

From My Castle, Looking Down

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From My Castle, Looking Down

by [rosadavidii](#)

Summary

Being locked in a tower isn't ideal, for sure, but Andrew could do worse. He's safe, and most importantly, he's alone. Then a strange man topples through his window.

Yes, it's a Rapunzel AU.

Notes

Well, I've got five chapters written so far, and I've got the plot mapped out. I'm planning to try for a consistent update schedule- maybe one chapter a week?- but no promises.

This one should be pretty light overall, but I'll put a content warning before the chapter if I think there's anything potentially upsetting in there.

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

Chapter 1

Andrew Minyard stared out the window at the same trees he had seen every day for the last five years and wondered very seriously if a person could die from boredom.

His room was a circle thirty-four feet across, give or take. He had paced it out over and over, counting and recounting as though he were likely to forget the number. The wall of the bathroom formed an alcove for his bed on one side of the room. On the other side was a small kitchen area. A couch and two armchairs formed a sitting area in the middle of the room, and bookshelves lined the rest of the walls, except for the space taken up by the huge window. And that was it.

If it had been an apartment, Andrew thought wryly, it would have been a great deal. *Secluded studio! Almost a thousand square feet! Amazing views!* There was, of course, the small matter of there being no staircase and no way down, but that was a minor detail.

Well, almost no way down. No way down for *him* .

Andrew looked down at the long braid of his hair to where it hung out the window, swaying in the breeze. The goddamn hair. Possibly his least favorite part of this whole ridiculous clusterfuck. Well, no. He had a lot of least favorite parts. But the hair was on the list, for sure.

“Hey, asshole! Wake up!”

Andrew stuck his head out the window and looked straight down. Down, down the length of the tower, and there was the witch- the source of his situation. He sighed deeply and moved to unbraid his hair so that it reached the ground.

After several minutes of grunting and swearing on her part and stoic silence on Andrew’s despite the pain in his scalp, the witch hauled herself through the window. Andrew looked her up and down. She looked terrible, as usual. Red-rimmed eyes, sallow skin, thinning hair the same light blonde as his.

Technically, she was his mother. It was a technicality Andrew chose to ignore. After what she had done, she didn’t deserve the title.

“Back so soon, Tilda? What, use it all up already?” he asked mockingly.

“Don’t give me that,” she growled. “Just get over here.”

Andrew didn’t move. Mumbling threats punctuated by more than a few expletives, Tilda crossed to his side, silver shears at the ready. Instead of reaching for him, though, she handed them to Andrew. She had learned that lesson quickly and well. Andrew took the shears and snipped seven strands of hair from his head before handing back the shears and hair, careful never to touch Tilda’s hands.

“And are you keeping to your side of the deal?” he asked, letting it sound like the threat that it was.

“No, I haven’t seen my son. No, I don’t know where he is. As if I care. You know I don’t need him anymore.” Tilda’s lip curled, her ugly expression turning even more sour for a moment. She turned back toward the window. “We’re done here. Let me down.”

She was so close to the window. One wrong movement... one wrong step... Andrew let himself consider it for a single moment, and then pushed it aside. Aaron was safe for now. If she died, there was no way of knowing what kind of failsafes she had. It would be just like her to set up some petty curse to be triggered just to get back at him. Andrew clenched his fists until the nails bit into his palms, but he walked back across the room and tossed the length of his hair out the window.

With Tilda finally on the ground and out of sight into the forest, Andrew turned back to the monotony of his daily routine. Seven strands would last her several weeks, assuming she didn’t get greedy, so he would be alone again for a while. Flopping into an armchair, Andrew pulled his hair into a pile in front of him and set about the arduous task of braiding and coiling it back until it was a manageable enough length to allow him to move around more freely.

Once it was done, Andrew leaned his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes. Dealing with Tilda drained every single one of his energy reserves and then some. He could still feel the residual effects of her spell drawing off of his life force, but magic aside, her personality alone gave him a headache. It was as good a time as any for a nap. It wasn’t like he had anywhere to be. He let his shoulders drop and drank in the quiet.

The stillness was broken by a panted breath and a low curse from somewhere just below the windowsill.

In a flurry of motion, Andrew was out of the chair with his knives drawn. He crossed the room in a few steps and pressed his back against the wall just to the left of the window. There was a series of scuffling noises accompanied by heavy breathing and several more curses, and then a pair of hands slapped against the windowsill from below and a boy was hauling himself into Andrew’s room.

Andrew moved in a blur. All he had time to register was dark hair and dark eyes before he had the boy pressed up against the wall with a knife to his throat. “Who are you? Why are you here?” Andrew demanded, injecting every ounce of menace he had into the questions. This was not a situation he had been prepared for. More fool him for assuming that anywhere, even an impenetrable tower, could be completely safe.

The boy went with surprisingly little fight. He looked startled and concerned but nowhere near as scared as people usually were when they found themselves in his position. Interesting.

“I didn’t know there was anyone up here. I saw a tower in the middle of nowhere. It seemed out of place. I was curious,” the boy answered. He cocked his head. “Who are *you*? I didn’t see a door in this thing.”

“Name,” Andrew growled, ignoring the question.

“Neil,” the boy answered easily, but something in his eyes put Andrew on edge. Whoever he was, this name was not the truth, or at least not the whole one. Andrew paused, debating on whether to demand more now or to wait and get his answers in time. Before he could decide, Neil coughed, and flecks of red appeared on his lips.

“Sorry, I think I-” he wheezed, before his eyes rolled back into his head.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Unfortunately for him, Andrew is not a doctor.

Chapter Notes

Once a week, I said. It's been about a week, right? I lost all sense of time three months ago.

CW: blood and injuries, questionable first aid

Andrew caught Neil as he slumped toward the ground. Where his hand met the boy's chest, it came away sticky with blood. Closer now, Andrew could also see that Neil's dark brown curls were matted to his head on the side, although he couldn't tell exactly where or how bad the injury was. Well, fuck.

Options, options. He could let Neil die. He could leave him to bleed out on the floor, or he could heave him out the window and hasten the process. Andrew considered but then dismissed the idea. Clearly, he was a liar, but Neil had seemed genuinely surprised to see Andrew. It was likely he actually had thought the tower was empty. And despite himself, Andrew was curious. There was a story here, one he couldn't immediately work out, and he wanted to solve it, but for that, he would need Neil alive. Which meant that Andrew would have to attempt to save his life. Shit.

Andrew hefted Neil's body into his arms and carried him to the bathroom. Although Neil was a few inches taller, he felt light as a feather. Probably underfed. Andrew set him in the tub and considered the logistics of pulling Neil's shirt off over his head before going to fetch some scissors to cut it off instead. He pulled the ruined fabric away from where it was stuck to Neil's torso as efficiently as he could, only pausing for a moment at the ruined landscape of scars he revealed. The blood appeared to be coming from a deep laceration in Neil's side, along with several smaller cuts across his arms and shoulders. Andrew paused at the waistband of Neil's jeans before gritting his teeth and pulling them off in one quick, clinical movement. It was necessary. It was necessary. He left his boxers in place, relieved to see that the damage appeared to be mostly confined to Neil's top half. His knees were badly scraped and his legs were covered in dirt and bruises, but that would have to wait. Then, Andrew turned his attention to Neil's head wound.

Neil's hair was so caked with blood that it was impossible to see anything. It would have to go. Andrew grabbed the scissors again. It was slow work trying to avoid an injury he couldn't see, but eventually Neil had an incredibly uneven buzz cut and Andrew could see that while the gash still oozed a small amount of blood, his skull appeared intact, and the damage was mostly to his scalp. Another point towards Neil's survival. Everything really was coming up Andrew today.

The damage assessed, Andrew turned his attention to the most pressing problem. He had to stop the bleeding from Neil's side. Wait, no. He had to clean it first. Andrew stood to grab his washcloth from the sink, wetting it and lathering up some soap. Hopefully cheap bar soap would work well enough. Grimacing, he did his best to wipe the blood, dirt, and sweat from around the wound. Neil was still unconscious, which at this point was probably a blessing. Andrew rinsed the washcloth and dabbed away the soap from Neil's skin. Then, he grabbed the towel off the rack and pressed it over the wound. Now all he could do was maintain the pressure and wait.

Andrew's breathing sounded loud in the quiet of the bathroom. His knees ached where he knelt on the tile floor. It was a good thing the towel was black, he thought absently. The stains might not show. It would be a shame to ruin a good towel. He glanced up at Neil's face, eyes closed and mouth slack as his head lolled against the edge of the tub. He was out cold, and Andrew hoped he would stay that way. If he woke up mostly naked in a strange bathtub and panicked, it would make all of this much harder.

How many minutes had it been? Enough, hopefully. Andrew carefully pulled the towel away and was relieved to see that the bleeding had mostly stopped. The cut was deep, but it would probably be okay without stitches. This was good, since Andrew had no idea how to stitch a wound. Whoever Neil was, he was incredibly lucky. Andrew dug out the first aid kit in the back of the cabinet and bandaged Neil's side and then his head. It wasn't the most elegant job, but it would hold.

Andrew sat back on his heels. He had done what he could- all that he knew how to do. Only time would tell if it had been enough. Out of nowhere, his thoughts flicked to Aaron. He had wanted to become a doctor, once. Maybe he could've been useful here. With effort, Andrew forced the thought away.

With the adrenaline of the emergency first aid wearing off, he now had a new problem. There was a comatose, possibly dangerous man in his bathtub, and no sign of when he might wake up. Andrew crossed his arms, pondering. He couldn't just leave Neil in the bathroom. He needed somewhere he could control. When Neil finally regained consciousness, Andrew needed to immediately have the upper hand.

Ten minutes later, Andrew carried Neil's limp body out of the bathroom and laid him out on a blanket spread in the middle of the floor. Neil's eyelashes fluttered and he groaned quietly in the back of his throat. After a moment's thought, Andrew tossed another blanket on top of him, covering all but Neil's face. Then, he sat back in his armchair, knives at the ready, and settled in to wait.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

We finally get some conversation. Everyone is conscious and not dying. Questions are asked. Good times.

Chapter Notes

So it's been a bit over a week... I did mention that I've lost all sense of time, right? Anyway here it is. I actually ended up combining the last two chapters that I had pre-written because I felt like they were too short, so next week's update will depend on whether I get the next chapter written in time. Sorry, ya'll.

Neil woke up with both fists swinging, hissing like a cornered cat. He moved so quickly that Andrew was caught off guard; one moment, he was dead to the world, and the next he had managed to kick himself into a crouch and was attempting to go for Andrew's throat. Fortunately for Andrew, this only lasted as long as it took for both of Neil's knees to give way, toppling him in the middle of his lunge. Neil snarled and made a movement like he was reaching for a weapon, and then seemed to realize for the first time that he was dressed only in his underwear. His already tight frame tensed even further, and he twisted himself toward Andrew, arms and knees drawn up defensively. Through it all, Andrew remained in his chair, consciously maintaining his flat expression and bored stance. Somehow, the realization that he hadn't moved at all, either toward Neil or away from him, seemed to relax Neil some minute amount.

"Are you done?" Andrew finally asked.

"Fuck you," Neil snarled. "What the fuck did you do?"

"You broke into my house and bled all over my bathroom. I stopped you from bleeding out. Now, you are going to answer my questions, or I am going to push you out that window and do whoever you are running from a favor. Are we clear?" Andrew made sure that his knives were clearly visible. He was not in the business of idle threats.

"I told you, I saw the tower and I was curious-"

"Ah, ah, ah," Andrew shook a finger mockingly. "Do not lie to me, Neil. I think we are a bit past that."

“I’m not telling you shit,” Neil spat. “I don’t even know your name. What are you doing here? How did you even get up here?”

Andrew sat back in the armchair. “How about this,” he said slowly. “A trade. A game, of sorts. You answer one of my questions, and I’ll answer one of yours.” Seeing Neil’s dubious look, he added, “I will tell the truth if you do the same. Unlike you, I am not a liar.”

Neil scoffed at that. “Fine, sure. I’ll go first. What’s your name?”

“Andrew,” Andrew responded easily. “Andrew Minyard. Look, I gave you a full name and everything. And now it’s my turn. Who gave you those wounds?”

“There are... some people who are looking for me,” Neil answered cagily. “They want to hurt me. They got a little too close.”

Andrew nodded. It wasn’t anything he couldn’t have guessed, but it was honesty, to a point. The details on *who* weren’t really important, anyway.

“My turn again, right?” Neil asked. “Alright. How did you end up in this tower?”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “A witch put me here. Ask less boring questions.”

“A witch? Are you serious?”

Andrew leveled Neil with a look. “I am always serious. I made a deal with her. This was one of the conditions.”

Andrew could tell that Neil was dying to ask more, but to his credit, he kept to the rules of their game and remained silent. Andrew let him stew, toying with his knives while he rolled his next question over in his head. Finally, he asked, “These people who want to hurt you. Did they follow you here?”

“I don’t think so. I’m fast. I think I lost them in the forest.” Neil glanced back toward the window, his brow furrowing slightly.

“And are they going to come for you?”

Neil hesitated. “They won’t stop looking for me. But this tower is hard to find- I only stumbled on it by accident. Even if they see it, they’ll probably assume it’s abandoned, like I did, and they can’t climb like me.” He gave a half-hearted shrug with one shoulder.

Andrew tapped one knife against his bottom lip, thinking. This boy didn’t come without risks, that was clear. If what he said was true, though, those risks might be less than they originally appeared. Overall, Andrew decided he was satisfied, at least for the moment.

“Alright. I believe you,” he told Neil. “Your turn.”

Neil cocked his head. He was silent for several long moments. Finally, he turned to Andrew with a smirk. “Switchblade or butterfly?”

“What?”

“Knives. Which do you prefer?” Neil gave a low huff which could have been a laugh. “You wanted a less boring question. I thought it was a subject you’d enjoy.”

“Oh, so he’s a comedian.” Andrew was not amused. He definitely wasn’t. “Switchblade.”

“Are you sure? I thought you’d go in for more dramatics.” The smirk was a full-on grin now. “It’s your turn.”

Andrew stood. “I do not have to take it now.”

Neil’s eyes followed him, his body regaining some of the tension it had lost. “You won’t get another chance. I’m leaving as soon as you give me my clothes back.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re sitting on my living room floor because your legs are too weak to stand. You are not going to be climbing down this tower any time soon.” He turned away towards his bedroom corner.

Behind him, Neil was silent for a moment. He was probably realizing the truth of what Andrew said. *Idiot*. Andrew went to his dresser and rifled through until he found an old t-shirt and sweatpants. He tossed them backward without looking. By the sound of it, they caught Neil square in the face.

“Your old clothes were ruined,” Andrew told Neil over the sounds of his spluttering. “You can wear these for now.”

“But-”

Andrew turned. “Go put on the sweatpants, and then you are going to lay down on that couch before you pass out again. I will not catch you, and you do not need another concussion.”

Neil’s jaw worked. He was clearly thinking about arguing. Finally, he gathered up the clothes and stalked toward the bathroom, muttering under his breath, “I don’t have a concussion.”

Andrew snorted. “We’ll see about that.”

The bathroom door slammed in answer. Andrew let out a long breath through his nose and stumbled toward the kitchen, rubbing his hands over his face. He needed some fucking ice cream.

When Neil woke again, Andrew was once again seated in the armchair, pretending to read a book. It had been so long since he’d had someone in his space for any length of time, and he was wound tighter than a spring. Neil came to in a burst of movement, spinning upright on the couch while reaching under the throw pillow as though searching for something. Then, he stopped, blinking blearily at his surroundings. He turned and caught sight of Andrew.

“Oh. You,” he said grouchily.

"Me," Andrew agreed.

Neil shifted until he was sitting cross-legged on the center cushion, hands holding his ankles. "Did you even move all night?"

Andrew didn't dignify that with a response.

For some reason, Neil seemed to find this funny. "Do you have any food?" He asked, brown eyes lit with amusement. "I'm assuming the witch feeds you."

With reluctance, Andrew nodded. "She does." She probably wouldn't have bothered, but she needed Andrew's energy, and that meant that Andrew had to eat. He took some small amount of vicious delight from making Tilda run errands for him, even if she only fulfilled his requests about half the time. It was her own fault for not thinking the whole "trapped in a tower" thing through.

Neil's eyes were still on him. When Andrew didn't elaborate, he nodded consideringly. "I have to admit, saving my life only to kill me by starvation is definitely new. I wouldn't have seen that one coming."

Andrew scowled. He stood and stomped over the kitchen. He pulled down a box of cereal and poured two bowls, filled them with milk, and then stomped back over to the couch and shoved one of them into Neil's hands. "There. You won't starve."

Neil didn't smile, but his eyes held far too much mirth for Andrew's taste. "Why, thank you," he said sweetly. Andrew pointedly turned his back and returned to his armchair.

He waited until Neil's mouth was full before he spoke. "What is your real eye color?" In the morning light, he had noticed the telltale ring of color contacts around Neil's irises.

Neil coughed and swallowed his bite of cereal. "Oh, we're playing again?" Andrew didn't respond. Neil gave him a long, considering look before slowly reaching up and removing one of his contacts. The eye beneath was bright, icy blue.

Andrew nodded. Neil replaced the contact and blinked several times to settle it back into place. He took another bite of cereal and regarded Andrew thoughtfully. Finally, he said, "My turn again. What was the deal?"

He didn't have to specify. Slowly, Andrew responded, "I allow her to siphon my energy for her magic. She leaves my brother alone."

Neil nodded. "I still don't understand the tower."

Andrew scoffed. "Insurance. She seems to think I might run. I do not break my deals, but for some reason she wouldn't take my word for it."

A hint of a smile played around Neil's mouth. "Seems a little dramatic, though, don't you think?"

“She read it in some story.” It had probably appealed to Tilda’s sense of humor. Neil was right, though; it was completely dramatic in the worst way. Andrew found himself unaccountably amused by having someone else around to point out the ridiculousness of his situation.

Neil cocked an eyebrow. “Was the hair part of the story, too?”

Alright, now. This had gone on long enough. “Careful. You wouldn’t want to take more than your share. But I’ll let you have this one for free: yes, the hair was part of the story.” Giving away truths was bad, but worse would be to let Neil think that Andrew dealt with the absurdity of his hair by choice.

Neil seemed to take the warning for what it was and subsided, sinking back into the couch and focusing back to his cereal bowl. Andrew watched him as he finished the food and leaned his head against the back of the couch, seeming already exhausted.

To his surprise, Andrew realized that he felt... normal. Not under threat. Not relaxed, by any means- but then, he hadn’t been truly calm in years- but he no longer felt the itching, creeping dread of having someone in his space. What was wrong with him? Disgusting. He needed to move. He stood and carried his cereal bowl to the sink, leaving Neil’s for him to deal with. Then, almost automatically, he found himself gravitating back to his favorite spot on the windowsill.

It had been almost a full day since Neil had staggered, half-dead, through the window. The morning coolness had burned off, and the sun was warm on Andrew’s face as it drifted toward a golden afternoon.

Behind him, Andrew heard Neil yawn. He would surely be asleep again soon, which was probably for the best. Only rest would let him recover from his injuries. Andrew settled himself more comfortably in the window, refusing to turn back and look at the man on his couch. A breeze stirred, lifting the few soft hairs that escaped from his braid. He turned into it. To the west, he could see clouds gathering on the horizon. Perhaps soon there would be a storm.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Some bonding, and an unwelcome visitor.

Chapter Notes

Here she is, mostly on time and everything. Same for the next chapter, though- not promising anything but I'll do my best. If all goes as planned, there should only be a couple chapters left.

CW: unpleasant family dynamics, some negative effects from magic usage that look a bit like someone is drugged

Despite his best intentions, Andrew found himself not minding Neil's presence in his space. His days, which had for years drifted past in a slow monotony, now held change and conversation and a growing sense of- not trust, never trust, but perhaps camaraderie. Interest. And Neil was interesting, however Andrew tried to deny it. Even with the scraps of truth eked out by their game, he was still clearly hiding huge parts of his story, but Andrew found himself just as intrigued by Neil's sharp wit and his observant gaze as by his mysterious past. He was surprisingly funny when he wasn't afraid for his life, and he seemed to have an almost innate ability to sense and skirt Andrew's boundaries. And as the days turned into a week and Neil was able to move around more freely, Andrew found himself... noticing. Noticing the way the morning sun caught the blue of Neil's eyes. Noticing the freckles scattered across his nose like cinnamon. Noticing the small, dark mole just under his right eye. Neil told stories of the things he'd seen on his travels, and Andrew noticed the way his lips curved as he described dolphins leaping through the surf off of the coast. Neil laughed as he told how as a child he had tried to swim out to meet them.

"Have you ever been to the ocean?" he asked, face alight with the fond memory.

Andrew shook off his distraction. "Once. A long time ago."

In the evenings, when Andrew sat in his spot on the windowsill to smoke, Neil began to join him. The window was just large enough for them to sit across from each other, knees almost touching, and pass Andrew's lighter between them. Neil liked to watch his cigarettes burn down, only taking drags often enough to keep the cherry alight. "I like the smell," was his only explanation. Andrew thought it was a waste of good nicotine, but the way the cigarette's

glow shadowed the hollows of Neil's cheeks was quickly replacing his fear of heights as his favorite source for an adrenaline rush.

As a week turned into two, Andrew also discovered many new facts about Neil, each more headache-inducing than the last. It turned out that when he wasn't actively bedridden, Neil was the worst person on Earth to be confined with in a single room. He was restless and easily bored, and Andrew had to snap at him more than once to stop pacing before he wore a hole straight through the floor. In exchange, Neil began suggesting increasingly elaborate and stupid stunts to end his captivity, seemingly just for the joy of hearing Andrew shoot them down.

"Okay, maybe I can't climb down yet, but I bet if I took your bedsheets and tied them all together I could make a pretty decent parachute. This thing is tall enough. It would work."

"And I'm left with no bedsheets?"

"You'd survive. Make the witch bring you more."

"I regret saving your life. The tower isn't tall enough, the parachute wouldn't open, and you would hit the ground at terminal velocity, wasting all of my hard work."

"What if I just jumped? It wouldn't be too bad, right? I can survive a broken leg."

"What if I toss you out right now and we can test that theory."

Andrew hated him.

Of course, when two weeks turned into two and a half, reality came knocking.

"Hey! Shithead!"

Andrew's head jerked up from where he had been dozing in the armchair. Neil twisted to look at him from the couch, where he had been stretched out flat on his back reading a mathematics textbook. "Who the fuck is that?" he asked.

"Hurry up, asshole! Toss me the hair already!"

Andrew was already in motion. "It's the witch. Put yourself away somewhere. I don't care where, but she better not see you." He didn't stop to watch Neil hide, instead crossing to the window as quickly as possible, unbraiding his hair as he went.

"Finally. What, were you sleeping or something?" Tilda huffed as she hauled herself through the window.

Andrew scowled, massaging his roots where her body weight had pulled. "You're early. Time to stop being so wasteful with the resources, hm?"

"I had some big things in the works last week. Not that it's any of your business," she snarked back, eyeing the room idly. Then, she stopped, her gaze caught by something. "What's this? Entertaining visitors?"

Andrew followed her gaze and cursed inwardly. They hadn't yet cleaned up the dishes from breakfast, and the table was clearly set for two. Even more damning were Neil's shoes, kicked off under his chair and obviously too big for Andrew.

Before Andrew could decide how to respond, Neil appeared in the kitchen, seemingly from nowhere. "Hi. I'm Neil. And you're the witch, right?"

Andrew had to thank Neil for one thing- the expression on Tilda's face almost outweighed the sour feeling in his stomach. "How did you-" she started.

"I climbed. Nice place you've built here, by the way. A real winner, as fucked-up fairy tale prisons go."

Tilda whirled on Andrew. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, you little shit? Our deal-"

"-said nothing about others coming in. I haven't left. I haven't broken my end." Andrew crossed his arms, carefully keeping his face as blank and cold as possible.

"You can't just- if you think I'll-" She was spitting mad and still not over the shock. Finally, curiosity won out, and she settled on, "He... climbed?"

"He climbed," Andrew confirmed. "He needed some of my tender nursing. He will only be here until he can climb back down without dying before he reaches the ground."

Tilda looked like she was sucking lemons. Her jaw worked like she was chewing on her next words. She wanted to protest, Andrew could tell, but she knew that he was right. He hadn't broken their deal, and Neil's presence didn't actually affect the contract between her and Andrew. More than anything, he thought, she was upset at the loss of control, but even she knew that there was nothing she could actually do to make Neil leave. Andrew could almost see her brain steaming as she tried to find some loophole, some way to assert her dominance without losing her human battery. Finally, she threw up her hands. "Fine. Fine! Do what you want. Like I give a shit. Here." She thrust the silver scissors at Andrew. Obediently, he snipped the required seven strands of hair. She took them and stomped back toward the window, muttering under her breath. Andrew followed to let her down.

When she was gone, Andrew's legs held up just long enough to make it to the armchair, where he collapsed. His head felt woozy. Having his energy drained twice in such a short span of time was taking its toll. Andrew blinked heavily. Was someone saying his name?

"-ndrew. Andrew!" Neil's face faded into focus. Andrew nodded. Yes, he was Andrew. He didn't know why Neil was stating the obvious.

Something cool and solid was thrust into his hand. Andrew looked down and saw that Neil had handed him a glass of water. He drank almost automatically, and the cold liquid washed away the sudden dryness in his mouth and some of the cobwebs that had filled his brain. His vision was more solid now, and he could see Neil standing in front of him, near enough to almost touch but far enough away that he was out of Andrew's personal bubble. Andrew took another sip, and the world resolved itself a little more clearly.

“Andrew, can you hear me?” Neil was saying. “Andrew, what’s happening? What do you need?”

“Don’t need anything,” Andrew ground out.

Neil’s lips quirked slightly, which was annoying. Andrew hadn’t intended to be funny.

“Alright. You gave her your hair, right? Is this her draining your energy?”

Andrew nodded slowly. He still felt as though everything was moving underwater.

“Okay. Andrew, can I take your hand? Yes or no?” Neil held his hand out, still maintaining that careful distance. Andrew nodded again. Neil could take his hand. Neil wouldn’t hurt him. Neil asked permission, and he cared about the answer. Andrew reached out and grasped Neil’s outstretched hand in his own.

Keeping only the single point of contact, Neil pulled Andrew to standing and guided him to lay down on the couch. Andrew had to admit, the horizontal position was a definite improvement.

“I think you should rest,” Neil said, his voice quiet. Andrew looked for him. Somehow he had moved again, and was now seated in the armchair. Andrew felt reassured both by Neil’s continued presence and by the space between them, which was a confusing combination. He frowned. A headache was rapidly drumming its way through his left temple. He hated Neil for making him feel confusing things when his head hurt so bad.

“Rest,” Neil said again. Andrew conceded the point and closed his eyes.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Tilda's visit.

Chapter Notes

Surprise, this work isn't dead! Sorry for the long break. I don't know when the next chapter will be up, but I promise that I do intend to finish this.

Andrew startled awake, disoriented. It wasn't often that he fell asleep on the couch, or that he slept in the middle of the day. It took him a moment to get his bearings. He looked over and noticed Neil curled in the armchair. It gave him a strange sense of déjà vu- a mirror image of Neil's first day in the tower, when he lay on the couch and Andrew kept vigil across the room. *Although*, Andrew thought with some amusement, *Neil was a much less effective guard*. At some point while Andrew slept, Neil had also dozed off, and he now sat with his knees pulled into his chest and his head tipped back onto the back of the chair, snoring lightly. As though he felt Andrew's eyes on him, Neil suddenly stirred. As always, he snapped awake with startling speed; one moment he was dead asleep, and the next he was alert and looking around, if still slightly disoriented. He caught sight of Andrew sitting up and smiled, broad and real. Andrew did his best not to feel anything in particular about that smile.

"You're alive. That's good," Neil said.

Andrew grunted. "It would take more than her to kill me."

Neil nodded very seriously, as though he were absolutely sure that was the truth.

Andrew stretched his neck and winced. Tilda's visits always left him with a killer hangover, but this time he was especially sore. Every muscle in his body ached. He shifted on the couch, trying to find a comfortable position, and looked over at Neil, who had gone silent again. Neil stared at his hands for a moment, then lifted his head and gave Andrew a long, considering look.

"I've been running since I was ten," Neil said suddenly.

Andrew was quiet. Neil continued, "My father is... not a good man. My mother stole some money, took me, and left. She died a couple years ago, but I kept going. He's the one I'm

hiding from, him and his people.”

“You don’t have to tell me this,” Andrew said.

The corners of Neil’s mouth twitched, the ghost of a smile more than the real thing. “I want to,” he said simply.

They were silent for a moment. Finally, Andrew asked, “How long will you run?”

“Until he catches me, I guess,” Neil shrugged.

“And what happens if he catches you?”

Neil shrugged again. Andrew scowled. “So you are a rabbit just waiting for the hounds.”

Neil laughed a laugh that was entirely devoid of humor. “I guess so.”

Andrew shook his head. Out the window, the sky was dark and the wind was picking up. The promised storm was quickly moving in. Andrew stood from the couch and crossed the room to close and lock the shutters.

When he turned back, Neil hadn’t moved from the armchair. With the shutters closed, the tower felt small and close. The lamplight cast strange shadows around the edges of the room. Andrew suddenly noticed that Neil had removed his brown contacts. The light blue of his eyes looked ocean-dark in the gloom.

“You’ve stopped hiding at least one thing, rabbit.”

Neil looked confused for a moment before his face cleared with realization. “Yeah, my contact ripped. That was my last pair. Guess I’m stuck like this for awhile.”

The rattle of the first raindrops hitting the shutters was startlingly loud in the stillness. Thunder cracked in the distance and Andrew felt the reverberations in his chest.

Neil stood. Andrew watched him as he crossed the room, feeling rooted to the spot. Everything felt strange, dreamlike, half-real in the half-light. Neil stopped in front of Andrew, close enough to touch but far enough away that he had a choice, just like always.

It was too much. He was too close, close enough that Andrew could feel his body heat, close enough that Andrew could- that Andrew wanted- and he couldn’t want. Those blue eyes watched him, and Andrew felt the storm outside filling up the space inside of him. His skin buzzed like lightning. He growled and reached out to push Neil’s face away.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” Neil asked, nearly inaudible over the wind.

Andrew’s hands were shaking. He reached for his cigarettes. It took three tries to get a light. He watched the smoke drift through the room in a dreamlike haze, trapped by the windows

still shut tight against the rain. This cigarette wasn't right. He stubbed it out and lit a new one, stubbed that one out too and lit another.

"Andrew," Neil said.

Andrew looked at him.

Neil's eyes were dark and watchful. His mouth was soft. His hands were at his sides. He wouldn't reach out without permission. Neil asked, and he cared about the answer.

Andrew wanted.

"Yes or no?" he asked.

"Yes," Neil answered, like it was easy. Like there was no other answer he could possibly give.

Andrew fisted a hand in his shirt and yanked him forward. As their lips collided, the storm broke.

It was thunder. It was fire. Andrew was burning, and it hurt, and he hated it even as he pushed closer, spinning them so that he could crowd Neil up against the wall. Neil's hands stayed fisted at his sides until Andrew caught them and drew them above his head, pressing his wrists into the stone. Neil's lips were soft and his mouth was so warm and Andrew bit his lip just to hear the sound he made, a startled squeak that turned into a moan. Outside, the wind howled.

Andrew drew back, panting. Neil's face was flushed, his pupils dilated, and his eyes never left Andrew's face. His chest rose and fell with deep, unsteady breaths. Andrew couldn't breathe. He needed air. He pushed away sharply and turned on his heel. A few steps, and he slammed the bathroom door behind him.

With the safety of four walls hiding him, Andrew slid to the floor with his back against the door. The awareness of Neil on the other side, ever-present and inescapable, was like static on his skin.

Andrew hugged his knees. This was dangerous.

This could end him.

He already knew that it would happen again.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

An interlude. Some unpleasant faces. Shades of things to come.

Chapter Notes

Hello! This is a short one, but I was excited to put it out. Normally I like Tilda written with a little more nuance, but she's literally The Evil Witch(tm) in this story, so you know what. Just like last time, I don't know when the next chapter will be out, but I have it started so it will hopefully be a reasonable time frame.

Content warning for judgemental and negative language used to refer to a character with mental illness. It's much more brief than even in the books, but it is there.

Tilda Minyard knew that she was a bad mother. She didn't care much, most of the time. She had never wanted to be a mother in the first place, so failing at it was a minor embarrassment at most.

Tilda also knew that she was a mediocre witch, and this rankled beyond measure. She had been ten years old the first time she felt the sweet burn of the power in her veins. It was a sunny day, and she was playing in her mother's garden. She picked a daisy, crushing the green stem between her fingers, and the rush in her blood was like fire. It was like sunlight. There would never be enough of that feeling, and that was before she discovered all of the things that the power let her do.

The problem, of course, was that magic is transactional. There is always a price, and great work requires great sacrifice. At first, Tilda made do with draining the energy from plants, and then animals, but before too long simply taking the blood of dumb beasts wasn't enough. The magic wanted more.

Tilda may have been a bad mother, but even she wasn't willing to kill her infant son outright. She thought briefly of the twin she had given away, but what was done was done. So, she experimented. Strands of his hair worked well enough for the day-to-day, and the effect grew as he aged. Blood was better, but the drain could leave Aaron bedridden for days, and Tilda wanted to avoid her self-righteous brother or the other townspeople asking too many questions.

Then, one day, her prodigal son returned, and Tilda found a new solution.

She hadn't meant to recreate the old story quite so exactly, but it served the purpose. Andrew scared her more than a bit, she wasn't ashamed to admit it; she was practically doing a public service by keeping that psycho locked up. And all he demanded was that she leave Aaron alone, as if she wanted anything to do with the whiny brat anymore. Andrew was the perfect power source, and with him secured away Tilda never had to worry that he would decide to leave or to give away her secrets.

This, though- this could be a problem. Tilda was fuming as she made her way down the winding forest paths that led toward town. What was the asshole's name- Neil? He had surprised her, and Tilda did not like surprises. He was trouble. What kind of trouble, she didn't know yet, and Andrew was right that he technically hadn't broken the terms of their deal, but Tilda was not about to stand for any kind of wrench being thrown into her plans.

"Excuse me? Excuse me, darling?" A voice called out.

Tilda looked up sharply. A woman and a man were approaching from a ways off, skirting between the trees. Their clothing was well-tailored and of fine materials, and they were leading horses. That on its own was unusual- such wealthy folk usually lived in the capitol, far from these provincial fields.

"Hello! Do you live in these parts?" the woman asked as they drew level with Tilda. She extended an elegant hand. "I'm Lola Malcolm, and this is my brother, Romero." Her nails were crimson, and her lips were blood red. Behind her, her brother inclined his head. There was something cruel about the tilt of his mouth.

"I live in the town," replied Tilda warily. She did not shake Lola's hand.

"Ah, the town!" Lola laughed airily. "Yes, we've just come from there. It's so... lovely. But disappointing, I'm afraid. We're looking for someone, you see, a boy- well, a man, really. Short, shorter than me, with auburn hair and blue eyes, although he may have disguised them. Have you seen anyone? Anything... out of place?"

Out of place. Yes, Tilda knew someone fitting that description.

"Actually, I did see a boy," she replied slowly. "He had brown hair, but he was short, and he had blue eyes, like you say."

"Oh! My goodness, darling, you must be an angel!" Lola's words were sweet, but her eyes glistened in a distinctly unpleasant way. "Where did you see this boy? You must take us to him, immediately!"

Tilda's mind raced. Whatever these people had planned for Neil, she could not let them near Andrew. She had no doubt that he would try to fight them, the maniac, and even an injury would mean less power for her to draw on and an interminable wait while he healed. She would have to get him out of the way.

"He was with my son," she replied, doing her best to play the caring, worried mother. "Is he dangerous? Will he harm my boy?"

“Oh, sweetheart,” Lola gushed, “you sweet thing. He’s not dangerous most of the time, but he may try to... resist us taking him home. He’s disturbed, you see. Not right, ever since his mother died.”

“Oh, my goodness! I see. I would just so hate for anything to happen to my darling. My darling son. Who I love so dearly.” Tilda clasped her hands in an imitation of pleading. “If I take you to him, will you give me time to take my son away? We’ll leave, and you can go and retrieve your boy and be gone before we return.”

“Yes,” Lola nodded, her grin sharklike. Romero’s nostrils flared as if he could scent blood. “Yes, I think that will work just fine. Lead on, darling!”

End Notes

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