, most people gone to reorientate themselves around the college or do some last minute supply shopping, those left behind lounging around in small groups to talk, songs played at a low volume drifting through the low murmur of voices. Every possible window and door is open to try catch whatever breeze can be found, suffering clearly etched on the faces of those not used to the Californian heat. His good mood is only slightly impacted by Laila’s insistence that he talk to Blue and Jean before evening practise.

He goes to find the former first, wandering through the lower shared rooms without luck, encountered only with shrugs when he asks for her. He’s almost given up on finding her, figuring she went out, when he stumbles across her sitting in the hall on the ground floor beside a fan she has directed at her face.

"It's too hot," she says without opening her eyes as he approaches, "It was *never* this hot in England. It shouldn't be possible to be this hot, it shouldn't be *allowed*. How do you play?" Jeremy laughs.

"You get used to it." She opens her eyes to frown at him. He shrugs and she sighs. "Hey Blue, so, I'm actually here to, uh, -"

"Practise." She scowls. He nods hurriedly and runs a hand through his hair, sweat causing his curls to stick up.

"Yeah. We, right so, you know the Trojans have, well, strict guidelines i guess? Like behaviour standards and -"

"You're very nice to everybody." She doesn't make it sound like a good thing.

"Well yeah. Listen, you, just, we don't tolerate fights. Not on court, not during practise. You have a problem with a teammate, you both come to me, we deal with it. End of. Ok?" She bights her lip and nods.

"Fine." It's not promising but he takes it for now.

"Cool," he turns to leave but pauses and looks back at her with her face in the fan and takes pity, "Hey, we have ice in the freezer if you want some."

"I just don't understand how you can not be dying in this heat. Are you from here and have just built up some tolerance or something?" complains Blue as they reach the sitting room. Jeremy laughs and shrugs.

"Yeah, i guess. I'm part Canadian too though so it's not like I don't know the cold or anything."

"Canadian?" Blue's eyes light up, "Do you speak French?"

"Um yeah I-"

"Vraiment?" He cuts off at the hope in her voice and stops to look behind him where she's stopped, leaning eagerly towards him. *Really? Vraiment?*

"Uh, oui, pas aussi bien que l'Anglais mais -" he frowns "- wait. *You* speak French?"

"Bien sur, je *suis* Française." Said like he's some sort of idiot.

"I thought you were English?" asks Jeremy, feeling a little lost, wondering how the conversation has derailed to this and what is going on. Blue waves his point away.

"Half. Mother's English, father's French, I lived there until i was... seven? About."

“Oh.” Unsure what to do with this information, he half nods awkwardly and turns back to continue his route to the kitchen. A prickling sensation stops him half way and he looks over towards the windows to meet Jean’s eyes. And freezes.

Knox and the girl are speaking French. Out here, in the open, with anyone able to hear them, they're speaking French. Jean’s breathing echoes in his head as he stares at Knox who stares back, looking trapped. His accent had been strange, unfamiliar, but the girl... she hadn't learnt to speak those easy dancing syllables in school.

Jean doesn't know why he clings to the language, why it still feels like home in a strange nostalgic way when he knows that he didn't leave behind a home when he came to America. Homes don't sell you. But he never learnt to speak English willingly and French brings with it a suicidal feeling of safety even after the brutality he faced for speaking it in front of Riko. He thinks he almost forgot that it wasn't a secret language for whispered conversations with Kevin snatched here and there and silent screaming in his head.

And now they're just speaking it casually right there like it's normal.

Knox opens his mouth then closes it, running an anxious hand through his already ruffled curls. He turns to murmur something to the girl, waving vaguely towards the kitchen before making his way over to Jean. The girl hesitates glancing between Jeremy and the kitchen before curiosity wins and she sets her jaw stubbornly and follows him with her chin raised defiantly in the air. Knox stops in front of Jean and messes with his hair again.

“Tu parle le français?” It spills out of him, stupidly hopeful and embarrassingly eager, too much revealed in just one phrase. He wants to pull it straight back out of the air as soon as he says it. *You speak french? Tu parle le français?* So simple, an easy sting of four small words, a damming child-like betrayal of optimism he didn't know he had. Like he somehow believes that something as random as a language means anything. A rush of soft breath and it's out there, thrown crudely at their feet. He braces himself.

“Um, oui?” says Knox uncertainly. Jean shifts his eyes to the girl at his side. What was her name again? A colour, he thinks. Her mouth twists and she meets his eyes carefully before nodding.

“Je viens de Bordeaux,” she says with a shrug like of course I come from Bordeaux, how could you not know? Red? Green? Purple? No... Blue. Her name was Blue.

“Je voix.” I see. He does not see. This feels like a dream about to end. “Marseille.” She wrinkles her nose and he scowls, a sudden burst of defensiveness at the slight of at his hometime causing him to open his mouth unthinkingly. Knox gets between them hurriedly.

“Great!” he says with clearly forced cheer, “That’s cool, no? That we all speak French?”

“You don't speak French,” says Blue turning her nose up at Knox with disdain, “You speak ... *Canadian* French, that's not - that's not *real* French.” Knox blinks at her, mouth falling open in surprise.

“I - what?” He looks over at Jean with wide eyes. Jean shrugs.

“Elle a raison.” She’s right. Knox splutters indignantly without finding a response, arms waving as if to show how affronted he is. Blue grins. She looks at Jean with new approval and he feels an agreement snap in place between them - in this they were united. *Truce?* she mouths and he reaches out to shake her hand.

Chapter End Notes

Ah yes, good deal of French here but I’ll try keep them speaking English as much as possible, it’s like 2:30 and I haven’t edited so ... sorry. I think it’s gonna go a little faster from now. I think.

Oui, pas aussi bien que l’anglais mais = yes, not as well as English but
Bien sûr, je suis française = of course, i am French

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

mention of violence - not graphic

Chapter Notes

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

Jeremy drags himself out of bed early on Sunday, mumbling a series of incoherent sounds to himself as he stumbles out of his room, his eyes still half closed against the light. He slumps sideways against the doorway to yawn, one hand rubbing his face and hair while the other stretches out, rising and falling with the yawn.

“You alive man?” Hector appears amused and far too awake for this time in the morning, grinning when Jeremy groans half heartedly in response and slinging an arm around his shoulders to steer him into the kitchen. “C’mon I’ll get you some coffee.” He laughs at Jeremy’s enthusiastic nod.

“Jeremy Knox? Our captain, awake at 8:30?” gasps Laila, leaning back against the counter with a mug of tea cupped between her hands. Jeremy doesn’t understand how you could possibly get up at this time and not drink coffee. He just... no.

“Barely,” he groans in response, sliding gratefully into a chair and burying his head in his arms.

“But to what do we owe this honor?” He drags his head out of the warmth of his arms to look at her, blinking stupidly as his mind slowly struggles to process the meaning behind her words. Hector gets there first, placing a giant cup of coffee in front of him and he rushes out his thanks and takes a deep gulp, wincing as the hot liquid burns his tongue, before answering.

“I need to get stuff. Class stuff. For, you know... classes.” He groans as they laugh, putting his head back into his arms. “Pens, copies, that stuff.”

“Now? Jeremy, classes start *tomorrow*.”

“I know *Laila*, thats why I’m getting up early. Do you really think I’d do this to myself if I didn’t know?” He points a finger in her general direction and gets a flat uh huh in response.

The coffee machine beeps angrily, saving him from having to defend his honor, and startles him enough to look up. He must be even more sleep muddled than he realized to not have noticed Jean in the corner of the room, quietly making himself a coffee with a calm ease Jeremy has never managed with that infernal machine. Dressed once more in all black and

engulfed in an oversized jumper, he blends into the shadows in a way that looks practiced. Jeremy wonders if he owns any clothes that aren't Raven black. It was strange to see him in color during practice, the image of him in gold and red jarring but not, Jeremy thinks, bad. Jean should wear color more. He looks less pale. Jeremy has never noticed he had freckles before.

"To buy college supplies?" says Laila, sounding unimpressed by his sacrifice.

"Yeah, I ugh," Jeremy shakes his head in an attempt to refocus on the conversation, "I have to talk to Coach this afternoon before practice so I - oh, right yeah. Um. I was supposed to tell you. Are you free-?"

"You did tell me."

"Oh. Good."

Laila rolls her eyes, fondly shaking her head at him. "You're really out of it, huh?"

"It's just -" Jeremy half laughs, half sobs, gesturing hopelessly with one hand "- the morning." Hector snorts. Jeremy takes the high road and sticks his tongue out at him only to get jokingly flipped off. He decides to ignore that. "Hey - do any of you need to get anything? So I don't have to go all alone?" Jean pauses halfway through leaving the room.

"Nope." Hector shakes his head with a sigh, "You had all summer dude, why would anyone wait till now?" Laila hums in agreement. Shrugging defensively, Jeremy looks over at Jean instead. The other boy reluctantly meets his eyes before looking down at the floor. Cringing internally, Jeremy is ready to move quickly on and go curl up into a ball of embarrassment later but Jean nods slowly before he has the time.

"Really?" Jeremy grins, relieved, "Great. We'll leave at like 9:30, yeah?" He gets another nod before the backliner leaves without looking him in the face.

Jeremy is rinsing his mug in the sink and more people are just starting to arrive, most gasping dramatically when they see Jeremy up, when Alvarez arrives back from her run. To Jeremy, the idea of getting up early and then immediately exercising is near sickening, but it doesn't seem to faze Alvarez, bursting energetically through the kitchen door, dark, curly hair wrangled into a sweaty bun, kissing her girlfriend on the cheek as she makes her way straight to the coffee machine. She throws a magazine at Jeremy as she snatches herself a croissant.

"Wha-"

"Third page." Jeremy obediently flips to the third page as Laila tiptoes up begins him to peer over his shoulder.

"Ah." Jeremy runs a hand through his hair as he scans the article quickly, reading only snippets to get the vague gist instead of the full thing. It's enough. Behind him, Laila makes a small, angry noise.

"What is it?" asks Hector through a mouthful of cereal, leaning towards them.

"The Ravens." Jeremy hands the article to Laila who clutches it eagerly, bringing it up until it almost touches her nose, and leans back against the counter. "They've announced their coach and captain."

"Oh. Who-"

"That's not it," interrupts Alvarez, "It's basically a page long rant against Moreau for not 'being there for the team' - the new captain even says some bullshit about how he's disappointed in-"

"Hey," Jeremy reaches out a hand to stop her, resting it on her arm. He feels a little sick. There have been articles, actually, there have been a good many, most written by a bitter opposing teams fan or a negative and bored journalist. There were more than there ever was after they played the Foxes, some posted even to his home address. Some of them were just an outright attack at his team, some just directly at him. So he's read this kind of thing, read it when it spoke about people he knows a lot better than Jean. But he's never read one so personal, so very cruel. Jean's old teammates he thinks, tearing his eyes from the glossy cover in Laila's hands, people he's spent years with, playing with.

"Stop." He shakes his head at Alvarez's attempted protest, "No. They're wrong. We know that. Jean gets to deal with this how he wants to." She allows that with an unhappy scowl.

"Shouldn't we release a statement or-?" asks Hector uneasily. Laila meets Jeremy's eyes.

"If Moreau wants to, that's his business. Otherwise, no. He decides," she says. And that settles that.

He goes to find Jean at 9:30 by the window, tapping the rolled up magazine against his leg and wondering if he should show it. He shouldn't have worried. Jean barely glances at it before tossing it aside looking unconcerned. Jeremy takes this as a we-dont-do-anything-because-he-clearly-couldn't-care-less and nods to himself, moving on then.

"What do you need to get?" he asks, holding the door open for Jean who slips past, carefully avoiding any contact, before frowning and shrugging. He hesitates, then, carefully...

"Tout."

"Everything?" Jeremy laughs, "Me too. Pens and copies mostly then I guess. What are you doing again?" He wonders if he's pushed too far by asking another question, cursing himself for forgetting to only ask yes or no questions until Jean started giving up information voluntarily, freezing in the middle of the car park when Jean stops. Frantically wondering if that's something you can take back without seeming weird and awkward he opens his mouth to say something, anything, to erase the strangely empty expression on Jean's face. But Jean speaks first, raising his chin and setting his jaw as he meets Jeremy's eyes with an odd

determination, like this is something he is willing to fight Jeremy on and is preparing to having to stand his ground.

“Art.”

Jean had doodled once. During his first couple of weeks in America when his classroom learnt English still didn't allow him to understand anything that was going on and he was bored, stuffed into a small classroom for a private lesson with two boys he barely knew. His mind had wandered and so had his hand, a collection of flowers and stars in the top corner of his page. He had already learnt to be wary of Riko by then but not enough, anger keeping real fear at bay. So he had doodled.

Riko hadn't even warned the teacher. Jean can remember the clear shock he'd felt, one minute staring out the window, the next being dragged out of the classroom by his hair, stopping him from fighting back for a moment as his body automatically complied to whatever hurt the least. His mistake was recovering. His mistake was fighting back. Riko had yet to test the limits on his power of Jean, had yet to learn if there were any limits. They would both learn today. One of Jeans fists had caught Riko in the stomach. He was falling before he even knew he had been pushed, his body too caught off guard to curl up instead crashing the full way down, a mess of wayward limbs, hitting his head hard on the floor.

He had not be able to get up.

He can remember staring up at Riko, slumped against the floor with a spinning head, while the other boy screamed and screamed. Can remember the wooziness that made it all feel very far away, shock keeping pain at bay for the moment. He hadn't understood a word of what was being said. It was the first time Riko had broken one of his fingers.

He had been locked away after that, for how long he still has no idea but enough for infection to seep into his cuts, enough for severe dehydration to kick in and enough that light would be painful for the following day. He hadn't understood why, had thought maybe the teacher had said something to provoke Riko, until the other boy set his page of thoughtless doodles on fire, letting each piece of ink turn to ash. Then the message was clear - nothing, he was allowed nothing but exy.

Art... art was a test. He can remember wanting to do it, ages ago. Maybe nine years old as he proudly helped hang his pieces on the classroom walls, art pieces full of color, swirls and splashes where his small hand tried to grip a too big paintbrush. He can remember biting his tongue, eyebrows furrowed in concentration as he hunched over a crayon drawing, can remember a class trip to some museum where the rest of his class pushed each other around, giggling and fidgeting and playing hide and seek between statues while he stares up, up, up, awestruck, at a painting. A painting of a boat, he thinks, in a storm, the desperate captain staring up at the clouds in prayer. And doodling, of course. Copies upon copies of endless doodles. Clouds and monsters and knights, on and on and on. Angry teachers telling him to stop, to concentrate, to stop staring out the window and start working instead.

So... art is a test. A test to see if somewhere, deep inside, that little boy is still there, still staring out windows and drawing birds and walls and strangers passing by instead of listening to a word he's being told. Or if he was burnt away to ash with that page of doodles.

He doesn't remember what he had been studying with the Ravens. Probably something sport related. He had slept through any class that he was sitting next to Riko and failed each of them consistently, only the Masters weight keeping him from being kicked out. Professors eyed him sadly with a hint of fear but never said a word, not even to ask if he had bothered doing whatever he had been assigned. He had ignored them, not stupid or naive enough to believe they could help him.

They would be good classes to continue for his exy career had said history major Kevin Day and that had provided enough temporary anger induced bravery that he had decided to look at his options out of pure spite. Options he had been surprised he was being given at all.

Now, facing his captain, he has to drag his anger back out, has to use it to provide him with the courage he needs to raise his chin and speak. This is one more thing that has been stolen from him, he reminds himself. Stolen, taken, burnt in front of his eyes. Some part of him, the part a little less self destructive than the rest, hates that he is clinging to this so tightly, to the little boy he can only vaguely remember. It is drowned out by his curling fists. He doesn't know of this is something that Knox even can object to but, he realizes, he's using it as a measure, a judge on his limits.

For a moment Knox says nothing, looking almost confused. Jean tenses, bracing himself, but refuses to let his shoulders curl inwards like they want to. His hands curl tightly into fists.

"Art? Huh." Jean swallows. "Aren't you gonna need, like, uh a sketchbook and pencils and all that stuff?" Oh. Jean's fists loosen and fall apart.

Knox blinks, looking politely puzzled. His hair is an absolute mess. Jean nods.

Knox somehow manages to get them lost during the simple 15 minute drive, muttering curses to himself as the navigation desperately tries to get them back onto the right road. Jean decides to ignore them both, setting instead with observing the gathering clouds that menace above and the birds flittering anxiously below them. Until Knox takes them down the same road for the third time.

"Turn."

"Huh?" Beside him, Knox jumps in surprise, turning wide eyes to Jean, who nods to the road he means. Knox barely hesitates, sharply swinging them to the side with a shrug, tires screeching and the person behind them braking hard with an angry gesture at the both of them. Jean levels her a blank look. Knox drives like a menace, edging restlessly against the speed limit. Jean wishes he would just forget it and take the rickety Ford as fast as it can go. "How did you know?" Grinning delightedly, Knox slows, peering out his side window to find somewhere to park. Jean wordlessly points at the map displayed by the navigation.

“Oh.” Knox makes a face, sheepishly ruffling his own hair. “Right. Well. Moving on.” Jean looks away as he nods.

They manage to park just outside, Knox looking far too pleased with himself for someone who just got lost with navigation on and had to be shown the way back. Jean pulls himself out of the car and finds himself once more back out in the Californian heat. Marseille had heat like this, made for sea swimming and ice cream, but he hadn’t wanted to hide back then, racing through the streets in a T-shirt and shorts instead of the massive jumper he forces himself to breathe past now. And Marseille was a long time ago. All the same, he tilts his head back into it, relishing in how it beats down, how he can feel it burning against his skin. He hasn’t been allowed the sun in such a long time.

Knox slaps the hood proudly as he gets out, squinting at the shops as he twirls the keys. How he convinces Coach to let him borrow the car again and again for things as stupid as forgetting to buy class supplies and being too lazy to walk to practice is beyond Jean.

“Tada! Welcome to the world famous, world class, store for all - Target.” Knox raises his hands slowly where Jean can see them before making a flourishing gesture. “Oh and there’s an art shop beside we can go to afterwards.” He nods at it briefly before starting to make his way across the car park, a small, old looking shop, crammed between two far bigger and more modern stores.

“Jean?” He nods and follows Jeremy.

The small boy comes out of nowhere, smile wider than his sunburnt face and eyes wide enough to cast a spotlight. He’s clutching an exy magazine to his chest.

“Hello,” he says leaning towards them while his mother hangs back with an anxious frown. “Are you Number 3?” Eager, excited, hopeful. Number 3. Jean can’t breathe. The boy points at his face, where a plaster still hides Jean’s cheek, seemingly having decided the answer for himself. “Why are you hiding your tattoo? And why did you change team? And is it true that - ?”

“Jack.” His mother reaches out to grab his shoulder and stop the bombardment of questions.

“Sorry,” she says tiredly with a worried twitch of her face, “He’s a big fan I-“

“Can I have an autograph, Number 3?” interrupts the small boy, fighting off his mother’s hand, excited and so so hopeful. Jean takes a stumbling step away. *3. Number 3. You are not a person, you are a number, a thing. Do you understand? ... Do you understand? ...yes.* He can’t... he can’t be here, he... he can’t he can’t breathe he, no, what he - it feels like he’s looking around in slow motion, looking for an escape, a way out, a way away anywhere from here, this moment, that name. The little boy’s smile starts to crumble. Jean doesn’t know what to do.

“Hey,” Knox steps forward, smiling that picture perfect smile, ready to compete with the sun. “Jack, is it?” The little boy glances at his mother, suddenly shy, and at her slight nod turns back to nod vigorously. “Nice to meet you,” Knox holds out his hand, “I’m Jeremy.”

“I know,” whispers Jack and Knox laughs, tilting his head back as he does. Jack flushes as he shakes his hand. “And this is Jean,” says Jeremy, “He’s not number 3 anymore, yeah? He’s with us now, with the Trojans.” *Not number 3 anymore. He’s with us now.*

Jean moves numbly to shake the boys small hand, soft un worked skin, and write his name, in trembling looping cursive, on a green copy in black pen. Knox does the same before existing them quickly with a politeness Jean could never replicate. *Number 3. Number 3. Number 3.*

“Jean?” He shakes his head. Don’t, he almost says, don’t. It’s not allowed. I’m not allowed. Number 3. Not Jean, not a person. Don’t. But he can’t speak, can barely hear Knox, can only just comprehend the image his eyes are showing him of the other boy and the world around them. *Number 3.*

He sits down in front of Target and curls into a ball. Nothing can reach him here. All he has to do is breath.

Jeremy doesn’t know what to do.

He’s with us now. Number 3.

Jean follows Knox around the store numbly, nodding whenever he’s asked anything. He thinks Knox takes him some pens and copies but he can’t be sure, trailing after him like a small child without taking in anything going on around him. He runs his fingers over the glossy colored plastic covers, neon greens and pastel pinks. Breath in. And out. There are twenty plastic covers. In. And out. Fifty three blue copies. In. And out. He follows Knox to the cashier. In. And out. Outside. It’s easier to breath outside with the sky stretching out above, the heat pushing uncomfortably against him a reminder that he exists.

“The art shop?” asks Knox to with a small worried frown, “Or do you want to go back?” In. And out. He nods to the shop. Knox hesitates but nods. “Ok, art shop it is then.”

The art shop breaks all of Jeans rules. It’s small, crowded and cluttered, shelves and shelves of pencils and pens and sketchbooks and crayons and little statues tottering up above them, two narrow isles the only way around. There is no easy exit. And color. So much color everywhere he looks. His long list of well structured rules crumbles around him the deeper in he goes, lost among the towering shelves, claustrophobia forgotten in the smell of fresh paint. Rules were important. His rules said never to go anywhere like this, this crowded, this unescapable, this attention attracting.

He forgets his rules.

“What do you need?” asks Knox, muttering a curse as he knocks over a pile of small packets of clay with his elbow and bending down to scoop them up. Jean doesn’t know. He shrugs, waving vaguely around the shop in general. Knox makes a face and twirls, making sure to

keep his elbows well tucked in, to scan the shop. “Well you definitely need a sketchbook, right?” He curses again as he trips over something in an attempt to find them. Jean rolls his eyes. “Oh! Here - what one do you want?” Each page is soft and smooth under Jeans hesitant fingers. He digs through the pile, carefully flicking through each one before he decides.

“Perfect!” grins Knox, looking relieved by Jeans newfound calm, “Pencils next?”

Jean looks away as he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Watch me spend weeks trying to write this while it repeatedly deletes itself

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

Jean wakes up with a gasp, clawing at his covers to pull himself upright before he has the time to realise he's awake. Outside his window sun is rising slowly behind a filter of barely there rain. He presses a trembling hand to the cool glass and the outside world it keeps him from, body in a frantic panic his mind doesn't understand, heart echoing in his ears as it tries to run instead of his feet, breaths coming in and out in short bursts. He had been dreaming... He doesn't really want to remember. A breath catches and he holds back a sob, burying his head into his knees.

He just needs to breath.

Breath. Breath. Breath.

Wrapping trembling arms around himself, he looks up at his room, hovering in a strange almost light that feels like he's trapped in a sort of in-between time prison of honey thick air. His eyes wander automatically to his bedside table to check his small glowing alarm clock before falling onto the container beside it. He can count the amount of pills left inside without even opening it. Four. Four more nights left.

Throwing off his covers, he grabs a jumper as he stumbles to his feet and flees the room to the less confining sitting room with it's massive windows and skylights. He just wants to be able to sleep. That's all. Sleep. Is that really too much to ask?

It's too early for even Hector to be up so he finds himself alone, making coffee with shaking hands. It's still strange, a room without anyone else. He feels too loud, too much, like he shouldn't be using all this space for just himself.

It doesn't last long.

"Hey!" Jean doesn't understand why Alvarez comes to their kitchen every single morning before her run to drink her glass of cranberry juice when she has her own kitchen beside her room or why she seems happy to be up at his time but he nods back in greeting. The other backliner is alert and prepared, hair pulled back and dark eyes brights and clear, clearly willingly awake and somehow full of that determined Trojan energy, bouncing lightly on her heels as she pulls open their fridge. She stops halfway through her glass to look him up and down, a small crease forming between her eyebrows and her mouth twisting to the side as she takes in the tired mess he's sure is obvious he is. Both of their eyes go to the half empty bowl of black coffee in his hands.

"Hey, do you... you wanna come with me?" He looks up in surprise to meet her eyes, curious and sincere, and gets a hopeful smile in return. "On my run. None of the losers will ever

come. Say its 'way too early's and 'youre insain'."

It is way too early.

Alvarez tugs on one of her curls and takes a loud sip of her cranberry juice. Jean squirms at the thought of time spent alone with someone he doesn't know, not really sure if he *wants* to know, head moving as if to shake a no, when he remembers his thoughts of just a few mornings ago. Of how running used to feel like flying. He can't stay here anyway, alone inside these suffocating walls, the windows for once just not enough. He nods.

"Great." Alvarez beams, revealing a simple, not a trace of doubt or regret visible, "I leave in five though, so..." She waves at his pyjama shorts and jumper.

Right. He puts his bowl in the sink.

Alvarez sets a good pace and he falls into it easily, into the steady rhythm of their feet, the music of their mingling breathes and beating steps. He lets the sound, the breathless ache that starts slowly, the wind in his face, blot out anything else, just one foot, and another.

Afterwards, breathless and grinning as she pushes the door open to let them back inside, Alvarez says,

"Let's do this again."

Jean nods. He thinks something like a smile might be trying to force its way into the corners of his lips.

"Hey?" Breathless, Jeremy balances his phone on his shoulder as he hops in a frantic attempt to put on his second shoe. His bag... his bag? Where - oh. He slings it over one shoulder a little too fast, wincing as it crashes into his shoulder with a thunk. Keys... yes. He grabs them off the counter. What else...?

"Jeremy?"

"Hey. Sorry, this isn't a very good..." His phone -where is - he pats his pockets and sighs in relief, cursing his own idiocy when he remembers that he's literally on it, "... time. Um would you mind-" Out of the house at last. And only twenty minutes after he would have liked. The door slams behind him and he transfers his phone more calmly to his hand. "Um, sorry, so ... Yeah i-"

"Sweetheart." Oh. He stops for a second before continuing determinedly on. This is why he never usually answers the phone before checking who's calling. "I just called because I have some news." Great.

"Ok Mom, but can I call you back later? I'm running late and -"

"It won't take five minutes." Of course. "I was talking to an old friend and -" Jeremy stops to check for cars before jogging across the street "- good kind of people... God... you should... daughter... church... good standing..." He half drowns her out as he finds a map to double check where he should be.

"So I've arranged for you to visit them."

"What?" he asks flatly, ears prickling and attention snapped back to what she's saying.

"Jeremy. Dont be rude. They've agreed to have you over to eat on Friday evening. Very generous really, an honor honestly, and as I was saying, you will meet their daughter, she-"

"Mom I - I have a girlfriend," he looks crazy to the poor passerbyes, awkwardly avoiding eye contact with him as he waves his hand in angry circles, "And anyway-" .

"You never told me that." Oh. Shit. "Why haven't I met her? Or heard of her? Is she catholic? Jeremy I don't like you dating girls I don't know. And then not even telling me! She could be anybody! She could-"

"Maybe this is why I never told you!" He's stopped in the middle of the path now, shouting down at the phone in his hand. It feels a little ridiculous, a little like he's overreacting and he thinks that the old man across the street thinks so too but his mother might be the only person who can immediately have him tense and ready to defend himself. A long list of past experiences line up that have him jumping straight to extremes. He hates it but can't stop himself.

"Don't be ridiculous. Jeremy, I'm your mother. I know what's best for you. I don't want you frolicking with some random girl." Jeremy bites his lip against the tears he can feel rising out of frustrated anger.

"Too late Mom!" He hates how flustered he is, how he forgets how to formulate his thoughts, forgets his points, whenever he talks to either of his parents. Hates how small he feels all over again, like he's still ten years old.

"No. Not too late! I love you too much to be-"

"I can't go Friday anyway," he interrupts, "I've got practise. I can't miss it."

"Jeremy you should have quit that brutish sport years ago anyway. This can be the moment where you realise what you should be doing and listen to your mother. You're going down the wrong path-"

"I'm on the path that got me to college!"

"Maybe you should be there. You've been different ever since you left. My darling boy is being corrupted and I won't stand for it." She's going into her hysteric state now, voice rising piercingly as she works herself into a state.

"Corrupted." Dull, tired. He can feel himself giving up.

"I'll be speaking to your father too. Maybe since you've always loved him more, he'll be able to talk some sense into you."

"Mom that is-" Ridiculous. Manipulative. Petty.

"You better not disappoint me and be at that dinner love. I -"

He hangs up.

By the time he arrives to his very first lecture, he's late (very late, embarrassingly late) and his foot throbs from kicking a bin. He pauses at a bathroom before entering to check that his eyes aren't red, splashing cold water at his face in an attempt to rinse his mind away but the weird, shaky feeling even crying didn't relieve still remains.

He makes sure he's smiling in the mirror before he leaves.

Charlie texts him just before lunch to say that mom is losing it - *call dad before she calls an exorcist to rid you of the devil or whatever.*

Is that not the aim? he answers, pushing away the sick feeling in his stomach. All he gets in response is haha.

He tries to call her on his way to his lunch date with Sophie to try get more details but ends up with the annoying beep of an answering machine. It has not been his day.

Sophie is waiting for him outside by the time he reaches the bustling burrito place, arms crossed with an unimpressed look on her face.

"We won't get a table," she sighs mournfully, play punching him on the arm. Jeremy groans.

"I'm sorry, really." He gives her a quick kiss on the lips. "Hey, listen I'm so sorry but I just, I have to call my dad, I uh." He gestures with his phone and she sighs but nods.

"I'll get us takeaways then - your usual?" Thank you, he mouths, putting his hands in a prayer position and she rolls her eyes with a smile.

It takes three times for his dad to respond.

"Hello? Who's this?"

"Jeremy."

"..." A pause, then - "oh. Jeremy, right. What's the matter? The kids -"

"The kids are fine." Jeremy doesn't know why he isn't speaking, why he isn't just saying what he needs to. Why is this so hard?

"Oh. Right. Well...."

"Have you spoken to mom?" Jeremy realises he's rocking uncomfortably on his heels and tries to stop.

"Your mother?... No."

"She um, we I mean, we had an argument this morning. She said she would try to talk to you."

"Oh. Oh yeah, sorry, yeah she sent me a message earlier. I would've called you but I don't have your number so..." How can he not have my number? Jeremy is thrown for a full second.

"Ok well... what, what did she, um did she say anything-?"

"Listen man, we both know she's crazy. Just do as she says and get her off my back, ok? Play along and she'll shut up, yeah?"

"So break up with my girlfriend," he says flatly.

"Nah, look just - go to the bloody dinner." He can hear his father getting impatient. It's been less than a minute, he wants to scream, you haven't spoken to your son in months and you're already trying to get rid of him? "Listen I'm not here to solve all your problems - I'm busy, I've got things to do beyond dealing with my crazy ex and whining son ok? Just tell her to stop annoying me with all of this, yeah?"

A click and Jeremy is left staring at an empty screen.

"How did it go? Everything alright?" asks Sophie cheerfully when she comes back out with a burrito in each hand to find him still standing in the same place, staring down at the long since turned off phone in his hand. Jeremy jumps, eyes snapping to her as his neck jerks up fast enough to be painful, guilty shoving his phone into his pocket as if he's done something wrong. His heart beats uncomfortably fast and he blinks at her, wincing at the brightness of the harsh sunlight.

"Of course," he chirps out awkwardly, voice breaking halfway through, "Just, you know... family." He waves a vague hand through the air, surprised but relieved to note it's not trembling.

"Right." Sophie looks septic but hands him his burrito without asking. He nibbles at the top and forces a smile and what he hopes is an enthusiastic and approving nod.

"Go on a walk?" he offers.

"After you."

They take a path that leads through the college trees, the sun filtering through and around them students talking and laughing in a nearly ridiculously idilic setting. It makes him feel weird, the perfect world he can see, can hear, smell even but can't feel. He wishes it would rain suddenly, wishes it so much he feels like crying just because all he can see is the warm sun and the light it plays with along the path. The rain is more understanding, closer, rain, he thinks, lets you feel things that the sun doesn't. Rain lets him breath.

Sophie is talking and he's trying to listen, trying so hard to hear her above the screaming of his own thoughts and the ache in his heart for the rain and the ocean, but focusing on each word has become so difficult that by the time he's understood it's meaning she's already seven words ahead.

She stops.

"Are you sure you're ok?"

"Oh, yeah." He grins, overly aware of how strange that feels, how detached he feels from his face, the muscles moving under his skin. How crazy is it that everyone has a body, that moves, just like that? How crazy is it that no one else seems to think that it's crazy? Hes moving, he decided to and he did and thats normal but it feels very not normal and everyone is just acting like nothing's happening because nothing is happening but he feels like something's happening or maybe going to happen or maybe that it already did and maybe hes going crazy. "Sorry, I am listening, I'm just a bit-"

Lost. No. A bit... a bit nothing. I'm a bit nothing and a bit everything and I'm not sure this feeling even exists and maybe it's all in my head and im making it up because... because, I don't know. I'm sad. No. No, no, no. Sad isn't the word. I'm very far away, and I know that I'm right here and that, technically you could just reach out and touch my hand and feel my heartbeat but I feel very far away. I don't know why I'm feeling this non feeling and I feel like I should, I feel like there's a reason but also like there isn't and I mean it's not bad but it's not good either and I'm just very... nothing. I'm very nothing. Does that make sense?

"I'm a bit tired, you know, classes. Can't believe summer is over." Summer doesn't feel real at the moment. Nothing really does. He doesn't say that. He lets her talk and trys to concentrate as he nods along and wishes for rain.

Afterwards he kisses her cheek and, classes done for the day, goes to bed, pulling his covers over his head and setting an alarm to just before practise as he curls up into the comforting dark where no one else can reach him at all.

Knox's smile doesn't meet his eyes and it makes Jean want to throw up. No one seems to notice the tension in his new captain's shoulders or the way his eyes wander to somewhere far away before someone startles him back into the Trojan meeting room. He looks tired and faded and off and he's way too good at hiding it. It's setting Jean on edge, and he finds himself holding his breath until he can't anymore, hands clenched tightly in each other's old habit to try to disappear, to make as little noise as possible. He closes his eyes and counts, his lungs clenching painfully, but around him the world continues on, refusing to freeze alongside him. He's forced to open his mouth with a small gasp, body hungrily drinking in the air his mind wishes he could go without.

Beside him, Blue gives him an odd look. She clearly isn't listening to a word either Knox or Coach are saying, playing with her shoelaces and tearing up little pieces of paper to stack them into piles. She had followed Jean to his corner by the window, likewise ignoring the coaches dominating the middle of the room and choosing instead to throw herself onto the floor with barely a nod of acknowledgement and neither of them had spoken a word since.

Curled up against the window, Jean focuses on her paper piles, his breathing slowly normalising as he counts the pieces. She does twenty per pile before moving on, neatly tearing them into squares. He reaches out to save a rickety pile from falling and she pauses before nodding. They work together in a companionable silence, her tearing and piling while he follows behind, straightening her piles with care.

He's startled by sudden movement and chatter around them, looking up in surprise to realise that it's over, the rest of the team getting up and talking loudly as they start to leave slowly in the disorganized mess he is starting to realise is standard here. He'd forgotten the world betting their paper towers still existed.

Blue sighs and carefully begins to collect each piece one by one into her palm. Jean helps silently. They finish and Blue stands immediately, swiftly and elegantly dumping them all in the bin before leaving without a backwards glance. Jean watches her go but stays sitting, chin on his knees, and pretends not to notice Knox come over even as he feels his shoulders tense and each step seems to echo loudly.

Maybe this is it. What 'it' is he's not sure. A limit, something he did, an unspoken test he's failed, nothing at all that he still has to pay for. An 'it', a tipping point.

"Hey." Knox is never awkward, never empty if things to say, never... never this. Forced cheer, forced ok. Jean feels very tired. "Did you listen to anything?" He sounds very tired too. No joke following his blunt, empty question, no anecdote, nothing. Jean forces himself to shake his head.

"Doctor checkups," says Knox and Jean looks up to get a wain half smile. "Yeah - it's not too bad, don't worry. They just have to make sure we're all still pieced together and not drugged up before the season."

"No." It's out of his mouth and he's shaking his head before he can think it through, a sudden panic clawing up his throat as his stomach drops. Jean has never liked doctors and America has done nothing to improve that. Knox frowns uncertainly.

"You can't play without the doctor's approval," he says slowly, "But I could talk to Coach I'd you want to chose one to see in particular? Or-" But Jean is already chocking all of that deep down and forcing the reasonable part of his brain to say something.

"It's fine," he interrupts. Get a grip. His hands are shaking. He stands and shoves them into his pockets.

"Wha - are you sure? Cause i-" begins Knox, looking a little lost by Jean's sudden change of mind. Jean nods aggressively and his captain stops, shoulders slumping, and nods more softly back. For a second Jean thinks he's going to argue but Knox just nods again, vacant, tired look coming back to his eyes. Jean feels almost guilty.

They go together, sent out in pairs, their slot the last one, during the end of practise, leaving early after drills so horrifyingly done Riko wouldn't have let a single one of them off the court until midnight. The car ride is the first real, tense silence Jean has experienced with Knox, whose mind is so clearly elsewhere that Laila took over most of practise and the team moral went out the window. Jean can't say he's too calm either, body stiffly still and each movement careful and slow and quiet. Still, it goes by far too fast and he's standing behind Knox while he charms the secretary and they're in the waiting room and he desperately desperately wants to grab onto someone's arm and say don't make me go in, don't let me go in, can't you see I'm not ok?

But he doesn't. He sits, still and quiet and trying not to breathe. The magazines on the table are too glossy, too bright.

He lets Knox go first.

Inevitably, he's called. A lady in a white coat, a floral dress and a bright smile with a clipboard. He feels giant trailing behind her, his limbs too long, too awkwardly tall. Or maybe that's just the walls, folding and buckling inwards.

Her office is small and white and smells strongly of disinfectant and some sort of perfume in an attempt to overpower it. A giant poster advertising coloured plasters shows children climbing a tree in exaggerated bright tones. She's talking, he realizes and turns to look at her. She's asked a question and she waits expectantly peering up at him through a pair of glasses that look too narrow to be of much use. He doesn't have the courage to open his mouth. She smiles and asks again.

"Would you mind stepping on the scales?" He wonders if he can say yes, I do mind very much actually.

He steps on the scales.

She flutters around, giving a concerned hum at the number announced and pointing him to where she measures his height and gives an even more concerned hum.

Jean really hates doctors.

"You're a bit light. As an athlete, at your hight, you should be... yes you should be a good deal heavier. You're going to have to put on weight if you want to keep playing. What have you been eating?" Jean stares down at her blankly and after an awkward, stuffed pause, she murmurs about bringing it up with coach.

"You're going to have to come back in... let's say a month? If you haven't started to put in weight, I'm going to have to bench you." There, showing the steel hidden in all doctors, just a flash, here and gone.

"Next," she mutters, flipping through a file, "Right. Are you on any medication?" Jean thinks of the near empty pot of pills on his bedside table and shakes his head. "Ok, perfect. I'm just going to take your temperature..."

By the time Jean comes out, he feels both mentally and physically like he's been filled with heavy rocks and told to drag them everywhere he goes. Knox is waiting for him by the door looking like he might understand the sentiment. Jean carefully unclenches his fists as he walks over, fingers painfully releasing their tight grip to reveal faint bruises on his palms. Add that to the list along with not not eating enough, he thinks bitterly, aware that he's sulking and unable to bring himself to care.

They leave silently. Jean can't remember the last time in the past week he's been in California that Knox shut up for this long and it's setting him more on edge than he would ever like to admit, the other boys silence heavy and clouded. They pause at a red light and he slumps his head against the steering wheel. It's strange to see, even his bright curls seeming faded and dull, sort of like seeing the moon on those nights where it looks sickly and half alive and he's a little scared it's going to leave him all alone.

Knox mumbles something into his arms.

"Excuse me?" Jean barely dares to breath it out.

"Ice cream. Do you want some ice cream?" Jean blinks. Oh. These people, this boy, are so confusing. He thinks of the doctor's gown and her mutters of 'too thin' and of how long it's been since he had ice cream and nods.

"Ok."

"Okay," Knox nods as the light goes green and swings them sharply, dangerously, into a different lane to get beeped at by three different cars and yelled at by a cyclist before taking a

sharp left down a small alleyway. "This place makes the best." He doesn't even seem phased. Jean is almost impressed.

The icecream place is tiny. How, Jean wonders, do they fit so many flavours into such a small space? And how did Knox find this place, hidden away alongside an old bookstore? Knox, who seems to relax as they step in, running quick fingers over the only wall that isn't lined with choices, a bright yellow colour that seems to be the overall theme of the place. Jean can't even think about choosing a one flavour among the dozens, so he hangs back so he hangs back and watches Knox order five different flavoured scoops for one cone. His long list finished, he turns to raise an eyebrow at Jean, who shrugs.

"I order? For you?" Jean nods.

Knox seems to consider carefully, seriously, like this is something important, walking up and down the freezers and peering inside with a twisted mouth.

"Raspberry, lemon, mint chocolate," he pauses and hums along with the song playing softly from the shop, in speechless reflection for a minute as he runs his hand through his hair. "Rose... and bubblegum." Bubblegum? Since when is that an ice cream flavour? Jean is starting to doubt Jeremys ice cream choosing abilities.

The ice creams both turn out enormous, bigger by at least a double than any Jeans ever attempted to finish, with generous helpings and bright colours. Bubblegum is very very blue in a not natural and not very edible looking kind of way. Raspberry and lemon, at least, don't look too fake. Everything on Knox's cone seems to be at least partly chocolate and Jean just doesn't know how he's possibly going to eat the entire thing.

They sit on the sole two rickety chairs outside and Knox lets out a sigh, shoulders visibly loosening. Like some sort of starved monster, he eats his ice cream with a spoon, happily swallowing it down while Jean tentively tries a lick. And splutters. Knox looks over in surprise.

"What?"

"This, Knox," says Jean, affronted, "Is disgusting." And Knox, strange, unpredictable Knox, bursts out laughing. Jean finds himself staring in bewilderment, wondering if his english has let him down and there's something he hasn't understood.

"You look so offended!"

"...ah." Why is this funny?

"What did you tr- where you trying mint chocolate?! You don't like mint chocolate?!"

Jean wrinkles his nose.

"Apparently not."

He doesn't understand why Knox is laughing so much or this sudden change of mood but something deep inside relaxes in relief, pushing him to try the rest of his flavours despite the unencouraging start.

Bubblegum is also disgusting. He's not sure where that one was going anyway. Bubblegum... in ice cream. Stabbing at his ice cream with the tiny bright yellow plastic shovel he was given in attempt to get around the horrific abomination, he hopes whoever had the ridiculous idea regrets it.

Rose is... interesting. Not bad really, just strange. He eats it all though to his surprise.

Raspberry and lemon are good, he can give Knox that. Raspberry and lemon are really good.

Knox also makes him try some of his plain chocolate flavour when Jean admits to not remembering what it tastes like but, although he admits that it's nice, he thinks lemon is the best. And he still can't image eating the sheer amount if chocolate Knox is happily making his way through.

By the time they leave, there's a small smile hidden in Knox's face, but only if you look closely. The wrinkle by his eyes, the tiny dimple by his mouth.

When they get back and he escapes back to his room, alone, he picks up a colouring pencil for the first time since he was a teenager and he draws Jeremy Knox's secret smile and his five flavours of chocolate ice cream.

Chapter End Notes

uh yeah just um projecting onto Jeremy in a totally healthy way

End Notes

pile on criticisms, compliments, thoughts - whatever! - im too tired to be offended and comments give me life

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