

ALL FOR THE GAME EXTRA CONTENT
NORA SAKAVIC

INTRODUCTION

Hello! **This is a compiled document of all the extra content linked from Nora's Tumblr.** I got tired of attempting and failing to find certain information and figured it would be much easier to find and read this way. I hope it helps you all as well.

The original link to Nora's Tumblr page can be found [here](#).

THIS IS ALL NORA'S CONTENT. I did not write any of it nor did I change any of it, aside from a couple spelling and grammar mistakes. If you go to the Tumblr links, you will find they all say exactly the same things.

You will notice the formatting is different in this than it was on Tumblr. That is because I am a basic bitch and changed it for the aesthetic. Also because Nora's organization system drove me a little crazy. Nora, I love you, but it was a little bit of a disaster. I organized everything in a way that hopefully makes sense, and attempted to keep similar themes grouped together.

CONTENT WARNINGS:

There are a few times where possibly triggering events from the books are explained in greater detail. I know we all know the content warnings of the series, but I want to make sure because some of it is intense. I have included specifics for the really graphic stuff. (There are also spoilers in this list)

- Graphic descriptions of violence
- Graphic descriptions of injuries
- Talk of emotional, physical, sexual, and medical abuse (Drake, Proust, Riko)
- Sexual assault and rape (Drake, Proust)
- Dubious consent
- Uses of homophobic language and mentions of homophobia
- Canon character deaths
- Major character death (what-ifs: Neil, Andrew, Kevin, Wymack, Riko, Jean)
- Suicide and suicidal ideation (Jean, Andrew)
- Self harm (Andrew)
- Drugs and drug abuse (including withdrawal), and alcohol (Nora was drinking while answering a lot of these asks) and alcohol abuse
- Throwing up (during Andrew's withdrawal, only time I can think of is in Son Nefes pt. 3)
- A lot of swearing
- I feel like "Andrew being Andrew" should qualify. So should "Kevin being Kevin." Just everything about them
- Parents being shitty
- Mention of abortion (Dan's section)

- Sexual content (mostly Andrew and Neil, all labeled; see below for more details)
- Some good ol' sexism
- Eating disorders (Allison)
- Food
- Andrew's terminal brain disease from the comics
- Basically everything in Proust's section is painful but the full list: lack of consent, drugging, manipulation and blackmail, physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, panic attacks. Just all the awfulness
- And Riko's section too: abandonment, murder and death, manipulation, psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and coercion, graphic descriptions of violence, torture, homophobia, virtually human enslavement, suicide (Jean)

If there is a content warning that you do not see and would like me to include, or if I missed marking a section that includes one of these, please message me on Tumblr at peggyrose19. I will add it no questions asked. If you send it as an ask, I will add it to the list and delete the ask without posting. Your safety comes first and I have no intention of or interest in making anyone uncomfortable.

THERE IS EXPLICIT SEXUAL CONTENT IN THIS. Please do not interact with those parts if you are under 18. I believe all sections and asks that have to do with sex are all labeled. **The only two sections not labeled in the title are Riko's (see above) and a brief mention in Kevin's (that one's also a lil iffy on the consent too).**

The underlined parts are links. All of the ones included here are links transferred directly from Nora's Tumblr. I don't know what all of them are to be completely honest, but presumably they're important since she included them. I'm saying this only because they're not trick links, and they're not there to catch you or anything.

Full order of the books:

>>> the perfect court
 the foxhole court
 the raven king
 the king's men
 the sunshine court
 the golden raven
 the broken cage
 >>> the queen's game

I hope this helps and I hope you enjoy your perusing! Stay safe <3

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COURTING MADNESS

EXY: RULES AND REGULATIONS

BASICS

Exy is played in two forty-five minute halves with a fifteen minute halftime break.

An Exy court is 60 yards wide x 100 yards long x 10 yards tall (in meters, roughly 55 x 91 x 9). It is completely enclosed by a half-inch thick plexiglass wall: primarily for rebounds and passing, but also to protect the audience from being struck by the ball. Both Home and Away have doors to allow players on and off that bolt on the outside. These doors must not be open when the ball is in play.

The court is divided into fourths by three lines: first-court (near the Home goal), half-court, and far-court (near the Away goal). Penalty shots are taken from marked spots halfway between first-court/far-court and the Home/Away goal, respectively.

The Exy goals are on either end of the court. The actual goal is a 3 x 7 yard (2.7 x 6.4 meter) section on the wall outlined by a bold line. The goalkeeper's territory is the 3 x 7 area on the ground directly in front of the goal, also marked by a line. Players are not allowed to cross the goal line. The boxed-in area of the goal wall is laden with sensors. When a ball strikes inside the goal the wall will light up red. A ball that hits the goal's border itself does not count. Each goal counts as one point.

The objective of the game is to out-score one's opponents.

THE TEAMS

There are four positions: striker, dealer, backliner, and goalkeeper.

- The striker is offense and plays to score
 - Strikers start the game on the half-court line. The strikers on the serving team start on the inside; strikers for the defending team are on the outside.
- The dealer serves and is thereafter the middleman; dealers have the option to specialize as offense or defense and can play as an extra striker or backliner depending on how the game is going
 - Dealers start on the first/far-court lines.
- The backliner is defense and protects the goal
 - Backliners start on the first/far-court lines.

- The goalkeeper guards the goal

Six players per team are allowed on the court at a time. Generally speaking, this allows for two strikers, a dealer, two backliners, and the goalkeeper. The goalkeeper is an optional position, however; a manager may sacrifice the goal for an extra player under certain circumstances.

The minimum size for an NCAA team is currently nine players. In theory this allows for six on-court players and a sub for each position save goalkeeper. After recent events this rule is under review and posited to increase to twelve.

EQUIPMENT

Racquet

- Net depth varies by position. Dealers have the deepest nets so they can more easily carry the ball between offense and defense. Striker racquets are a bit shallower, still allowing them time to line up a perfect shot. Backliner racquets have just a little give, as backliners are strongly discouraged from carrying the ball; the longer a ball is near the goal the higher the chance an opposing striker can take possession of it. Goalkeeper racquets are flat. They are also the largest of the racquets, with a head that measures 1.5 x 2 feet.

- Goalkeeper racquets are also the longest allowed on court, with a shaft that tops out at 4 feet. Racquets for every other position have a range of 30-45 inches based on player height and preference. Racquet weights are also negotiable, as are the materials allowed in the construction. Generally speaking, offense racquets are made of aluminum (for lighter carry and more control), and heavy defense racquets are made of wood (for more power and force in challenges).

Ball

- Roughly the size of a fist and weighted for rebounds

Helmet

- Required to be worn on the court at all times unless instructed otherwise by an official or unless the game is not in session. A visor goes in front of the eyes to allow a protected but unobstructed view of the court; grating protects the face from the nose down.

Armor

- Chest and shoulder padding, neck guard, shin guards, arm guards, and armored gloves to protect the players' fingers. Optional: bandannas to keep hair out of one's face, armor to wear over one's thighs under one's shorts, and mouth guards (to prevent accidental injury during collisions)

SOME BASIC RULES

1. Off-sides is in effect on Exy courts. Meaning: an offense player who does not have possession of the ball, or who is moving to take possession of the ball, must have an opposing defense player between him or herself and the opposing goalkeeper at all times. This prevents strikers from waiting near the goal to score. The penalty for off-sides is loss of possession and a reset to the half-court line.

2. Body checks are allowed against players who have reasonable possession of the ball: that is, who currently have it, who have just relinquished it, or who are within a moment of receiving it. The player who currently has possession of the ball may body-check any other player with no restrictions. A faulty body check results in loss of possession and a reset to the next-closest court line.

3. Any other form of fighting is prohibited and will result in a card. The severity decides whether the card is yellow or red; it also determines whether a team deserves a penalty shot or a simple loss in possession. Games are restarted from where play was halted; the exact spot will be decided on by the residing referee. No other player may stand within ten feet of the dealer during a mid-play serve.

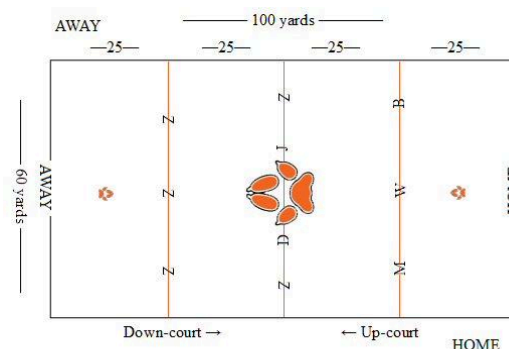
4. "Stick checks" are allowed only between racquets. A player who strikes another player's body with his or her racquet will be carded and the opposing team will receive a penalty shot. This includes using one's racquet to trip another player. A stick check against another player's helmet is an immediate red card and earns the wounded team a penalty shot on goal.

5. Balls may only be carried for 10 steps, at which point they must be passed. Acceptable passes are to a teammate, to oneself via a rebound, or a shot on goal.

6. One yellow card is a warning. Two result in the player sitting out the remainder of the game. A player who is red-carded is immediately expelled from the ongoing game and must sit out of the next one as well.

7. Exy games for youths and high schoolers require four referees at minimum. From the NCAA level upward six are required, three to either side of the court.

8. Goalkeepers are the only players allowed to touch the ball with their hands. Players cannot catch, kick, or otherwise interfere with the ball unless using their racquets. Violation of this is a stop-play and switch of possession.



Example Set-up of Starting Positions for Fox Serve

D Kevin Day
J Neil Josten
W Dan Wilds
B Matt Boyd
M Aaron Minyard
Z Opponent

EXY: A HISTORY OF THE SPORT

Tetsuji Moriyama and Kayleigh Day met while studying sports management abroad at Fukui University (from University of Connecticut and University College in Dublin, respectively). Exy began as a lark: first an idea, then a class project wherein they recruited classmates and friends to be guinea pigs, and then spreading to after-school teams when they interested enough people.

Exy spread slowly but surely in the Chūbu region as friends and family carried it from one university to another. The first big boom came when it went online. Yoko Sanada, the sport's first goalkeeper, designed a website and uploaded videos of games. Tetsuji and Kayleigh released an official rules and guidelines book in Japan around the same time. The second burst came when it caught the attention of a local mangaka, who received permission from Tetsuji and Kayleigh to publish a short serialized manga highlighting it.

Exy made its way overseas through online scanlation groups. The first attempts to start teams in the United States were rough: small groups of friends trying to cobble the rules together from translated websites who were making do with whatever gear and stand-in courts they could find. For a while the only Exy racquets could be imported from a company in Japan, so most early players substituted lacrosse sticks when they could. Tetsuji and Kayleigh noticed the growing attention and translated their guidebook to English.

Kayleigh and Tetsuji trained some of their original players to be coaches and designated them local experts, then returned home. Kayleigh scaled back to a part-time student so she could try to introduce Exy to Europe. Tetsuji kept his course load but devoted his evenings and weekends to fundraising and generating interest. He spent his summers recruiting and training and secured funding to bring Exy gear to the United States. He built the first pop-up court at a local recreation center and paid for the Plexiglass walls with his family's money.

Exy started as street teams, moved into local recreation centers, and slowly made its way into high schools. Bigger universities offered it as a club sport, but no college was yet willing or able to spend time and money on building a full-sized stadium. As Exy spread Tetsuji applied to start the ERC, the Exy Rules and Regulations Committee, so the sport could have official representatives and regulators. He hired two retired referees to help him.

During his last semester Tetsuji reached out to the NCAA, offering himself as a coach and promising the funding for a stadium if they would sign the contracts and take on another collegiate team. In the end he signed with Edgar Allen University in West Virginia. As soon as it was official he reached out again with a challenge to build the first Exy court in America.

No one had missed the enthusiasm for Exy, but the price for a university-sized stadium was astronomical and returns on the investment weren't a guarantee. In the end only two schools

backed Tetsuji: University of Southern California and Pennsylvania State. They recruited coaches from the best of the high school teams and started to build.

Fundraising was a wide scale effort. Street teams, recreation teams, and school teams did local projects and donated their money up the chain. The universities and their new coaches reached out to alumni and contacts in every field. Tetsuji found the biggest supporters when he turned to professional women athletes. He promised them he was bringing a co-ed sport to the national level. When the women got behind it, so did the real money, and Tetsuji had his stadiums.

Castle Evermore was the first stadium completed, with USC's Trojan Court not far behind it. Pride Court at Penn State experienced delays but the coach continued training and building his team in the meantime. Other universities with established Exy clubs but no stadiums applied to have their teams recognized as NCAA teams. The ERC made a full inspection of club teams, gave feedback on what needed to change to be recognized as a collegiate team, and signed off on twenty-eight other teams.

NCAA Exy officially started the following fall semester. The first game of the season was between the Trojans and Ravens at Castle Evermore, and the Ravens won 13-12. The Trojans, Ravens, and Lions played primarily home games that year so the teams with pop-up courts could visit and play on a real court. By the time the year ended, seven other universities had started progress on stadiums. As the number of teams and stadiums increased, the ERC took steps to break the country into manageable pieces: first by creating four districts, then breaking the teams up by Class I and Class II based on skill. There was some small controversy when Edgar Allen was accepted into the northern district instead of the southeast, but Tetsuji won the argument rather quickly.

The first professional teams were formed around the graduates of the first university teams. Two years later the national team, the US Court, was born. The following year Exy made its first appearance at the Olympics, where Japan took home the gold.

PALMETTO STATE UNIVERSITY

All for the Game was a comic up until I graduated from high school. It started the slow transition to novel format while I was studying at Clemson University. Palmetto State University is Clemson's fictional alter-ego: the geographic location is the same and I envision the campus layout to be pretty similar.

I loved everything about Clemson while I was there (except for my major, go figure) and I even considered looking for work in the area post-graduation. I ended up going overseas for a while instead, but hey. Clemson is also where I fell in love with the color orange. Orange is brilliant, I

think. It's not exactly a happy color, but it is unapologetically bold. Anyway, I wanted to share a couple (poorly taken) pictures of the Clemson campus to help build a background visual for the story.



Looking across the amphitheater toward the library. Part of the Clemson library is underground, and there's a cafe on the second floor up from ground level.

Clemson House, aka Fox Tower. It really is across the road and up a hill. In the winter it's easier to see, but in spring and summer the trees help hide it from sight. In real life it's a co-ed dorm, not an athletic dorm, and it has its own small dining hall.



Told you. It's like a ninja.

If you were facing this direction and went to the left you'd hit the "downtown" part of campus, where there's bookstores, restaurants, and shops selling all kinds of Clemson paraphernalia.

Straight ahead are the freshman dorms. To the right is one of the dining halls. Downstairs is the athletes' dining hall. Further right is the student center, which might have gotten axed in this draft. (conference rooms, a cheap theater, a food court, the main bookstore, etc).



And what would this post be without some orange? Sorry, all I've got are football pictures. I can imagine, though.

Anyway, I could go on about Clemson and the like all day, but I won't. I'll end this with a confession instead: I've stepped foot in Columbia, South Carolina exactly once that I remember. The Clemson women's lacrosse club had a match down there. I try to make all mentions of Columbia as vague as possible in the books because I don't know how to describe the city. Oops. Maybe it's time for a road trip.

CAMPUS FUN FACTS

USC:

Had to dig up 2007 course catalogues to figure out where & when Jean's classes would be so I could map him out a proper schedule. Annoyed that Fertitta didn't exist back then because it's a gorgeous building. Also apparently the wheel throwing classes were very different then (one nighttime class vs daytime classes twice a week). Voted in favor of inaccuracy because it's more fun & afternoon practices would make it impossible to attend.

Campus sizes:

- USC's main campus is 226 acres (.9 square km)
- EAU's campus is 456 acres (1.8 km²)
- PSU (based off of Clemson ofc) is 1400 acres (5.6km²). Granted that does include a botanical garden that is larger than USC's main campus lol

Numbers game

- Ye, Renee & Jeremy for the 11/9 date
- But also if you write Jean's birthday as 11/9 then he and Nathaniel are the same numerical sequence 1/19
- Bonus: Nov 9 end of the French revolution
- TSC had 17 chapters, 12 Jean 5 Jeremy. Ended 108700 words give or take
- TSC2 is 22 chapters, 12 Jean 10 Jeremy, and its current word count is about 139000. ((For reference, TKM was ~138600))
- This is AFTER I tore out an entire subplot and set it aside for #3

I am going insane

SON NEFES

Son Nefes was a story written for fun, a take on the cousins' first year from Renee's POV. The original version was written back in 2009 when the story had some significant plot differences. I thought I could just tweak lines here and there to make the story work with the current timeline. Instead this is a quasi-rewrite. It took 5300 words to keep 2800, and this is just the first scene.

The entire thing will likely read a bit disjointed, as Son Nefes was intended to be a collection of scenes instead of an actual Beginning-Middle-End story. I guess we'll find out the hard way? Will try to post the rest of it at regular intervals. Apologies in advance for all the typos and profanity.

Timeline: One year before the events of The Foxhole Court.

PART 1

The month leading up to Andrew's first day was the shortest summer vacation Renee could remember, probably because she spent half of it soothing Dan's fraying nerves. Allison had taken it upon herself to collect every scrap of gossip she could find regarding their new defense line and, although she hadn't been out of high school long enough to forget how malicious and imaginative teenagers could be with their rumors, she was quick to spread everything she found to the rest of her line-up. Renee's numerous attempts to deter her met deaf ears.

They knew what they were getting into—had known since Wymack made them vote on Andrew's contract—but the closer her teammates got to June the easier it was to forget why they'd agreed to this. Wymack and Abby's sudden reticence on the matter did little to help things. Andrew, Aaron, and Nicky had moved into Abby's house for a few weeks following the twins' graduation from high school. Abby refused to spread ill-will to the rest of the team by offering her honest opinion on the lot, and Wymack neatly rebuffed Dan's best attempts to pry. Renee was sure Dan hadn't had a full night's sleep in weeks.

By the time Wymack recalled his team to Palmetto State University for summer practices, the Foxes were an anxious, angry mess. Waiting for the cousins to arrive only worsened their attitude. Wymack said he wanted all of his Foxes accounted for before he brought the freshmen by, but the last of them had checked almost an hour ago and the cousins were still missing. Renee was too caught up in her reading to mind the wait, but she couldn't miss the growing tension in the room. Dan had checked her watch ten times in the last fifteen minutes. At the eleventh quick peek, Renee finally reached out and clasped Dan's hand. She didn't lift her gaze from her page but gave Dan's hand a small squeeze.

"Relax, Dan," Renee murmured. "They'll be here."

"They're late," Juan said. "We don't have all day for this bullshit."

"They've got two more minutes, and then I'm out of here," Dwayne said.

There was no way he'd really defy Wymack by dipping out early, but Dan still shot him an angry look and snapped, "You're not going anywhere. Sit still and shut up."

Renee glanced up from her book and considered her grumbling teammates. Seth, Dwayne, and Damien were slouched on the far couch. Reggie and Juan had two of the chairs. Renee and Dan had two cushions on the other couch, and Matt sat on the arm of the couch at Dan's side. Renee's stomach knotted a bit as her gaze passed over the team's only sophomore. Matt was the second-tallest of the Foxes, trailing Seth by a spare half-inch, but he'd looked so small last year. A month and change with his mother had straightened his shoulders and fixed his posture, but Renee wondered how long he could last before his teammates broke him down again. She didn't know if she could stand another year with Matt sleeping on their bedroom floor.

The click of stiletto heels heralded Allison's return from the restroom. Six pairs of eyes followed the hem of her impossibly short skirt as Allison crossed the room to the couch. Allison reclaimed her spot on the empty cushion at Renee's side and flicked a cursory, contemptuous look across the open pages of Renee's book.

"They're still not here?" she asked. "This is bullshit."

"See?" Dwayne demanded.

"Patience is a virtue," Renee said.

"Who needs those these days?" Damien asked. "They ain't got you anywhere better'n they got me, right?"

Dan shifted as if to get up. "I'll call—"

The outer door opened down the hall, and the Foxes exchanged quick looks. Reggie, the most outspoken senior against the cousins' recruitment, slouched a bit further to hide how uptight he was. Seth elbowed his side for such an obvious giveaway, and the two scowled at each other in exaggerated annoyance. No one had time to say anything else before Nicky Hemmick sailed through the doorway.

His arrival shifted the mood in the room two degrees to something ugly, and Nicky's toothy ear-to-ear grin said he'd expected the looks on their faces. His snug black tee was emblazoned with the rainbow letters "GET THIS STRAIGHT—I'M NOT" and it'd drawn every eye in the room. He wore enough woven bracelets on his right wrist to cover a third of his forearm, and sunshine-yellow sunglasses pushed unruly black hair out of his face. He surveyed his new teammates with an intense interest, and the small jerk of his chin said he found at least one of them to his liking.

"I knew this wasn't going to be a total loss," he said. Renee couldn't help but admire his courage. Nicky wasn't facing her, but maybe he had a sixth sense for picking up on a friendly face. He swiveled her way almost as soon as she'd smiled, and he nodded a cheery hello. The thump of the door heralded someone else's arrival and Nicky sent a distracted look over his shoulder. "I've met Dan an' Matt. For the rest of you: I'm Nicky. I'mma be one of your backliners this year, 'cause Lord knows I love a rearview best."

Seth made a noise like he'd thrown up in his mouth a bit. Reggie made a furious gesture but couldn't put words to his outrage. Juan was the only one with enough wits to speak, and then all he managed was a venomous, "Coach didn't say he recruited us a faggot."

If looks could kill, the one Dan turned on her teammates should have seared the skin from their bones. "Fucking enough."

"It's all cool, cap." Nicky gave an expansive shrug. "If I let every asshole get to me I'd never have a good day."

"What'd you call me?" Juan demanded.

"He called you an asshole," was a bored response, and one of the twins stepped up beside Nicky. Judging by the cool look on his face, this one was Aaron. Nicky was quick to prop his arm on the shorter man's shoulder, and Aaron didn't try to dislodge him. Aaron met Juan's glower with an unimpressed stare and said, "That wasn't news to you, right?"

"This is Aaron," Nicky said. "He's a bit rude sometimes, but at least he's honest. You remember Aaron, right, Dan?"

The look on Dan's face said she remembered him well—and what he'd said about the Foxes when Wymack went calling on the cousins. Renee heard about it at length on more than one occasion. How Dan hadn't worn a line through their carpet with all of her furious pacing, Renee would never know.

"Hello again," Dan said, but Aaron didn't even look at her.

This is going marvelously, Renee thought a bit ruefully. She closed her Bible, tucked it under one arm, and got to her feet. She crossed the room to the cousins and offered her hand. Aaron gave her a once-over before turning his attention elsewhere, but Nicky stepped away from Aaron to take Renee's hand in a firm, warm grip.

"Renee Walker," Renee said. "It's nice to meet you."

"Starting goalkeeper," Nicky said.

"Not for long," Aaron said.

Nicky's smile begged forgiveness for his cousin's attitude and he gestured to the Bible. "What faith?"

"Catholic," she said. "Are you religious?"

"Sometimes," Nicky said. "Dad's a Baptist minister, so some of it was bound to rub off. So long as you don't try to save me from my man-loving sin, I'll forgive you for belonging to the wrong church. Deal?"

Renee smiled. "Sounds fair. Why don't you two come in and sit down?"

"Yeah, let's get this over with," Damien said. "You guys are fuckin' late."

"Yes, well." Nicky didn't bother to explain but headed for the remaining chair. Aaron trailed him across the room, but neither of them sat. Aaron took up a spot behind the chair and Nicky slumped against the side of it to give Matt a considering look. He didn't look for long before speaking again, but the next words out of his mouth weren't in English. Aaron shook his head at whatever Nicky said and said something that sounded decidedly unfriendly.

Matt shifted a little uncomfortably, but Renee didn't know if that discomfort was due to the blatant interest in Nicky's stare or the looks his roommates were sending him for catching

Nicky's eye. A bit of vicious rudeness would redeem him in their eyes, but Matt didn't have it in him to be awful for no reason. Instead he said, "That's German, right?"

"Sure is," Nicky confirmed. "Macon only offered Spanish and German, and why would I put myself through more Spanish?" He waved it off as an obvious choice. "Since we all studied it, we run a bilingual household. I can't afford to fall out of practice while I'm in the States and it keeps things interesting. What about you? You good with your tongue?"

Matt didn't have a ready response for that or the welcoming leer on Nicky's face. Dan had no problems staking her claim, though, and she laced her fingers through Matt's. Nicky grinned and lifted his hands in self-defense. "Easy, sister. Look but don't touch—I get it. You don't mind if I look, right? Good, good taste."

A string of German at Renee's side set her heart tripping. Renee couldn't remember the last time someone successfully sneaked up on her, but by the time her shoulders tensed in instinctive warning Andrew was already at her elbow. She knew relaxing her guard was a healthy development; she hadn't had to be hyper-aware of her surroundings since her adoption. Despite that, dismay at being startled was a prickling heat in her throat. Renee would have to work through inappropriate reaction later. For now she took stock of the team's newest goalkeeper.

It was a hundred degrees outside, but Andrew had come in a long-sleeved black shirt and boot-cut jeans. A skull cap was pulled down low on his head, nearly hiding his eyebrows, and his hands were crammed into his back pockets. He stared wide-eyed at his cousin, seemingly oblivious to the rest of the gathered Foxes, and rattled off something else. Nicky gestured and responded, and Andrew's answering smile was all teeth.

The creak of the door opening a last time had both Andrew and Renee glancing down the hall. Abby and Wymack entered together. Andrew acknowledged them in a glance and then looked at Renee as if noticing her for the first time. Renee looked for the lie in his expression and came up short.

"Oh, how indecisive," Andrew said.

"I'm sorry?" Renee asked.

Andrew gave a knowing nod and grinned. "So I've heard."

There was a strong chance she'd just been insulted, but Renee offered him her hand and a smile. Andrew batted her hand aside without hesitation and sailed across the room toward his family. He sank into the chair they'd left him and immediately began picking at frayed threads on one of the arms. Renee headed for her place between Dan and Allison and was halfway there before Wymack and Abby stepped into the lounge. Wymack dumped an armload of paperwork on the entertainment center and took a headcount in a sweeping look.

"All right," Wymack said. "We're all here—"

"Finally," Dwayne muttered.

Wymack made a fist at him. "—so let's get the boring shit out of the way. Names and ranks around the room."

Abby passed out paperwork while the Foxes talked. Dan went first since she was captain, and one by one they introduced themselves. Dan's spiel was the longest. By the time it was the cousins' turns the Foxes had shortened their greetings to names and court positions. Andrew was the last one to go and all he said was "The other Minyard!"

"We don't need three goalkeepers," Reggie said, sinking further into the couch and scowling across the room at the cousins. Dan pinched the bridge of her nose in a search for patience. Allison was less subtle in her irritation, but her aggravation had nothing to do with Reggie's inability to let this argument go. The Foxes had put money on how long it'd take Reggie to pipe up with another complaint. Allison had changed her bet at the last second and put the fight further into this meeting. Ten bucks wasn't much, but Allison had always been a sore loser.

"We've talked about this," Wymack said.

"We don't need three goalkeepers," Reggie insisted.

"Oh, such a long face," Andrew said, and mimed wiping away a tear. "No worries! I'm just here for morale."

"We are fucked," Juan said.

"That's new," Seth said, heavy with sarcasm.

"Coach said you signed off on him," Nicky said. "Unanimous, right?"

Seth stabbed a finger in Nicky's direction and glared at Wymack. "Funny you told them all about us and forgot to warn us about the fag. I'm not changing out in front of him."

Wymack stabbed a finger toward the back door. "Get out. You can spend the rest of this meeting in my office. As in now, Gordon," he said when Seth just stared at him in angry confusion. "You have been here long enough to know I won't tolerate slurs in this locker room. From anyone," Wymack added with a cold look around the room. "I took on your anger issues willingly, but no one pays me to put up with your prejudices."

Seth looked a heartbeat awake from arguing, but at length he lurched to his feet without a word and stomped out. The office door shook in its frame with how hard he slammed it behind him. Wymack turned on the rest of the seniors, who busied themselves looking anywhere but at him.

Nicky raised a hand. "If it helps, most of you are too ugly to be my type."

"Stow that," Wymack said.

Nicky rolled his eyes and huffed something in German. Aaron sent his cousin a sidelong look, unimpressed and unamused, but Andrew laughed. Whatever Andrew said in response, Nicky didn't find it as entertaining. Nicky flicked his manic cousin a quick look before glancing over at the seniors' black expressions. The two went back and forth for a minute under Wymack's watchful eye, and then Nicky offered a smile Renee didn't believe for a second.

"But hey, Coach, no problem, right?" Nicky said. "You took a chance on us by signing us, so let's do you a favor in return. Let us use your changing room in turns, us and them. Everyone wins."

"Yes," Dwayne said.

"No," Wymack said at the same time.

Andrew laughed and leaned forward on his chair. "Oh, Coach. It's so boring watching someone feign indignation on our behalf! Be smart, would you?"

Wymack eyed him for a minute, obviously suspicious of the cousins' motives, then said, "We will talk about it later."

It wasn't a yes, but it was enough to mollify the upperclassmen and take a little tension out of Nicky's smile. Satisfied his team was temporarily cowed, Wymack returned to his agenda. Renee listened to his speech about academic records and summer schedules with only half an ear. She'd heard this spiel twice before, so there was no harm in letting a few stray details slide.

Most of her attention was on her newest teammates, and she glanced between them. Nicky looked genuinely fascinated by everything Wymack had to say, whereas Aaron seemed only vaguely interested in the papers in his hand. Andrew had dropped his paperwork on the ground as Abby handed the sheets to him and now sat cross-legged with his hands on his ankles. His thumbs beat an uneven, rapid rhythm on his pants legs.

Renee knew better than anyone how deceiving appearances could be, but the Andrew sitting in their locker room looked incapable of the atrocities Allison linked him to. Part of that was undoubtedly attributed to his medicine—everyone knew Andrew was medicated and what he'd done to earn those pills, even if no one could name or explain his drugs with one hundred percent certainty. Uppers, some guessed, so he was too manic to feel violent. Anti-psychotics, the rest said, to make him a little more human. Maybe it was neither; maybe it was both.

It was only a matter of time before Andrew caught Renee watching him. She smiled; he answered with a lightning-quick, toothy grin and didn't look away. Renee knew she wasn't that interesting to look at aside from her multicolored hairstyle. She idly wondered if he was testing her, daring her to be the first to look away. It was a simple power game—childish, Dan would say, because Dan would never understand—and one Renee saw no reason to win. She held Andrew's stare for a minute, long enough to acknowledge his challenge, before dropping her gaze to the papers in her lap. When she looked up again, Andrew's attention had moved on, and he didn't glance her way the rest of the day.

PART 2

That weekend Nicky showed up at the girls' room and invited Dan out for dinner. It was a completely unexpected gesture, but Dan knew better than to turn down a chance to get to know her newest teammates. She accepted her roommates' offer of luck and disappeared after Nicky down the hall. Allison wanted to wait up for her, not trusting the cousins with her friend, but Renee believed Dan could handle herself. They compromised and stayed up until midnight, spending part of the time on a movie and the other half comparing their fall schedules. They were asleep before Dan came home but found her fast asleep on the couch when they woke up.

Dan slept until late afternoon and woke with what she complained was the worst hangover of her entire life. Allison ignored her misery in favor of quizzing her, but Dan could barely remember the previous night. She begged off her roommate's curiosity, more interested in the medicine and water Renee offered her, and Allison eventually had to give up. It wasn't until a few days later that Dan admitted her memory was still in pieces. She didn't know what she was missing, or how or why, but since nothing seemed to have changed between her and the cousins she told Renee she wouldn't worry about it.

Matt moved into the girls' room the following Friday. Allison went up one side of him and down the other, completely unimpressed by his so-called weak will. Matt listened to her lecture in silence, refusing to defend himself, and kept his stare on the carpet at Allison's feet. Dan looked like she wanted to say something, but she kept her mouth shut. Renee went to dig spare pillows and blankets out of their closet, and the three watched as Matt made a nest on their couch. After he'd gotten comfortable, the girls locked themselves in the bedroom to argue in whispered voices. Dan wanted to get Abby involved, whereas Allison thought that would be unfair.

"Unfair," Dan echoed incredulously. "Unfair? How is that," she jabbed a finger at the wall separating them from the living room, "at all fair?"

"Come off it, Dan," Allison said, propping her fists on her hips defiantly. "It's not like you mind having him over all the time."

"It's not about where he stays. It's what they're doing to him."

"They're not chasing him down with needles and bongs," Allison said.

"They know better than to do those things around him! It's his room too!"

"So, what, they should stop because it hurts his feelings?" Allison arched an eyebrow at Dan, looking almost pitying. "Let 'em do what they like. It's not going to hurt anyone."

Dan's expression darkened. "Like it didn't hurt Ian or Kirk?"

Allison's mouth thinned to a hard line. "That was different."

Ian and Kirk started with the girls, but they died in a car accident at the end of their first year. The school lost seven athletes in one go, a consequence of them drunk driving and carpooling from after-party to after-party. Wymack hadn't reacted well to the loss, and he'd sat his team down for a long talk the day after the boys' funerals. They talked about responsibility, partly, but mostly how they could meet each other halfway to keep the Foxes safe. Both he and Abby were willing to let the team crash at their homes for celebrations, and they were happy to play designated drivers no matter what time of night it was.

Drugs, however, remained a gray area. Officially, Wymack didn't want any of his players doing drugs, and Abby would likely tear their ears off should she ever catch them at it. Off the record, though, Wymack only said, "I don't approve of drugs, since I've seen them tear a whole lot of good families apart. However, you could say the same for alcohol, and no one in the world's gonna get me sober. To each his own and agree to disagree. Just be safe, don't hurt

anyone, and don't you dare get caught. The second you break one of these three rules is the second I stop conveniently looking the other way."

It was permission to do what they liked, so the Foxes did. Most of the boys stuck to pot and painkillers, but Reggie and Damien dabbled in coke every chance they could get. It didn't mean much for the girls, since Allison didn't mind the smell of weed and neither Dan nor Renee had much reason to see the boys outside of practice. Matt was a different story entirely. He'd suffered an out-of-control addiction for years, courtesy of his wealthy, drug-abusing father, and he hadn't been out of rehab long enough to face his roommates' addictions.

"They're asking for trouble," Dan said at last.

"At least they're here where we can keep an eye on them."

"And where they're hurting Matt."

Allison drummed her fingernails against her forehead and exhaled slowly through clenched teeth. "Again," she said. "It's one against the majority. You can't ask them to stop just because it's bruising your little rehab project out there every time he sees them light up. Tell him to grow a pair—you don't see Renee crawling inside herself every time she sees Matt's track marks, do you?"

Dan shot Renee a quick look to see how Renee reacted to such a backhanded accusation. "Do you even look at lines before you cross them, or do you just crush them underfoot?"

"Everyone reacts to addiction differently, Allison," Renee said. "Faith pulled me through, and it holds me together whenever I think I might be too weak. Matt hasn't found an anchor yet, so it's difficult for him to keep a center when they're playing devil's advocate. I'm not," she said, holding up her hand when Allison looked about to argue, "asking them to stop. We've all lived through terrible things and have had to find our cures where we can. I won't take theirs from them. I sympathize with Matt for his unhappy position, is all."

A knock at their suite door cut their argument short. They heard the couch creak through the wall as Matt got up to answer. Dan stalked out to meet her guests, raring for a fight, and Renee and Allison followed after. They expected to see Reggie or Damien here to taunt Matt about his retreat. The two were hell on Matt's sobriety, finding Matt an easy target upon which to vent their frustrations and inner demons.

When Matt opened the door, however, Nicky was standing on the other side. Nicky looked a bit thrown to see Matt there, but it only took him a second to recover. His pleased smile said he didn't mind the surprise.

"Evening," he said cheerfully. "Am I interrupting?"

"Not really," Matt said.

"No? Well, that's boring," Nicky said. "It's Friday night, you know?" Nicky looked to the girls, then past Matt at the couch. He clucked his tongue against his teeth as he studied the makeshift bed, then shook his head and turned on Matt again. "This looks like a fate worse than death. How about a knight to save you?"

"Do I really look like I need saving?" Matt asked with a gesture at his all-female company.

"You want my honest answer or my polite one?" Nicky turned in the doorway and motioned for Matt to follow. "Come on. We're heading out of town to get a couple drinks. You should come with."

"We?" Matt asked.

Aaron and Andrew stepped up behind Nicky, dressed head-to-toe in black for their night on the town. Andrew ignored Matt entirely in favor of surveying the room. His smile was all teeth and he rapped the back of his hand against Nicky's shoulder. "Oh, Nicky, Nicky," he said. "That didn't take long at all, did it? Guess he forgot to pack his brakes—could've used them on that fall!"

Matt bristled at Andrew's mocking tone. "What didn't take long?"

"You hiding out in here," Aaron said. "We thought you'd last two weeks at least. Guess not."

"I'm not—" Matt started.

Andrew didn't let him finish. "We're leaving now!"

He wheeled out of the doorway, but Nicky and Aaron didn't follow. Aaron propped his shoulder against the doorframe and turned an expectant look on Matt. Matt turned away, still looking a little offended by how easily they'd seen through him, and started back toward the couch. Nicky snagged his elbow to drag him to a stop. He was still smiling like there was nothing rude about what his cousins had said.

"You are coming, aren't you?" Nicky said.

"Now, Matt," Aaron said.

It was the first time Aaron had bothered to call any of them by their names that week. Maybe that was what sealed the deal, because Matt glanced back at Aaron. After a moment he pat his pockets in search of his wallet.

"Don't bother," Nicky said, correctly interpreting the gesture. "It's on us, and no one's gonna ID you where we're going. Okay? Out you go." He let go of Matt as Aaron turned away and left. Matt glanced at Dan one last time before following. Nicky started to follow, but Dan crossed the room in a second and caught his shoulder in an iron grip.

"You be careful with him," she said, low but so fierce her voice carried.

Nicky's smile wasn't kind, but it was at least sympathetic. "Easy, sister. We know, okay? Aaron's got an eye for people like Matt. Trust us."

"Who would?" Allison asked.

Dan couldn't be so indiscreet. "Don't give me a reason not to."

"Such devotion!" Nicky tapped Dan's hand until she took the hint and let go of him. "How long have you two been dating, anyway?"

"Four months."

"Four, huh? Then we'll take extra-special care of him just for you."

With that he wheeled away and set off down the hall. Dan looked a little like she was regretting this already, but at last she closed the door and locked it.

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The next time they saw Matt, he was a delirious mess on Abby's living room floor. His arms and face were raked raw in places, self-inflicted wounds in his panicked withdrawal, and his skin was so pale and slick Abby could barely keep a good grip on him. Abby's face was bruised in a half-dozen places from stray elbows and fists, but she grimly held on as tight as she could. Betsy Dobson, the team's psychiatrist and Abby's best friend, had hold of Matt on his other side. Her legs were tangled with his, likely to keep him from kicking either of them. Renee couldn't understand a word Matt was saying; it was twisted through with too much hysteria and desperation to be at all intelligible.

Dan threw herself at him, crying for some sort of explanation, and practically climbed into his lap to hold on. The choking guilt in her voice made Renee's heart hurt. Dan had trusted Nicky with Matt last night, and this was how the cousins repaid her faith. Rage would come later, Renee knew, and she knew she needed to be there when Dan broke. For now, Dan would keep herself together for Matt's sake.

One of the women had to move to make room for her, so Abby carefully disentangled herself. Dan fell into her space easily, threading her fingers into Matt's hair and pulling his face into her shoulder. Matt wrapped an arm around her so tight Renee heard Dan's back pop all the way across the room. Matt was still talking, but now Dan's shirt smothered most of it. His tone still carried, though, and Renee swallowed hard against the lump in her throat.

Abby and Betsy exchanged looks, and Abby crossed the room to guide Renee out of it. They went down the hall to the kitchen. Abby opened a cabinet door and tried lifting down cups, but her hands were shaking too badly. One slipped from her grip and bounced off the counter. Renee caught it as it sailed off the edge and took the other before Abby could drop it too. Abby slammed the cabinet door shut, then opened it and slammed it again for good measure. Renee set the cups down and placed a calming hand on Abby's arm.

"Sit down," she said, so Abby went to sit at the table. Renee collected enough cups for the rest of them and filled all of them with water. Three she left on the counter for now; the others she brought to the table. She pressed one into Abby's shaking hands and sipped from the other. "What happened?"

"Speedballs," Abby said hoarsely. "They got him up on crackers and speedballs."

Renee closed her eyes to let that sink in. Dread and horror were stones in her chest, crushing the breath from her lungs. Crackers were a candy drug, a current craze with clubbers looking for a quick and temporary high. They were only mildly addictive, but even they would be razors on Matt's wavering resolve. Speedballs, though? There was no quick fix after something like that. Renee still remembered how they felt. More than that, she remembered what it was like

coming off of them. Matt was right back to square one after everything he'd sacrificed to get this far.

"Please tell me you can stand in the same room as him," Abby said, and Renee opened her eyes again. "I don't want to make this hard for you, but you're the only one who's been there and back again. You're the only one who can understand what he's going through right now. Dan can give him everything she's got, but they're going to need your help. Can you do that?"

"I'll do my best."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Renee said.

"I'm sorry," Abby said again, because they both knew she was asking a lot. Abby scrubbed her face and looked away. "How could he be so stupid? How could they be so cruel?"

Renee couldn't answer her. The best she could do was reach across the table and take one of Abby's hands in hers. She gave Abby's hand a hard squeeze and got to her feet. When Abby looked at her, Renee smiled, willing Abby to believe her, willing all of them to believe in Matt.

"He's going to be all right," Renee said. "Matt's strong. He's not going to let this stop him."

"I wish it was that simple," Abby said, but her hands were a little steadier now. Between the two of them they managed to carry all five cups back to the living room. Dan couldn't take hers, and Matt was too far gone to notice his drink, but Betsy accepted her glass gratefully. Then there was nothing they could do but be there for Matt—if he even knew they were there.

..

Wymack showed up on Abby's doorstep around dinnertime. It had been a while since he looked this haggard—not since Ian and Kirk died, Renee thought. She started a tea kettle in the kitchen, and it wasn't long before Betsy, Abby, and Wymack joined her there. Abby glanced from Renee to the door and back again, a silent plea for privacy. Renee left the room but didn't go far. Matt was asleep for now, but his brain would wake him up soon enough as he hit the next valley in his withdrawal. Dan was catching what rest she could, and Renee didn't dare disturb her. Instead she took up a post a few feet down from the kitchen doorway.

"Where are they?" Abby asked.

"They're at the stadium," Wymack said. "They had two choices: sleep there or get a hotel. I'm not letting them back to Fox Tower anytime soon, and they sure as hell can't stay here. I do need to borrow your spare bedroom, though. Randy Boyd called to say she's touched down at Upstate. I offered to pick her up from the airport, but she wanted to have a rental car handy."

"You told her?"

"I didn't have to," Wymack said. "Apparently Andrew got her number from Matt's file or something; he called her from the bar to tell her what he was going to do. She said Andrew acted with her blessing and doesn't want any of them punished for this."

"You can't be serious," Abby said flatly.

"She apologized for any inconvenience it might cost us to have Matt going through rehab right now," Wymack said, with a noticeable edge in his voice, "and promised to compensate our team and Betsy for the hardship. I told her it wasn't necessary and that we neither wanted nor needed her money, but she said we could write her check off as a donation."

"Money doesn't make this okay!" Abby said stridently.

There was a short, sharp pause. Renee imagined Wymack trying to hush Abby before she attracted attention from the Foxes.

"Nothing's going to make this okay," Wymack said at length, "but we've got to believe she knows what she's doing."

Renee had heard enough. She went down the hall as quietly as she could and crouched against the wall near the living room doorway. Matt was groaning in his sleep now, and the rustle of cloth said it wouldn't be long before the sound woke Dan up. Renee propped her elbows on her knees, laced her fingers together, and pressed her forehead to her knuckles. She focused on every strong memory she had of Matt, from his easy smile at their first introduction to his aggressive playing style to the night he'd finally risked asking Dan on a date, and prayed and prayed and prayed.

The doorbell interrupted her some indeterminable time later, and Renee stretched out the kinks on her way to open it. Matt's mother was a sight to see, a professional boxer who almost matched Matt's generous height. She was dressed in jeans and a bomber jacket, with a backpack slung over one shoulder, and she nodded at Renee in recognition.

"Morning," she said.

Renee hadn't even realized the sun was coming up. "Good morning."

Wymack, Abby, and Betsy had stepped into the hall at the sound of the bell, but they kept their distance and said nothing in greeting. Wymack gestured to indicate the living room, and Randy slipped past Renee to investigate. The doorbell had woken Matt too, it seemed, and even in his terrible state he recognized his mother. He was begging by the time Renee stepped into the doorway, heartbroken and desperate and needy. Randy stretched out on the couch with him, burying him between her body and the cushions, and held him close. Dan watched from a few feet away, looking white in the face and exhausted.

Renee went to her and caught hold of Dan's arm. Dan came to her feet with only a little resistance, and Renee tucked Dan closed to her side. "Come on," she said. "I'm taking you back to the dorm to get some sleep."

Dan dug in her feet, but not for long, and Renee guided her out of the house without a look back. A rental car was parked behind Wymack's at the curb; Dan's car was still in the driveway behind Abby's. Renee got Dan's keys from her and waited for Dan to get settled in the passenger seat before starting the engine.

They were halfway back to the dorm when Dan hit her door. Renee kept her eyes on the road. Dan groaned something thick and unintelligible in the back of her throat and lashed out again, beating the inside of her door until Renee thought she'd break every bone in her hand. She

didn't stop until Renee parked at Fox Tower, and then both girls sat still until she could breathe without choking.

"I'm going to kill them," Dan said, voice raw.

"Randy okayed this," Renee said.

The look Dan shot her was horrified. "No."

"Coach said so to Abby and Betsy," Renee said, gazing out the windshield as she tried to make sense of it. "Andrew told her what he was going to give Matt, and Randy gave him the green light. She doesn't want any of us to hold him accountable."

"Fuck her," Dan said hotly. "The next time I see him, I'm going to wring his neck, and you'd better not try to stop me."

Renee looked over at her, weighing her friend's words and wondering where the line fell in a situation like this. She thought about forgiveness, about being the better person, about trusting people's good intentions even when one couldn't understand. Then she thought about Matt's bloody face and Dan's heartbroken guilt, and she settled on the religious code most convenient to the situation.

"Leviticus," she said. "An eye for an eye. Maybe you can't exact an even retribution, but perhaps you can extract some measure of repayment. I will let you try, Dan."

Dan's expression tightened with cold resolve. "Good," she said, and she slammed the car door behind her on her way out.

..

Dan got her chance two days later when the cousins were the last ones to arrive for afternoon practice. Wymack had been waiting in the locker room with the upperclassmen, but someone from facilities arrived and couldn't wait around for Wymack's convenience. Wymack didn't look happy leaving his Foxes unattended, but he hurried the other man into the stadium to show him the trouble spots they'd opened tickets on. He was gone maybe thirty seconds before the Foxes' freshmen waltzed in.

Dan had been sitting tense, a coiled spring of rage just waiting for a trigger, and she moved the second Andrew stepped into her line of sight. The others all knew what had happened by now, and while they didn't really care about Matt's situation they were happy for a reason to fight. Juan came off his chair with a whoop, and the locker room exploded into chaos.

Renee stayed back for a minute, content for now to play referee. Her intent gaze followed Andrew as he moved, cataloguing the way he fought. He had a nasty, undisciplined style likely learned the hard way. His height was a serious disadvantage, but he'd tailored his fighting style to compensate: he put emphasis on being quick and devastating.

He was going to win this fight, Renee realized with something that was but shouldn't be impatience. The only reason he hadn't done so already was because the roiling bodies around them made it hard for him and Dan to stick with each other. It didn't seem fair that he could do

such a thing to Matt and then beat Dan here. Renee forced such thoughts aside as unhelpful and unbecoming and finally waded into the fray.

Allison was closest, so Renee hauled her aside with a hand on her elbow. Allison started to swing, realized who'd grabbed her, and fell out of the way as fast as she could. Renee caught Seth's fist when it came too close to her face and gave a warning squeeze. He scowled at her for stopping him, but Seth would never hit a woman. He wrenched his hand free and barked a couple angry words at his roommates. None of them were listening, but Renee didn't have time to wait for them. She went for every pressure point she could find and forced her teammates to clear a path. Finally she was where she needed to be, right between Dan and Andrew.

Andrew went still immediately, looking bright-eyed and amused by the untimely interruption. Dan tried to shove Renee aside, but Renee reached behind herself and caught Dan's wrists. She leaned against Dan, back to chest, and forced Dan out of Andrew's reach. Dan struggled to get loose, but Renee would always be too strong for her. Eventually Dan gave up and gasped ragged curses against Renee's shoulder.

"Enough," Renee said, looking around the room at her ruffled teammates. Her gaze settled on Andrew's smiling face last. He was having the time of his life, or so it seemed. "That's enough, all of you."

"Oh, okay." Andrew shrugged and turned away.

"Fuck you!" Dan yelled at him. "You can't do shit like that."

"No?" Nicky managed a cheeky grin despite his split lip. "Matt's mom says otherwise. Coach already told you, didn't he? So there's no problem."

"No problem?!" Dan echoed incredulously.

Andrew spun and put a finger to his mouth. "I don't want him on your couch, captain! I don't want him skulking on the defense line. What a mood-killer! It's so annoying."

"You—" Dan started.

Andrew didn't let her finish. "Matt's been in this hole once before, yes? If he wants to, he'll climb out! If the climb doesn't kill him, he'll remember why he got out of that hole the first time. For a team that loves to bet you're awfully afraid to gamble. Curious!"

That caught them all off-guard, and Allison was the first to react. "You expect us to believe you did that for his sake?"

"Oh, no." Andrew waved that aside with a flap of his hand. "I did it for me! He was making life troublesome."

"We didn't hold him down and shoot him up," Aaron said. "The choice was his, and he said yes. He was weak. You're lucky we were the ones who cleaned up behind him."

"Lucky," Dan spat. "Go to hell."

Nicky slung an arm around Aaron's shoulders and turned his cousin after Andrew. "Guess that means we get first dibs on the locker room? We'll see you all down on the court!"

Renee waited until she heard the door close down the hall before letting go of Dan. Dan stalked to the far side of the room to pace and seethe. Renee decided to make herself scarce and

went to change into her uniform. She was done dressing and working on her laces when Dan and Allison finally showed up. Dan didn't return Renee's searching look but angrily shoveled clothes out of her locker onto the floor.

"You're no match for him," Renee said as gently as she could. "I couldn't let him win."

Dan ignored her and peeled her shirt over her head. Her sides and abdomen were stained dull red in a half-dozen places; she'd be sore every step she took on the court and covered in bruises by the end of practice. Allison wasn't as bad off since she'd had most of the men between her and the cousins, but a glancing blow left color on one high cheekbone.

In the end, physical discomfort had nothing on the acidic tension between the Foxes. Practice was almost unbearable, and it took most of the afternoon before Dan would say anything to Renee. She refused to acknowledge the cousins whatsoever, choosing personal outrage over her position for the first time since the summer of the girls' freshman year. Wymack could have called her to order—they all knew Dan would do anything he asked her to—but he settled for group punishments instead. They skipped scrimmages in favor of exhausting, miserable drills and ended practice with a six-mile run around campus.

Renee wasn't sure Dan had forgiven her yet, but she matched Dan's pace as they took off across the parking lot. If Dan pulled ahead of her, Renee would obediently fall back, but Dan said nothing about having Renee at her side. Seth and Allison were close behind them, since the only thing Allison hated more than long runs was looking slower than the men on the team, and the rest of the Foxes stretched out behind them as a long, broken string.

Renee ran the first five miles in silence, then looked over her shoulder for the cousins. They'd taken up the far rear, unsurprisingly.

"I'll see you at the stadium," Renee said. Dan glanced over at her at that, but Renee only gestured over her shoulder and peeled off to the side. She slowed to a walk, ignoring the look Allison sent her on her way by and the snide remarks from the men as they passed her moments later. She waited until Aaron and Nicky finally passed before falling in beside Andrew.

"This is unexpected," Andrew said. "To what do we owe this undeniable honor?"

"I'd like you to apologize to Dan and Matt," Renee said.

He laughed. "Oh, no. Minyards don't apologize! It's not in our blood."

"Maybe you'll make an exception just this once," Renee said. "Good intentions don't change how much you've hurt them. Apologizing is the right thing to do."

Andrew quirked a brow at her. "Weep, weep, a tear for their bruised feelings. Really, Renee! Why would I care about doing the right thing?"

"For a nice change of pace?" Renee suggested, smiling. "You might like how it feels."

He laughed again and slanted a look at his cousin. "Nicky, do you hear her? What a strange, strange child we have among us."

"She's sweet, if a little naïve," Nicky said. "I think I like her."

"How lost you are," Andrew said to Renee. "How sorely misplaced."

"Do you think so?" Renee asked.

"Should I?" Andrew asked.

"Seriously, though," Nicky said, looking back at her. "How'd someone like you end up here?"

"Grace of God," Renee said.

"Boo, wrong answer." Andrew waved her words off like they stank. "I despise Christians. Such blind creatures have no right to give others advice."

"If you'll forgive my curiosity, what have we ever done to you?" Renee asked.

Andrew only smiled, but Nicky said, "Don't take it personally. Andrew hates everyone."

"But you might prove amusing, at least for a little while longer," Andrew said. "Goodbye, black sheep, baa baa lamb."

With that, he was off like a shot, running like he hadn't already gone the better part of six miles. Renee watched him hit full speed in just a couple of strides and contemplated giving chase. In the end she settled for running the last quarter-mile in silence. Her thoughts were company enough, even if she didn't yet know what to make of them.

PART 3

Renee wasn't entirely surprised to find Nicky on her doorstep Friday night. Luckily for him, Dan was at Abby's house with Matt and Allison was next door drinking with Seth when he dropped by. Monday was the only day the Foxes had erupted into a full-out brawl, but the entire week had felt toxic. Without Wymack or Abby around to intervene, and with Nicky's fierce cousins nowhere in sight, there was a good chance Nicky would end up hospitalized should he be caught in the dorm.

If Nicky knew what he was risking by being here alone, he gave no sign of it. "Heya," he said brightly. "Gonna be hot where we're going. Got anything less, uh, good Christian daughter-ish?"

"I might have one or two things, if you don't mind waiting while I check."

Renee motioned for him to come in so she could at least close the door behind him. She slipped the lock into place with her thumb and left Nicky poking around the living room while she changed out of her plain gray sweatshirt. She pawed through her closet one-handed, checking and dismissing her usual shirts in a glance. Dan didn't remember much of her night out with the cousins except that they'd gone to a club in Columbia. It wasn't a guarantee they would take Renee to the same place, but the crackers and speedballs they'd fed Matt would've been easier to hide in a place like that.

Renee didn't go out much, but she tended to pack a couple dressy shirts just in case. She found them in the bottom drawer of her dresser near her winter pajamas. She tugged on a pink silk undershirt first. The x-shaped straps across her back did nothing to hide the colorful marks across her shoulder blades, but she found a short-sleeved black jacket to pull on over top. Her

stray coin purses were in with her underwear and socks, and it took no time at all to transfer her cards and gum from her purse.

Nicky put down the photo album he'd been flipping through when she reappeared. "All set?"

"All set," Renee agreed with a smile.

She locked up behind her, glanced down the hall to make sure the other suite doors were closed, and followed Nicky downstairs. His cousins were waiting for them out back, Aaron propped against the hood and Andrew sitting on the trunk. Despite Nicky's warning to dress light, Andrew was wearing yet another long-sleeved black shirt. It was all Renee had seen him wearing since he'd shown up—even when he wore his jersey he had a black undershirt on. He was playing catch with a pack of cigarettes, but he crammed the pack in his pockets when he noticed Renee and Nicky.

"Oh, good! Hello." Andrew slid off the trunk and put a hand up in greeting. "We are, of course, thrilled beyond the telling that you could join us tonight. Nicky didn't think you would, see? Shows what he knows."

"Thank you for inviting me," Renee said.

Andrew waved that aside and turned away. "We're leaving!"

Nicky had the keys and Andrew claimed the passenger seat, so Renee ended up in the back with Aaron. Aaron didn't bother to buckle and had even less interest in answering her polite hello. He propped his elbow on the windowsill, perched his chin on his hand, and stared out the window like he didn't know she was there. Renee weighed the pros of pursuing a conversation, found them unsurprisingly slim, and decided to let it go.

Nicky flicked the radio on before pulling out of the parking lot and sent her an apologetic grin over his shoulder. "I don't think any gospel's on at this hour."

"That's all right," Renee said. "I'm not a fan."

"Surprise, surprise," Aaron muttered.

"No?" Nicky asked. "What're you into, then?"

"These days, orchestral pieces," Renee said. "Instrumental soundtracks and such, like the sort you hear in movie trailers. Epic music, I think some people call it?" She considered it a moment, then gave up with a slight shrug. "I like music that's meant to be felt."

"Huh." Nicky eyed his stereo as he thought that over, then flipped channels as he looked for a decent substitute. He found a trance station on his third try and cranked the volume up to where it was barely tolerable. Conversation would be impossible, but maybe that was the point. "Good?"

"Thank you," Renee said.

Nicky grinned and focused on getting them out of town. It took them the better part of an hour to get to Columbia, and they stopped at a packed diner as soon as they arrived. Nicky barely had time to take the keys out of the ignition before Andrew threw his car door open and leaned out. Without the music going anymore it was easy to hear him cough and gag. Nicky and Aaron

didn't look at all surprised or concerned by this but got out on the other side of the car. Renee climbed out on her side, closed her door, and turned on Andrew.

Only a white-knuckled grip on the door had kept him from toppling out onto the asphalt, and Renee was close enough to see the shudder that shook his shoulders. Nicky was talking to her about the place they'd stopped at, extolling the virtues of its ice cream and professing their great luck in getting a parking spot at this time of night. Renee responded with the appropriate congratulatory remarks but kept most of her attention on Andrew.

Andrew spat a couple more times to clear the taste from his mouth and finally got out of the car. He slammed the door behind him with such force she expected something to break, and when he turned toward her she had a piece of gum out and ready for him. Andrew paused and glanced from the foil wrapper up to her face. Renee's heart skipped a beat when she saw his face, because for the first time since she'd met him Andrew wasn't smiling.

"It's sugar-free," Renee said. "Better for your teeth."

Andrew took the gum from her, unwrapped it, and let both the stick and the foil fall to the mess at his feet. He didn't stick around to see if she reacted but strode past her toward the door. Aaron waited until Andrew reached the sidewalk before following, and Nicky hung back to match pace with Renee. Renee didn't ask about Andrew, and Nicky didn't volunteer an explanation. Instead they talked about South Carolina summers—a tragic season Renee was getting used to out of necessity but which Nicky had grown up dealing with.

"North Dakota?" Nicky asked, startled, when Renee told him where she was from. "What'd you do, pick whichever school was furthest from home?"

"I didn't have to pick," Renee said, and nodded thanks when Nicky got the door for her. "Palmetto State was the only one to offer me a position. If I'd had a choice, though, I would still have asked to come here. I believe in what Coach Wymack is trying to do with this team. Don't you?"

"How quickly they buy into the publicity stunt," Andrew said, but his mockery lacked the energy and cheer he'd been radiating the last two weeks. He slanted a look at her but didn't let his gaze linger. He was more distracted by the salad bar crackers he was tearing through. Renee didn't know how he could put anything on his stomach so soon after throwing up, but Andrew inhaled almost six packs before their hostess called his name.

"Coach Wymack is a good man," Renee said, neatly outstepping Nicky as they followed Andrew and the hostess to their table. "He is not above publicity stunts, but this is not one of them. He would never choose the program over his individual Foxes."

Andrew gestured like he was trying to shoo away a fly and slipped into the booth. Renee took the spot opposite him. She expected Nicky to slide in beside her, but Nicky climbed in beside Andrew and left Aaron to sit with Renee again. The hostess passed out menus, but Nicky collected them again as soon as she'd left and piled them in front of him. He shrugged at Renee, even though she hadn't asked, and said, "We get the same thing every time. Tradition."

Tradition turned out to be spicy cinnamon vanilla ice cream. The waiter unloaded four bowls onto the table from a wide tray, then set a stack of napkins down in front of Andrew. As soon as he turned away Andrew swiped a hand along the stack, spreading it like a deck of cards. Light glinted off plastic packets that at first could have been condom wrappers. It took Renee only a second more to see the off-color powder inside. Andrew plucked the packets up as fast as he could. Most disappeared into his pockets; the last was opened and upended into his mouth.

Renee wondered if she was supposed to comment on the blatant drug use going on right in front of her. It seemed too predictable, never mind dishonest. Renee knew the cousins had access to drugs, and they knew she knew. She helped no one by feigning discomfort or surprise now. Instead she ate another spoonful of ice cream and said, "This is amazing."

"Isn't it?" Nicky said. "Finding this place was a stroke of luck. I used to work here, see, when I moved back to Columbia a couple years ago. Tried it as a waiter, but the lack of a brain-to-mouth filter kind of uhhh..." Nicky gestured; Renee translated it to mean "a total disaster". "The manager liked me, though, so he let me go to hosting full time instead of tossing me out on my ass."

Just like that they were back where they'd started, with Nicky chattering away about South Carolina and the local area, but it didn't last long. Slowly but surely Nicky started turning the focus of the conversation toward Renee's life. Renee saw it happening a mile away and smiled. Nicky hesitated, maybe sensing something wasn't quite right, but failed to see the gentle warning in her expression. He kept on, and Renee neatly deflected his best attempts at prying. It took her only five questions to turn the conversation right back around, and there was no way Nicky could change topics without it being obvious what he was doing. For a moment he looked frustrated, then highly uncomfortable.

"Imagine that," Andrew said, tossing his spoon aside and motioning for Nicky to get out of the booth.

"Never thought I'd meet someone who could out-talk Nicky."

Renee smiled again, but there was nothing sweet in her stare when she met Andrew's hard gaze. "You could just ask."

Andrew only slid the bill across the table toward Aaron and got to his feet. Nicky hurried off the bench to let Andrew out, but Aaron didn't get up until he'd left a stack of twenties in the center of the table. Finally he moved so Renee could get up, and the four of them left the diner in a straggling line. Traffic had picked up a bit, but their next stop wasn't far. Nicky pulled up to the curb in front of a building too nondescript to justify the long line standing outside it. The twins and Renee got out onto the sidewalk, and Aaron collected a yellow tag from one of the two bouncers. Nicky rolled the window down so Aaron could flick it onto the passenger seat. Nicky pulled back into traffic, and Aaron stabbed a finger at the door in a silent demand that Renee follow Andrew inside.

There was a second set of doors beyond the bouncers' guarded entrance, and Renee gave mental props to whoever installed the sound-proofing insulation in the walls. She heard only a

distant hum between the two entrances, but as soon as the second door opened music roared over her skin.

Andrew was too short to be in a crowd this thick, and his dark outfit didn't help matters much. Renee lost sight of him twice in her attempt to follow him around the dais, then found him again by pure luck. He'd found a small, sticky table with only one chair still pulled up to it. He pushed the chair aside without looking to see if he sent it skidding into anyone.

As soon as Aaron stepped up beside Renee Andrew turned away, and Aaron pushed Renee's shoulder in a silent order to follow. It was easier to track Andrew over to the bar counter, and the bartender that greeted Andrew did so with unfeigned cheer. Renee wondered at that: had he simply known the cousins long enough to not be afraid of them, or was that the self-assured smile of the supplier to the addicted? It was promising either way, that someone could look so comfortable around someone like Andrew.

"We're going to be here a while," Andrew said.

"What, you?" the bartender joked. He didn't wait for a response but flashed Renee a toothy smile. "Any special requests?"

"Something canned and carbonated, please," Renee said.

"DD?" he guessed, and she only smiled.

"Canned," Andrew repeated when the bartender stepped away to start mixing drinks.

"Force of habit," Renee said with an apologetic shrug. "Please don't take it personally; there are very few people I'd accept an open drink from."

"I suppose you don't take candy from strangers, either."

"Candy is a little harder to resist."

Andrew waved that aside, and they waited for their drinks in silence. The bartender returned with a full tray of drinks, everything from shots to colorful cocktails, and slid it over the counter toward Andrew. With it out of his hands he was free to grab a soda from a small fridge behind him. Renee took it with a grateful nod and watched the expert way Andrew lifted his tray up to shoulder height. Andrew was too young even now to have gotten a job here at Eden's Twilight where he'd have to handle alcoholic beverages, but maybe he'd been a waiter at Sweetie's with Nicky. Then again, Dan hadn't had any trouble snagging her job at Snowy Starlets a few years back and she definitely hadn't been old enough for that either.

Renee cleared them a path back to the table and found Nicky had caught up with them. Nicky seemed to have lost his taste for nonstop conversation, but Renee was happy just to watch how quickly her teammates could put away the two dozen-odd drinks the bartender had served them. They'd emptied half the tray before Andrew's diner drugs reappeared. Nicky looked to Renee as he took a packet, searching her face for a reaction or condemnation. Renee only smiled.

"Pretty open-minded for a Christian," Nicky said.

"As are you," Renee pointed out. "Faith is my cure, but I know it's not everyone's answer. If this is yours, it is not my place to judge you. I am here to understand and support you."

"Even the flaming side of me?" He said it like a joke, but his smile didn't reach his eyes.

"The heart of all faith is love," Renee said. "That is what religion is supposed to be about: acceptance, peace, and cherishing one another despite and because of our differences. Why anyone would hate something as beautiful as love is, I don't know. Fear is hardly an excuse for today's rampant violence and discrimination."

"Cute," Nicky said. "Andrew, she's cute. Can we keep her?" Andrew didn't say anything, but his look said enough. Nicky grinned and waggled his packet at Renee. "I figure the answer's obvious, but it seems rude not to at least offer. Want in on some crackers?"

"Thank you," Renee said, "but I'm fine for now."

Nicky nodded, and the three tore their packs open. They knocked their drugs back with an ease that spoke of long practice and chased the dust with shots. They made short work of the rest of the tray, and Aaron was gone as soon as he put his last cup down. Andrew stacked the empty glasses onto the tray and vanished. Nicky didn't watch him go but looked out at the dance floor. He was already drumming his fingers along to the beat, but he gave no sign that he'd get up and abandon her.

Renee sent a casual look over her shoulder to make sure Andrew had disappeared into the crowd with his burden, then put a hand on Nicky's arm. Nicky turned to her with a winning smile on his face. Renee didn't smile this time, but Nicky had too much dust and alcohol in his system to notice.

"A week ago you brought Matt down here and gave him speedballs," Renee said. "Why?"

Nicky's smile faltered, but he didn't have the good grace to look guilty. "Andrew already said it, didn't he? That was the truth, what he said the last time you asked him."

"I don't see how Matt's struggle was 'troublesome' for Andrew."

"Oh," Nicky said with a knowing nod. "That's Aaron's fault. I told you! No, I told Dan. No?" Nicky hesitated, thinking it over, then gave it up as a lost cause and barged on. "Aaron has a special eye for people like Matt. He's a recovered addict too, see? Aaron's got dust and Andrew to keep him on the straight and narrow these days, but you can't put him and Matt on the same team and expect it to work out. What a wicked trigger, seeing someone else's desperation that close-up. Andrew doesn't have the patience for that wish-washy need—or, well, for anything else."

She understood more than he knew what it was like to maintain one's sanity while watching someone else struggle, but this wasn't the time or place to have that conversation with Nicky. Instead she said,

"If that's true, Andrew honestly believes Matt will beat this."

Nicky nodded energetically. "If Matt fails, he'll drag Aaron down with him. Andrew wouldn't have risked it if he thought Matt would lose. Just 'cause Andrew doesn't want to be here doesn't mean Andrew intends to get cut anytime soon. It'd be inconvenient."

Renee mulled over it in silence for a bit, wondering if Nicky was telling the truth or just passing along his version of it. To believe him meant believing in the good in Andrew when all

signs pointed to the contrary and a dozen-odd therapists had supposedly written him off. Even Andrew had said he wasn't interested in doing the right thing.

Maybe because he doesn't judge things in terms of right and wrong, Renee mused. He just acts without worry for consequences or collateral damage. All the wrong things for all the right reasons?

"We can't all be saints," Nicky said when Renee was silent a little too long.

"Saints would get bored with no one to reform," Renee said.

"Yeahhhh, good luck," Nicky said. "You succeed on this one and I will lead the charge for your, uh, uhhhh, what do Catholics call it when their people become saints?"

"Canonization," Renee said.

"Yup. That. Oh, hey," Nicky said.

Renee followed Nicky's distracted glance in time to see Andrew step up to the table again. He'd brought the tray back, loaded down with the same impossible number of drinks. Nicky gave an appreciative whistle, but instead of reaching for a glass he just clapped Renee's shoulder in encouragement or support. He was gone a heartbeat later, finally following Aaron out onto the dance floor. Renee looked back to Andrew, who was rearranging his glasses like their current set-up was unacceptable. As soon as he was done he started in on the drinks. Renee sipped her soda and counted shots as they disappeared. After the fourth Andrew finally looked at her.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Andrew said. He offered the fifth glass to her. She considered turning it down; she'd already told him she didn't take open drinks from many people and Andrew certainly was not one of those trusted few. After a moment, though, she accepted the cocktail and took a neat sip. Andrew emptied the rest of it when Renee passed it back. "Tell me you actually have a reason to be here."

"Do you think I'm a fluke?" Renee asked with a smile.

"I think you're a toadfish."

"Oh, that has unpleasant connotations."

He shrugged such an interpretation off as her problem. She considered him, wondering if she should tell him, debating his motives for asking. He hadn't earned her trust or her story, but maybe he deserved it all the same. This was something she understood—he was something she understood, God save them both, if even a fraction of the rumors surrounding him were true. They were two of a kind, and knowing that, believing that, was enough to make Renee relax. She set her soda aside and motioned to his tray.

"May I?"

If he was surprised by her request, he gave no sign. He only said, "They're loaded."

That he admitted it endeared her to him. "Crackers?" she asked, and when he tipped his glass in confirmation, she chose a drink at random.

She hadn't counted how many drinks Andrew knocked back already, but now she wished she'd paid more attention. Even if the first round hadn't been laced, there was no telling how

much cracker dust was coursing in Andrew's veins. That a frenetic upper did nothing to Andrew said worlds for what he'd put his system through over the last several years. It was also an interesting insight into how powerful his prescription was, if it could kick him sky-high but these drugs couldn't. Renee supposed the copious amounts of alcohol helped even the dust out a bit, but even still it was impressive.

"Nothing to worry about, then," Renee said, and toasted him before draining her drink in one long swallow. The alcohol burned, a familiar ache starting in her throat that became a raw knot low in her gut. She set the empty cup down halfway between them, left her fingers lingering on the rim until she trusted herself not to reach for another drink, and looked Andrew straight in the face.

"My name is Natalie Shields, and I was born in Detroit."

She told him her story, in more detail than she'd ever trouble Dan with. Dan would never want to know such things about her and Andrew wouldn't appreciate her glossing out the critical details. Andrew listened in complete silence, calm expression unchanging. It was a little eerie having such an unimpressed audience. At the same time, it was reassuring. Renee hadn't spoken this much about her past since she'd finally embraced the art of Confession. Andrew was no priest, but Renee felt as light now as she'd felt then. This wasn't a cloistered cleansing; this was her giving her darkest shadows voice in a crowded room, never mind that no one else was listening.

Andrew waited until she was done before returning to his drinks. Renee collected her soda and let the carbonation and sugar finally burn the lingering taste of alcohol from her tongue. She could feel the dust like a hum in her veins, leaving her restless and borderline anxious. She remained still only through sheer force of will; she'd grown up with an unbreakable front out of necessity and it was what she defaulted to whenever she felt threatened.

Andrew emptied half of the tray before long and pushed it aside. Renee watched as he reached under the hem of one long sleeve and withdrew a short, thin knife. Andrew held the blade as he offered it to her, and Renee carefully took it by the hilt. Andrew watched the way she handled it, likely judging the validity of her story by how natural the knife looked in her hand. She tested the edge against her fingertips and nodded at how easily her skin peeled up under the slightest pressure.

"Are you any good?" he asked.

"It's not really my place to judge."

"Without your humility, Christian," Andrew said. "Such things bore me."

Renee supposed subtlety would bore someone like Andrew, but it was difficult to tell the truth without sounding like she was bragging. She weighed her word choices and settled for the simplest version: "I've never lost." She turned the knife slowly, watching the way club lights flickered off the blade. If she tilted it enough she could see Andrew's reflection on the metal.

"What about you?"

"It's not my first choice."

Renee held his knife out and waited for him to take it before guessing, "You're too short to have a useful reach. Back-up, then, for when you can't finish a fight quickly enough against a larger opponent. Thank you for not drawing it on Dan Monday."

"I don't need a knife to best her," Andrew said. "Would I need it against you?"

Renee knew the right way to answer that but settled for the truth. "Yes," she said, "but I can't promise you it would do you any good."

Andrew smiled a slow smile she didn't believe at all. "Show me."

"I'm afraid I've given up fighting."

"Yet another reason religion is despicable. It breeds boring minions."

"May I ask what the first reason was?" Renee asked, but Andrew only stared at her in silence. "Religion does seem a complicated brouhaha, doesn't it? To be honest, organized religion can feel a bit constricting at times. What is most important to me is faith itself—the ability to believe in good, redemption, and an afterlife. I like believing that we're not alone in this."

Andrew tipped his head to one side and considered her. "You fear death."

"Yes," Renee said. "I've been close to it enough times to fear what's on the other side. Faith is helping me come to terms with it, but it's a slow process. What about you?"

"What a waste of time and energy," Andrew said.

"Fear, or fearing death?" Renee asked.

"Death is unavoidable," Andrew said as he slipped the blade under his sleeve again.

Renee watched the weapon disappear and assumed Wymack didn't know Andrew was wearing a sheath on his forearm. She'd like to think Andrew had chosen to wear it out with her tonight and not that he strapped up on a regular basis, but she felt obligated to warn Wymack. Even if Andrew had hinted practicing restraint with who he used the knife on, it was a safety risk she couldn't ignore.

"How many knives do you carry?" Renee asked.

"One more than you do," Andrew said. "Fight me."

"I can't."

"You can if it means I won't draw it against your teammates, hm?" Andrew asked.

Renee lifted her gaze from his sleeve to his face. Andrew took two drinks from the remaining batch on the tray and set one down in front of her. He picked up but didn't drink. He was watching her, waiting for a reaction, but they both knew what it'd be.

"Not tonight," Renee said. "I won't fight you when you've been drinking and dusting."

"Sunday," Andrew said.

"Sunday," Renee agreed. "There are study rooms in the basement at Fox Tower. It's carpeted, but there aren't cameras or windows for witnesses. Thin carpet," she explained when he didn't look sold on the idea. "A rough layer over concrete. Not quite like fighting outside, but comparable, I would think."

"That'll do," Andrew decided. He knocked his shot back, dug his cigarettes out of his pocket, and left her behind to guard the table.

Renee watched until he disappeared into the thick crowd, then looked at the drink he'd left her with. She ran her tongue along the backs of her teeth, looking for a hint of dust and scotch, and found nothing. After a minute she picked the glass up and returned it to the tray untouched, and she settled for sipping her soda until the cousins made it back to her.

PART 4

Renee kept her knives in a shoebox on the top shelf of her closet, behind the empty boxes she'd brought her photographs and fragile decorations to school in. A set of five, finger-length and thin, were in a folding mesh case with a protective plastic layer. The others were stored either in sheathes and heavy cloth. Renee hadn't handled her blades since she signed Wymack's contract to play for the Foxes, but she did now what she had done that night: she knelt in the middle of her bedroom and carefully unwrapped each and every one. Dan was at Abby's again, and Allison had fallen asleep in Seth's bed last night, so there was no one to see her with her weapons and no one to make excuses for.

Renee turned her knives over in her hands one at a time, checking for blood she'd washed off years ago. She had expected to feel something—disappointment over how easily she'd been talked into this fight or a bit of sickness at how familiar the knives felt in her hands so many years later—but she felt nothing at all. She considered that for a minute, knowing she had the time to spare before she was supposed to be downstairs. Was it a good sign that her past wasn't haunting her now, or was it too soon for her to be done atoning?

It was something to think about, for sure, but her minute was up. Renee chose her weapon after a little more consideration and put the rest away. The shoebox was tucked safely out of sight again and Renee strapped her sheath to the side of her calf. She tugged the hem of her pants back down and tugged on a pair of well-worn sneakers. A glance around found her keys on her pillow. Renee collected them and took the stairs to the basement.

There were only a hundred-odd students on campus for summer school and only one other team checked into Fox Tower already, but Renee checked all of the study rooms for witnesses. She found Andrew in the last room. He'd already folded up the tables' flimsy legs and stacked the tables against the walls. The chairs were pushed to the corners, stacked upside-down on top of each other. Renee gauged the room they had to work with, judged it to be sufficient, and hesitated when she got a better look at her opponent.

Andrew had come in a short-sleeved black shirt, but his arms were still mostly covered. What the Foxes had thus far assumed was a long-sleeved undershirt were black wrist-to-elbow bands on both arms. An unsubtle attempt to hide his sheathes, perhaps, except Andrew should only have one. He'd told her Friday he had one more knife on him than she did and he'd assumed she was unarmed. His left arm was strapped; his right was likely covered to make the left less obvious.

"Oh, she came!" Andrew said. "A woman of her word, what a novelty."

"Honesty, or honest women?" Renee asked.

"Yes," Andrew said.

Renee smiled and let it slide. She'd pulled a light zippered sweatshirt on over a tank top so as not to wander the halls with her shoulders showing, but now she eased out of it and set it on the nearest chair. Andrew was rocking on the balls of his feet as she returned to him, and he spun a finger near his head when she stopped.

"How unexpected. Let us have another look."

She obediently turned her back to him. The mottled scars along the top of her shoulder blades were too faded to have caught his eye across the room, so she knew he'd spotted the edges of her tattoo. Last night's stringy shirt would have shown off more of the uneven lines, but she'd left her jacket on the whole time she'd been out with him.

Andrew hooked a finger in her sleeve hole and tugged it toward the center of her back, trying to pull it enough that he could get a better look at her. She'd have to take off her shirt for him to see the whole thing, but she thought he could see enough to understand what he was looking at. The jagged wings were more dragon than angel, consequence of being inked into her young skin by an inexperienced hand. Appropriate, she thought some days—the discrepancy between what she was and what she wanted to be was carved into her skin for all time.

"Prison ink?" Andrew asked.

"Close," Renee said. "One of the Hounds did it for me. It seemed a good idea at the time." Andrew let go of her and stepped away, so Renee turned to face him. When he said nothing else, she said, "I feel obligated to warn you that I don't fight fair. I would rather respect you by giving this my best shot than slow us both down by being a gentile opponent. You do not have any reservations about fighting a woman, I suspect?"

"Oh, no." Andrew's smile was all teeth. "Not at all."

"What a relief," Renee said, with a hint of her usual sweet smile. "This might actually be interesting, then."

Renee wasn't sure which one of them moved first, or if they both broke at the same second. She didn't think, just moved, and within a couple blows she knew which of them was going to win.

She wasn't used to fighting people who were shorter than she was, and Andrew was significantly faster than she was with those drugs in his system, but Renee could and would adapt. She didn't know if someone had taught Andrew to fight or if he'd picked it up out of necessity, but the aggression in his style said he primarily used violence to settle disputes and assert dominance.

Renee's six years with the Detroit-based Bloodhounds, on the other hand, had been an endless fight for survival. The Hounds had fought each other as stress relief and practice and the rest of the city when defending or stealing territory. She'd defended her body and her reputation with her life. She was slower because she was patient and because she knew how many punches

she could take before she was in real trouble. She was willing to give ground as often as necessary if it meant making an opening.

Renee didn't think Andrew was used to losing, but she didn't mind reminding him how it felt.

Unfortunately—and unsurprisingly—Andrew didn't have the good sense to pull out when it was obvious he couldn't take her. He'd told her Minyards didn't apologize; apparently they didn't say Uncle either. The only one who could end this was Renee. She drove him back toward the wall, watching for him to draw his knife. It was inevitable when he realized he was being herded, but by the time he reached for it, it was too late.

Renee had pushed him for a reason, and the chairs were now within her reach. She smashed one into Andrew's side, hooking the legs around his arm and forcing the blade away from her unprotected skin. An elbow to the chin slammed his head back into the wall and Renee gave the chair a brutal twist that threatened to dislocate his shoulder. He moved with it instinctively, and a second later Renee had him flat on his back with one knee on his throat and the other shoe pinning his wrist to the carpet. Renee slipped her own knife free and put the tip to his groin.

"Enough," Renee said.

She gave him a moment to respond or react. He said nothing: neither accepting his defeat nor foolishly challenging her win, but Renee nodded anyway and eased off of him. As soon as Andrew could breathe easier he started laughing. Renee put the knife away before settling to sit cross-legged beside him. Andrew pushed himself up and looked at the knife in his hand. He seemed mildly surprised—amused?—to find his weapon drawn.

"Your fundamentals are sound," Renee said, "but you might want to draw that sooner."

"Against someone else, perhaps!" Andrew waggled the knife at her and tossed it off to one side. "Against you, perhaps it would not have made a difference, hm?" He smiled, but Renee saw the menace in his bared teeth. She was a threat to him, and he didn't like it. "As you have already said, it is a bauble for back-up only."

"You could have chosen a weapon you were more comfortable with," Renee said.

"It made sense at the time to pick it up," Andrew said with an expansive shrug. "He liked knives, and I like beating people at their own game."

Renee stopped breathing. It took her several heartbeats to get her lungs working again, but even then she didn't trust her voice. She almost asked who "he" was, but it wasn't her business. Besides, the who didn't matter so much as the rest of it did. Andrew tipped his head to one side and quirked an eyebrow at her, which meant something in her expression gave her away.

"What's that about, one wonders?" Andrew asked.

Renee weighed her options. She knew which path she should take—and she knew which one she needed to. "You won't get any better without proper practice. Spar with me again? Not today, of course, but later on. Even if it's just once a week, it'd be better than fighting shadows."

"Give us a reason for the change of heart!" Andrew said.

"Do you know why I learned to fight with knives?" Renee asked. He only shrugged at her and twisted in search of his knife. She assumed he was still listening to her, though, and she was right—the next words out of her mouth had him go still as stone with his hand halfway to his blade.

"On initiation night to the Bloodhounds, I was raped by its eight officers. Tradition," she said, with a casualness she wasn't feeling. "After that, most of them left me alone, but one took a special interest in me. He was older than me, and bigger than me, and stronger than me, so I had to find a way to fight him. He liked knives," she said, and Andrew flicked her a quick look she couldn't decipher, "so I decided to use them against him. I wanted to beat him at his own game, too."

Andrew rocked onto his knees to get in her face. He was so close his knuckles scraped her collarbone when he motioned to her. "But there is a flaw in your story, don't you see? Friday you said you spent six years with the Hounds. But you were in North Dakota for two and a half years, yes? Either you are very old, or you were very young. Maybe both?"

"I am twenty-two," Renee said. "I'll be twenty-three in September."

Andrew did the math faster than she expected—she hadn't expected him to remember all the finer details of the story she'd told him on Friday, but he pulled the numbers together now and ticked them off on his fingers. "Twenty-one your freshman year. Nineteen when you started your junior year at West Jackson, eighteen when you moved to North Dakota. Two years in the foster system. So you became a Hound at ten years old, Natalie Renee Shields Walker."

"Yes," Renee said quietly.

"Spoil the end of this story for me," Andrew said. "Did you kill him?"

He wasn't smiling anymore. Renee had the distinct feeling her answer was important to him, but she wasn't sure why. His odd comments here and there had her thinking he was more than a little misogynistic, but the intense look in his eyes upended those suspicions. It was maybe too soon to put her faith in him, but in that moment Renee was willing to believe. He wasn't a good person—probably never had been, never would be—but he was not the soulless, crazy monster the rumors made him out to be.

"Eventually," Renee said. "I knew he'd kill me if I lost, so I waited until I was sure I could take him. But yes. When the time came I won and he died." She reached for her cross necklace and hooked her finger around the thin chain. "I'm waiting to feel sorry for it, but all these years later I still can't repent. So instead I keep the knives I killed him with, to remember what I let myself become. I am out of practice, for sure, but I remember enough. Do you want to spar with me?"

"You are the strangest Christian I've ever met." He retreated out of her space, grabbed his knife, and bounced to his feet. Renee watched him slide his knife out of sight under his left armband. Andrew flashed her a manic grin as he turned back on her. "Might not be the smartest choice!"

Renee shrugged. "You've told me that knife is your last line of defense and that you wouldn't draw it against someone who wasn't strong enough to deserve it. I'm trusting that means you won't take what I teach you and hurt my friends. If I am right, then spar with me again."

"You trust too easily."

"Do I?" she asked. Andrew just smiled, so Renee got to her feet. Moving reminded her how sore she was. She massaged her throbbing shoulder as carefully as she could and didn't try to hide a wince. "I think I'm going to bruise."

"A tear for her discomfort." Andrew swiped the corner of his eye with his thumb.

Renee smiled despite herself. "Will you talk to Dan and Matt?"

"I have nothing to say to them."

"Would you at least stop by and check on his progress?"

"No point! He'll get better without me as a witness."

Someone else might have given up then, but Renee was determined. She thought hard for a moment, then lighted on the story Nicky told her Friday. It was a stretch and it depended far too heavily on her new assessment of Andrew's character, but she was used to taking leaps when she had to.

"I need to see him today," she said. "I was a junkie my last years with the Bloodhounds; my addiction was what caused me to slip up and get arrested in the end. I understand what Matt's struggling with now, so I'm the best-qualified to walk him through this, but Abby and Betsy worry when I'm there. They know they need me, but they're scared he'll trigger my relapse." She brightened as if something had just occurred to her. "Let's go together. I'll go for Matt's sake, and you go for me. Surely you wouldn't leave me to face such terrible temptation alone."

Andrew mimed slashing his throat. "I am never leaving you alone with Nicky again."

"So he was telling the truth?"

"Truth is too valuable to be given away so freely," Andrew said. "Nicky will never understand, hm? He's a little stupid that way."

A second later he was gone, sailing past her out the door. Renee stared at the empty doorway a moment, then grabbed her jacket and ran after him. It was too warm outside for such things, and the sweatshirt was uncomfortable against her heated, sweaty skin, but Renee preferred not to go out in public with her tattoo showing. She had the shirt zipped up to her throat by the time Andrew pushed open the back door and led her into the parking lot.

A FOB on his keychain got the doors unlocked as soon as Andrew had line of sight of the car, and Renee eased into the passenger seat. The more she moved, the more she hurt. Andrew didn't seem to be suffering. Renee didn't know if it was a brave front or if his medication-induced mania made him unaware of how many blows she'd landed on him.

"I'm sorry about your face," she said. She'd split his lip with her elbow and the ruddy stains on his cheekbone and jaw would be awful bruises by the time he woke up.

"I'm not sorry about yours," he returned, and he cut the radio on to kill any further conversation.

The usual cars were parked at Abby's house; Abby's and Wymack's in the driveway, and Dan's in front of Randy's rental car at the curb. Andrew pulled up in front of the neighbor's house for lack of better options, and Renee led the way across the yard. Abby's door was unlocked, as usual, but Renee still knocked on it as she pushed it open.

"It's me," she called so Abby wouldn't have to get up and investigate. Andrew moved so Renee could close the door behind them, and Renee brought him down the hall to the living room.

Everyone looked up at their entrance, but any greetings they might have offered died when they saw who she'd brought with him. Renee took a careful look around, looking for trouble. Randy was the only one who didn't recognize Andrew, so she only nodded and turned back on her son. Wymack's expression was guarded; Abby's was stony. Betsy's gaze was intent, but her stance was relaxed: she was interested in this new turn of events, not worried. Dan went rigid where she was huddled against Matt's side, and her face went white with anger. The most important response was Matt's—he froze when he saw Andrew, but there was no fear or anger on his face.

Andrew propped a shoulder against the doorframe and grinned at Matt. "What a mess!"

"Hey," Renee said before Dan could open her mouth. She kept her tone as gentle as possible as she crossed the room to Matt. "We thought we'd stop by and check on you."

"And did 'we' drag each other here kicking and screaming?" Wymack asked, gesturing up at his own face.

"Did he hit you?" Dan demanded.

"I hit him first," Renee said cheerfully.

"Did not," Andrew countered, then considered it and allowed, "Maybe."

Renee knelt in front of Matt and crossed her arms across his knees. Matt didn't look it, but he was tense as stone under her touch. Renee smiled up at him, willing him to focus on her instead of Andrew, and eventually he dragged his stare down to meet hers. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," Matt said after a long pause. "I think?"

"When I was coming clean, I was angry all the time over absolutely everything," Renee said. She nodded at the twitch at the corner of his mouth and said, "That's what I thought. This house is too small for something like that. Come back to practice with us and work your aggression off on the court."

"I can't," Matt said, voice raw with something that wasn't quite shame.

"You can," she said, quiet but insistent.

His mother had made fitness and sports his best weapons against drugs, Matt had told her last year. He'd needed something healthy to get into in lieu of his father's needles and pills. He'd learned to box first since it let him vent his pain and restless rage, then worked his way back into Exy. Renee didn't know if the same trick would work twice, but she had to believe it. More than that, she needed him to believe it.

"You know it's strong enough to catch you," she said. "Now trust us to be strong enough to hold you up. You can't hurt us out there. It's the safest place for you to be right now, and it'll feel cleansing to get this out of your system."

"Hurry it up," Andrew said. "Your teammates are so loud when you're not there."

"Andrew," Abby said sharply.

His name was enough to get Randy's attention, and she shot a quick look across the room. She started to shift like she was going to get up, but Andrew wasn't sticking around. He waved off Abby's impending lecture, and spun out of the doorway. "Get your own ride back!" he called over his shoulder as he left, and he was out of the house a couple seconds later.

As soon as the front door slammed shut behind him, Dan turned on Renee. "He hit you?!"

"Once or twice," Renee said.

"Who won?" Wymack asked.

"I did," Renee said, with a touch of surprise like she couldn't believe Wymack had to ask.

It was a little rude of her, but it got the reaction she wanted: Matt laughed and scrubbed roughly at his face. "I would've liked to see that."

"I'm glad you didn't," Renee said. "I'm not a kind fighter, and no amount of faith can change that about me. Besides, I don't think Andrew would have taken well to having an audience."

"Serves him right," Dan said darkly.

Renee looked from Dan to Matt, weighing her words and wondering how to say this without making it seem like she was taking sides. "What he did was wrong," she said, "and I'm sorry you'll never hear him apologize for it. But I do believe, after talking to him and Nicky both, that he really did mean to help you. Maybe it's not the kind of consideration we want, and maybe he has a misguided way of getting results, but he wanted you sober."

She told them what Nicky had told her about Aaron, then said, "Andrew is an addict in his own right, but his drug isn't one he can give up." She tapped a finger to her temple, meaning the court-ordered medication that kept Andrew at a manic high for the better part of his waking hours. "He has no choice but to keep taking it, though he's found some avenues of controlling and easing that addiction. I don't think he enjoyed your struggle any more than Aaron did." She drew her arms back from Matt's legs and relaxed back to sit on her heels. "But that's just speculation on my part, and I don't think Andrew would ever admit it if we asked him. Point is, I'm not trying to excuse his actions. I'm just trying to make sense of them."

Dan looked like she wanted to say something, but Matt beat her to the punch. "I remember," he said slowly, then hesitated as if not trusting his memories of that night. He flexed his fingers, clenching and unclenching his fists. Renee took one of his hands and squeezed as hard as she could. It was permission to squeeze back and a silent promise that she could handle the pain. Matt took it at face value and almost crushed her hand in his. "He said—he said I could jump or fall. One last drink for the road—that's what he called it."

"Why did you take it?" Abby asked.

"I'm sorry," Matt said. "I'm—sorry. I didn't know how to say no." Dan gave him a short and fierce hug but said nothing. Matt closed his eyes and took a long, shuddering breath. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

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Matt showed up at practice Monday morning. If Andrew hadn't shown up about the same time, the boys might have had something awful to say to Matt about his issues. As it was, Andrew was only ten seconds behind Matt, and he came in with startlingly dark bruises across his face and throat. Matt was bruised as well from struggling with the staff and Randy during his crash. Renee had more marks on her than he did, but there was no way the boys would think her capable of picking a fight with Andrew. They drew what seemed the obvious conclusion, that Matt had gotten some of his own back against Andrew, and just like that Matt was redeemed in their eyes. Renee and Dan kept a discreet eye on Matt throughout practice, but Matt held it together somehow. Dan finally started talking to the cousins again, but only when it was necessary and then only about Exy.

By the end of the week, Matt was doing well enough that Randy went home. At the end of July, Matt caught up with Seth after afternoon practice and said, "I want to come back to the dorm."

Renee could almost feel Dan holding her breath at Renee's side. Seth considered Matt for a couple seconds, then only asked, "Who's stopping you?"

That night, Matt packed his things and moved out of Abby's house. Juan had moved in with Seth and Dwayne in Matt's long absence and wasn't interested in leaving, but no one wanted to stick Matt with Reggie and Damien. Seth and his friends stuck mostly to pot, whereas Reggie and Damien had a tendency to stray toward harder drugs whenever they were available. In the end Dwayne and Juan took the third bed out of Reggie's suite and made a second loft in Seth's room.

The following week was a little tense as the upperclassmen readjusted to each other. But as August continued, the boys settled back into their usual routines. And Matt—bless his heart—was doing better than ever. Renee could see him growing into his own now that drugs weren't a barrier between him and his roommates. She caught him laughing with them more than once, and Matt stopped trying to slouch his way out of existence.

The team was healing and fracturing in the same breath. Matt and his roommates had come to some sort of truce, but that required them to draw a line in the sand and pull away from Reggie and Damien. Andrew's lot was still happily on the outskirts, disliked and antisocial, and the girls were their own separate unit. Allison flitted back and forth from her friends to Seth, but she would never be on easy terms with the rest of the boys.

When the school year started, the team was in pieces, but it was in fewer pieces than Renee had ever seen it. It wasn't until the first game of the season that Renee realized what those

tenuous threads of unity were doing for them. She caught it in glimpses, when Aaron, Matt, and Nicky were on the court in some combination. Matt wasn't friends with the cousins, but he was willing to work with them. They were the unified defense Wymack had hoped for: not as strong as they needed to be yet, but at least enthusiastic and forceful. Damien was a stronger backliner than either Aaron or Nicky, but he had no interest in playing with the mouthy freshmen. Reggie, in goal for first half, only weakened the line, since he and the cousins hated each other.

The first fifteen minutes of second half showed Renee what the team stood to become, with best friends Seth and Juan on the strikers' line, Dan hard and strong in the dealer's spot, and Matt and Aaron playing defense in front of her goal. They were still split offense and defense, but when the strikers were willing to play with each other and the backliners were on the same wavelength, when Dan kept the ball moving between both groups and Renee could guide her backliners from behind, there was so much potential Renee couldn't breathe.

Oh, Coach, she thought, smiling so wide her face hurt. Give us one more year, maybe two, and you won't recognize us anymore.

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By mid-September, the Foxes had problems. Damien's drug habit was steadily getting out of control, to the point that he was skipping lectures and failing his classes. If Damien's grade point average plummeted any further, he'd lose his scholarship and his spot on the team. Wymack and Abby took turns trying to talk some sense into him, but their warnings and speeches didn't make a lasting effect. Damien feigned improvement for a while, then continued his downward spiral. Reggie was in the best position to help him as both his friend and roommate, but he gave it a half-hearted effort at best. Andrew, who'd taken such drastic measures to save Matt and Aaron, had no plans to intervene.

"Might as well spit on fire," was his bright response when Renee asked him about it privately. "He doesn't want to make it."

By the end of the month, Damien was on probation and relegated to the bench.

Renee regretted his poor decisions, but nothing she said got through to him. Dan tried for a little while, then stopped trying when she saw what his absence did to her defense. Matt was the strongest backliner the Foxes had signed to date, and everyone could see the effect he had on Aaron and Nicky. The two had to fight to keep up with him. Bit by bit, game by game, they started to close the gap.

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They made it as far as October before Andrew finally stepped onto the Foxes' court. They were up against Breckenridge and losing with a miserable fourteen-three score. Renee didn't know what the Jackal strikers said to Reggie, but she could imagine, since she'd endured their hateful mockery all first half. Whatever it was, it was enough to get Reggie out of his goal. He was on the nearer striker in a heartbeat, and the court erupted in a full-out brawl. It was the sixth

fight this match alone, and apparently six was one too many for the referees' patience. Red cards flashed like they were going out of style.

Wymack had been gnawing on an unlit cigarette for the last few minutes, but now he broke it into as many pieces as he could and threw the mess at the wall. "Useless jackasses. All I want for Christmas is some fucking restraint on this line." He looked over his shoulder for Renee, then looked past her at the short goalkeeper half-dozing on the bench. "Wake him up."

His words were enough to get Andrew's attention. Andrew looked from him to the fight happening on the court. He looked a little sluggish, consequence of his withdrawal. Andrew was only here as backup, signed to the Foxes before he could be recruited by anyone else, but Wymack was a man of his word: he'd promised Andrew sobriety on game nights, and he wasn't going to renege just because Andrew wasn't in goal. Renee didn't see the point of going through withdrawal for nothing every single Friday, but Andrew seemed content with the deal.

"Let's go," Wymack said.

"You have Joan of Exy," Andrew said.

"I said now. Attempt to earn your keep."

Andrew eased off the bench. He came to the games in full gear even though he and Wymack didn't expect him to play, but he'd dropped his helmet and gloves under the bench as soon as he'd gotten comfortable. Now he pulled them on and went to get his massive racquet from the stick rack. The referees were almost done restoring order to the court by the time he was ready, and Wymack walked Andrew to the court door. With the fight over, the crowd noticed who was going on for Reggie, and the reaction was startled and loud.

Reggie stomped off the court ahead of three of the referees. He didn't spare a glance for his short replacement but peeled his helmet off and threw it. Wymack and the referees went after him, scolding him for his terrible behavior, and Andrew let himself onto the court. Renee stood as close to the court wall as she could. Wymack had shown the Foxes one of Andrew's high school games in an attempt to win them over, but she'd never seen him play a live game.

The last of the referees left the court at last, and the doors were bolted closed. The teams lined up for a penalty shot on the Foxes' goal. Andrew gave his racquet an experimental twirl as the buzzer rang. The Jackal striker wasn't waiting for Andrew to be ready—as soon as the bell said he could swing, he did, and he heaved the ball at the goal like he wanted to bust a hole through it.

Andrew didn't even slow. The twirl became a smooth, wide swing, and Andrew slammed the ball right back the way it'd come. It was the last thing the striker expected, and the ball caught him full in his helmet. He stumbled back, startled and dazed, and tripped over his own feet. Aaron was already there to steal the ball from him, and he popped it right back at his brother. Andrew smashed it all the way up-court.

Aaron and Nicky knew what to expect and were running before the ball even connected with Andrew's racquet. The rest of the Jackals and Foxes were a second slower to respond, but the cousins helped pull the teams up the court away from Andrew's goal. Andrew's ball hit the far

wall, six feet over the Jackal goalkeeper's head, and rebounded with a hearty thump. The teams caught up with it as it bounced back to mid-court, and the fight to the last bell began.

Aaron and Nicky were too young and inexperienced to take on Breckenridge's offense line, but the Foxes were out of substitutions. They fought tooth and nail to hold the line, and Andrew sort-of tried somewhere behind them. Sort-of was still good enough, because Andrew's lazy attempt to guard the goal slowed the Foxes' plummet to a leisurely crawl. Reggie and Renee had given up fourteen goals in their sixty-five minutes on the court. In the last quarter of the game Andrew only lost four.

"He really doesn't care, does he?" Matt asked at Renee's side.

"No," Renee said. "I don't think he does."

He'd said it, and Wymack had said it, and everyone had warned them, but it was still jarring to watch him and realize he didn't honestly care which way the score went. He swung at the ball because he wasn't the sort to get stepped on, but he didn't care enough to really try. Renee was torn between amazement and frustration.

"That's obnoxious," Matt said at length.

"It's sad," Renee said. "I can't imagine being so apathetic about life. To never be excited, or happy, or willing to risk it all—what a gray existence. How do you wake up and keep moving every day if you don't get anything out of being alive?"

Matt sent her a startled look for that interpretation, but Renee couldn't look away from Andrew to return his stare. At length Matt turned his attention back to the court.

"It's still aggravating," he said at length.

Renee wisely said nothing.

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The following Friday morning, the Foxes met up at the stadium at nine-thirty. They had an away game in Virginia that night, which meant they needed to get on the road as close to ten as possible. Instead of letting them gather their gear, Wymack sat his team down in the locker room. Abby, standing at his side, had a brave face on that had never fooled any of them. Renee looked from her to Wymack and back again, wondering what could sour their moods so early in the day. She didn't have to wait long for an answer.

"Palmetto State is a Class I school on a technicality," Wymack said when they were all seated and still. "We earned the rank on my say-so, because I learned Exy from Kayleigh Day and the ERC thought that stood for something." He drummed his fingers on the side of his coffee mug and stared past them at the far wall. "As you know, we're halfway through our fourth season as a team. So far we've only won ten games."

He paused there, letting that dire statistic sink in, and Renee knew where this conversation was going.

"We are getting better, yes, but the higher-ups are losing patience. I received a call from the ERC this morning. They are considering dropping our status in December. Let me tell you

now: if we get demoted to Class II, we will never be Class I again. We would need near-perfect scores for five years straight before we'd earn a reconsideration, and even then there'd be no guarantee of winning an appeal. It'd be easier to leave us as the best of the second-best than give us another chance.

"I'm going out on a limb here," Wymack said, and finally swept them with an intent look. "I'd like to think I don't ask a lot of you, but I'm asking you now: help me. The last thing I want is for us to lose our Class I title, but there's nothing else I can do. The fight is yours, so start fighting. You need to do more than just show up and play. You need to start believing in yourselves and each other. You need to win, and you need to keep winning."

The seniors exchanged sidelong looks, as if they found such a prospect ridiculous, but for once they were smart enough not to say anything.

"Yes, Coach," Dan said when no one else spoke.

"Good," Wymack said. "Now get your stuff. If you're not on the bus in five minutes I'll leave you here."

They were carrying his dreams and his career on their shoulders, to an extent few of them had previously realized. Renee's heart twisted in sad sympathy as she got to her feet, and she glanced at Allison to see what she thought. Allison didn't return it, more interested in staring Seth down across the room.

Renee looked at Andrew next, but Andrew was fast asleep. On Fridays he realigned his medication schedule to match up with whenever first serve was. Renee didn't completely understand the intricacies of the timing, but she knew he was supposed to take a pill during first half. He started crashing near halftime and spent second half a hazy mess. Renee supposed it best that he was sleeping now, because she doubted Wymack's plea would mean a thing to him.

The only thing Renee could do was pray, so she did, for most of the ride to Virginia.

Virginia's crowd was a rowdy lot, with barely a friendly face in sight. Few Palmetto State students bothered to come to away games anymore, especially out-of-state ones, since they already knew how the game would end. Renee avoided looking at the packed rafters, but the shouted, derisive remarks were harder to ignore. Running warm-up laps was a good enough distraction, and the referees ushered the Foxes on the court for drills shortly after.

As soon as they were sent off-court again, Reggie and Damien got comfortable on the bench. Reggie's red card meant he was out this game, and Damien was still on probation. Neither of them seemed bothered to be out tonight, so Renee looked away from them. Dan and Allison had brought Seth and Dan close to the court wall to talk. Juan and Dwayne were chatting up the Vixens, the Foxes' cheerleading squad. Nicky and Aaron were talking to Abby near the stick rack. Wymack and Andrew stood away from everyone else, out of earshot but close enough that Renee could see their expressions. Judging by the serious look on Wymack's face, Wymack was talking to Andrew about their upcoming demotion.

Andrew noticed Renee's attention and motioned for her to join them. Renee set her helmet aside and went to stand at Wymack's side. Andrew grinned at her easy obedience and

turned back on Wymack. He motioned as if trying to beckon Wymack closer but didn't wait before saying, "Give us a number between one and ten and a bottle of Walker Blue."

Wymack gazed at him, not understanding the game and therefore unsure if he wanted to play. At last he said, "Five."

"Five," Andrew echoed, and pointed at Renee. "You're sitting out this game."

Renee wasn't expecting that, and she looked from one man to the other. Before she could ask or Wymack could react, Andrew laughed at their ignorance and explained. "I'm shutting down the goal. Can't do that if you're giving points away like it's Christmas, right? Pay attention, Coach! I'm only going to do this for you once."

"Can someone who doesn't care about winning really close the goal?" Renee asked.

"So little faith." Andrew grinned and sailed away.

Renee watched him go, then said, "It's all right with me, Coach. I've always wanted to see a miracle firsthand."

"Yeah," Wymack said dryly. "Me, too."

He squeezed her shoulder, either in thanks or an apology, and went to round his Foxes up. Wymack announced that Renee was out for first half, but didn't bother to clarify that she was out for the whole game. Dan frowned a little at the last-minute switch but wouldn't question Wymack's decisions. The starting line-up was called onto the court one at a time, and Renee and Wymack took up a spot near the wall outside the half-court line so they could watch the game.

Renee tried to get Reggie to join them, but he was more interested in talking with Damien on the bench. Wymack let it slide because it sounded like they were arguing about a class they shared. Reggie should have listened, because Andrew was effortlessly showing up both of the Foxes' goalkeepers. Thirty minutes into first-half, the score was five-three, Jackdaws' favor—and then the Jackdaws stopped scoring.

They broke through the Foxes' defense again and again, but Andrew was always waiting for them. Every shot they made on goal, he deflected. He slammed ball after ball to the far end of the court, clearing the Jackdaws out of his zone with relentless energy. It didn't take long for the Jackdaws to get bored of such tricks, but the angrier they got the easier it was for Andrew to play with them. When the halftime bell rang, the Foxes had caught up, and the teams were sitting five-even.

Halftime break was where Wymack clued his team in. First half had gone so well that the upperclassmen and girls didn't think to argue with his call. Dissent came from the least expected corner: Andrew's own family. Aaron flicked Andrew a shrewd look but said nothing, but Nicky gaped and protested, "You can't do that. He can't play a full game."

"I can do what I want," Wymack said.

"But he's—" Nicky stopped, cowed by the black look Andrew sent him. Andrew's smile was long-gone, and the careful way he moved had nothing to do with first half's exertions. "Um, I mean..."

Aaron said something in German. Nicky winced and answered, but Andrew shut them both up with something that sounded vicious. Nicky made himself scarce under the pretense of getting more water, and Aaron subtly put more space between himself and his brother. Andrew noticed Renee's stare then and slid her a cold look. Renee kept her expression calm, not wanting him to mistake an encouraging smile for mockery or pity, and Andrew eventually looked away again.

Renee spent the entire second half standing at first-fourth. She pressed her hands against the wall to try and hide their excited trembling, but she could feel that quake even in her stomach as she watched Andrew fight. For forty-five minutes, the Jackdaws hurled their absolute best at Andrew, but it was clear from the start that it was a futile effort. Andrew reacted to the awful ache of withdrawal by getting angry, and he vented that rage in every swing.

It wasn't just Andrew anymore—the short goalie had inspired his team, and from the backliners forward the Foxes were moving with renewed energy and determination. The Jackdaws' confidence was shaken, and the Foxes took advantage of it as best they could.

The game ended ten-five, the best score the Foxes had ever grabbed, and the team erupted in celebration on the court. Andrew was the only one unimpressed by the victory, and instead of joining their mid-court party he cast his racquet aside and set off for the door. Matt started to go after him, caught up in the excitement of an unexpected win, but Nicky grabbed his arm to stop him.

The Foxes' subs were waiting for the referee to open the door and let them on, so Renee was right there when Andrew stepped off the court. The heavy grating and mask of a goalkeeper's helmet made it hard to see Andrew's face, but Renee could see enough to know Andrew was in horrible shape. He slipped past her without slowing and set off immediately for the locker room. Renee hesitated, torn, but Allison pushed Renee's shoulder in an impatient gesture to hurry up. Renee followed her teammates onto the court and ran to scoop Dan into a fierce hug.

It felt like they were the only ones celebrating in the entire stadium, but the Foxes didn't care how many people were against them. They high-fived and hugged in the middle of the Jackdaws' court, rowdy and excited, and finally traded bruising handshakes with their opponents. The Jackdaws had nothing nice to say about the game, but the Foxes were too happy to care. They booked it off the court and swarmed Wymack.

By the time they made it to the locker room, Andrew had already half-changed out. Reggie and Damien went ahead to get changed, but the others hesitated to consider the man who'd made their win possible. Andrew had shed his padding but put his dirty jersey back on. It was three sizes too big for him, since goalies had more body armor than anyone else needed. He sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor, hands clenched around his ankles and eyes closed. If he'd already thrown up, it hadn't helped. He was still too white in the face to look at all okay.

"That was incredible," Dan said, the first compliment she'd given Andrew all year.

"That won't happen again anytime soon," Andrew said, voice thick with nausea. "Pull your own weight from here on out, hm?"

Dan bristled but headed to the showers without another word. Her exit signaled the others to get moving, and the Foxes split up between the changing rooms. The cousins and upperclassmen were still taking turns, so Aaron and Nicky stayed behind with Andrew.

As Renee left the room, she heard Wymack ask, "What if I'd said one?"

"What if?" Andrew returned breezily, and Renee heard the smile in his voice.

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That game created a handful of unforeseen complications. The Foxes were well-known in the NCAA Exy world, mostly as the butt of jokes, but Andrew's stunt was enough to pique people's interest across the nation. Turnout at the Foxes' games started to climb, and the school board put a lot of pressure on Wymack to succeed. Wymack fended off his bosses with the grumpy confidence of a man used to getting his way and never showed signs that they were getting to him, but even Wymack knew when he had to make concessions.

Andrew was indisputably the team's best goalkeeper, and Wymack needed him in goal, but putting Andrew in the game meant taking one of his goalies out. Reggie was the obvious choice, since he had weaker stats than Renee did and his isolationist playing style hurt the defense line. Reggie was a graduating senior, though, with only seven games left to play. A smarter coach would vote in favor of his team's overall success, but Wymack couldn't look at the team and not see the damaged youths he'd handpicked to believe in. In the end he made the only call he could, and he rotated Reggie and Renee every other game.

Keeping Andrew in the goal wasn't as simple as it seemed, either, because of the secret deal between Wymack and Andrew. Withdrawal was hard enough without the added stress of a game night. The teams the Foxes faced were talented and brutal, and even when Andrew was only mostly trying he burned through his energy reserves at an alarming rate. They gave Andrew the first half to play out of necessity so he could pop his pills before second half, but it took a couple games before Andrew stopped throwing up during halftime. Andrew had juggled cracker dust and alcohol to prolong his so-called sobriety in Columbia, but those were unacceptable substitutions here. He couldn't afford a misstep with so many eyes on him.

The struggle was worth it, because the Foxes were doing what Wymack asked them to do. They won six of their remaining seven games, and the one they lost, they lost by acceptable margins. They ended the season with a nine-five record. It was the first time they'd won more games than they'd lost, and that was reason enough to celebrate.

Their victory was dampened a bit when fall semester grades were posted, because Damien had failed all of his classes. There was nothing Wymack could do but cut him from the team. Damien moved out of Fox Tower that same night and went home the next day. Renee grieved his lost chances and knew Wymack felt responsible in some inexplicable way, but Damien had made his choice.

The news they received two days later did worlds to brighten their moods: the Foxes had qualified for spring championships. Championships were decided partly by wins and partly by points, and the Foxes had collected enough points by one to grab the fourth spot for spring games. When Wymack first told them, no one believed him. He showed them the official invite, and the locker room exploded in surprised, excited chaos. Dan screamed and jumped on Matt, Nicky grabbed Aaron for a triumphant hug, and the upperclassmen finally looked happy about something.

"And our ranking?" Dan demanded when the hubbub died down a bit. "Our status?"

"We've bought ourselves some time in Class I," Wymack said with the biggest grin Renee had ever seen on him. "Foxes—have a good goddamned weekend."

PART 5

Virginia hosted the Christmas banquet that year, so the Foxes stuffed their nice clothes in the storage compartment under the bus and boarded for a rowdy ride north. The cousins predictably sat all the way in the back and talked to no one, but the upperclassmen chattered amongst themselves with rare boisterous cheer. Finals were over, they'd qualified for spring championships, and they were one weekend away from winter break. Even Reggie and Juan, who had nowhere to go for Christmas break except to Abby's house, were in good moods.

Their spirits petered off as they reached the stadium parking lot, and the mood that permeated the bus now was a sharp mix of smug defiance and discomfort. The Foxes were expected to show up at these banquets, as they were NCAA-hosted and planned, but they knew they weren't welcome. There was only so much their peers could do to them when every coach and team staff would also be in attendance, but snide asides and dismissive looks would always cut. Such things were harder to deal with here than on the court—at least in a game they could body-check the rudest of their opponents.

Tonight was different, though, for the first time since the Foxes' very first fall banquet. The small team was finally making a comeback, and their winning streak through the last half of the season was enough to earn them some reconsideration. Some teams hung back, unwilling to play nice when they'd lost to the Foxes this year, but others finally made overtures of friendship. Dan and Renee spent most of the night with the four girls from the Wilkes-Meyer Hornets, Matt got bounced from one group to the next so people could get another look at him, and the Jackdaws were bold enough to seek out the cousins.

All in all, the banquet wasn't nearly the disaster the Foxes expected it to be, and for the first time in team history they didn't duck out early. They were exhausted and yawning by the time Wymack rounded them up and ushered them toward the bus afterward. Renee hesitated as she stepped off the court, then rubbed sleep out of her eyes and looked again. She was tired, but not tired enough to be seeing things. Wymack wasn't wearing what he'd shown up in. The jacket was the same, but the simple white undershirt was replaced by something blue. It was odd, but

not worth asking about when Renee realized Abby was missing. The oldest bet the Foxes had was whether or not Wymack and Abby would ever hook up.

This wasn't that, Renee decided after another look at Wymack's face. His expression was calm, but there was a quiet tension in his body language. He was trying to hurry them out of here without looking like he was rushing them. She wouldn't slow him down by asking about it, so instead helped him shoo her sleep-drunk teammates through the locker room and out to the parking lot. Wymack didn't open the bus door until everyone had loaded their travel bags into the compartment, and then he got on first and stood near the driver's seat.

"Keep it moving," he said, and Renee didn't understand the warning until her shoe hit the second step. The bus smelled like blood. Dan rocked to a stop at the top of the stairs, but Wymack caught her shoulder and gave her a small push. "On the bus, all of you. Go, go, go."

Abby was standing to one side at the top of the stairwell, forcing the Foxes to squeeze past her to get down the aisle and acting as a physical barricade between them and the first seat. Dan shot a wild look between Abby and Wymack before darting for the second bench. Renee understood her reaction better when she reached the top of the stairwell and realized there was a body curled up on the first seat. Abby had changed out already into jeans and a sweater, and the dress she'd worn for the event tonight was draped over their battered visitor from his head to his waist. Renee slid in alongside Dan but couldn't get a glimpse of the man's face even from here.

"Keep it moving," Wymack said again, because every Fox who stepped onto the bus wanted to stop and gawk. "We have to get out of here right now."

That bit of urgency finally got through to them, and the Foxes hurried to their places immediately. The team usually split up one to a seat for bus rides, but now they packed in two to a row to get as close to the action as possible. The only ones who didn't break routine were the cousins. Andrew motioned to Nicky when Nicky might have hesitated, and Nicky and Aaron set off for the back of the bus ahead of him like nothing strange was going on. Wymack closed the bus door as soon as everyone was on board and stood in the aisle. He didn't have to wait long; all eyes were on him already and the Foxes were dead silent as they waited for an explanation.

Wymack unbuttoned and shrugged out of his jacket. Under it was a blue t-shirt, likely what he'd packed to wear on the ride home, but there was blood smeared across it in dark swathes. Dan was on her feet in a heartbeat, the start of a strangled, panicked cry on her lips, but Wymack shook his head. Quieting her before she had an outburst, perhaps, or reassuring her it wasn't his blood. Dan choked on what she could have said and dug her fingers into Renee's arm hard enough to bruise. Wymack passed Abby his jacket, and she immediately draped it over their guest's legs.

"Listen up," Wymack said, "because what I'm about to say is non-negotiable, and I am not going to repeat myself. We," he gestured to include the entire team, "are not going to repeat it, under any circumstance, to anyone. Friends, family, friends with benefits, I don't care. One word of this gets out before we're ready for people to hear it and a lot of people are going to get hurt. Tell me you understand me."

They nodded, but Wymack said nothing else until he got a "Yes, Coach" from everyone. When even Andrew chipped in a too-cheery affirmation, Wymack looked to Abby. His gaze couldn't stay on her for long before he looked past her at the crumpled figure.

"There's been an accident. Right now we are the only ones in a position to help him, so we are going to have a visitor for a while."

Wymack went quiet, visibly working out the right words to say. His expression twisted—just for a moment, but enough to catch Renee's breath in her throat. That wasn't frustration; it was grief. This was personal, whatever it was, but Renee didn't think Wymack knew anyone outside of his team.

"Coach?" Renee asked.

"It's Kevin Day," Wymack said at last, and if those words weren't enough to knock the Foxes off their feet, the next ones surely were: "His left hand is broken."

It took a second for the full impact to hit. The first shock was the name, was the mere thought that Kevin Day—Kevin Day!—was on their bus with them. Kevin was a sophomore at Edgar Allan University and vice-captain of the first-ranked team in the NCAA. He played for four different teams, including the national Court. He'd been born to play, literally—his mother Kayleigh and the Ravens' coach Tetsuji Moriyama had invented the sport years ago.

And then the rest of it kicked in: Kevin was a left-handed athlete.

"Oh my God," Dan said, horrified. "Oh my God."

"You're fucking me," Seth said, bewildered.

Juan was out of his chair in a heartbeat and down the length of the bus to stare at Kevin's covered body. Abby leaned to one side so he could see better but refused to move out of his way. Juan didn't seem to notice, and a second later Seth and Dwayne were right behind him. The three upperclassmen were a rude and raucous bunch, but they were still strikers. Kevin wasn't exactly a role model, but he was an impossible dream to aspire to.

"Er, why is he alone?" Dwayne asked.

Juan elbowed him, but Renee thought it a legitimate question. She wasn't as versed in Kevin's statistics as the strikers might be, but anyone who knew Kevin's name knew he shouldn't be here by himself. Kevin was one half of an unbreakable, unbeatable pair. The other half was the slightly more popular Riko Moriyama, Tetsuji's nephew and the Ravens' captain. Riko and Kevin had grown up together, and they were always in the same room. They played on the same four teams, slept in the same room, went to all the same classes at all the same times, and took every interview and photo shoot as a pair.

"It's not really broken," Seth said.

Wymack traced a line across the back of his left hand. "Abby put the bones back in." Seth gave a fierce jerk of his hand, rejecting that, but Wymack only shook his head and said, "I don't know yet what happened, but I do know he wants to be left alone. You know what will happen if people find out he's down south with us. We aren't ready to face that kind of response; I don't know if we ever will be. So we're going to hide him until he doesn't need to hide anymore."

"Yeah," Juan said after a moment. "Yeah, no problem, Coach."

"Thank you," Wymack said, and the seniors slowly went back to their seats. Wymack waited until they were settled before getting into the driver's seat, and the ride south was dead silent.

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Christmas break came and went, and the Foxes who'd gone home moved back to Fox Tower. They'd kept their eyes on the news during their two weeks off, but there hadn't been a peep from Edgar Allan about Kevin's injuries. It made all of them uneasy, because someone should have said something about how he'd gone missing. But Tetsuji said nothing, the Ravens said nothing, and Riko was conspicuously absent from the news.

When spring semester started, the Foxes started whispering foul play. Gossip was a glue that temporarily tied the upperclassmen together, but it wasn't strong enough to close the gap between them and the cousins. Nicky perked up every time the Foxes started trading terrible theories but wouldn't join in. Aaron and Nicky were definitely talking about it, though—Renee couldn't understand German, but she picked out more than one "Kevin" in their heated chattering. The only one cheerfully oblivious was Andrew. Renee tried bringing Kevin up with him only once, when she and Andrew had a moment alone near the water fountain at afternoon practice, but Andrew changed topics seamlessly.

All Wymack and Abby would say about the matter was that Kevin was now living with Wymack and that he still required their silence. It took a couple days before Renee realized that was all they could say. Wymack believed in keeping people's secrets, but Abby got flustered when asked too many questions and was bound to slip up. Since even Allison couldn't get a good answer out of her, Renee deduced Kevin still hadn't told them anything else about what had happened to him.

The first championship game was scheduled for the second week of the semester, so the Foxes had a little time to try and get their groove back. The first week ended with a gloomy, gray day that promised overnight storms. It was the perfect weather for goulash, so as soon as the team made it back to Fox Tower Renee set to work in the kitchen. Allison volunteered to do dishes afterward since Renee had cooked, so Dan disappeared next door to see Matt as soon as she was done eating. Renee turned the kitchen over to Allison's capable hands and went to start her homework in the bedroom.

She was half-burrowed under her covers and only a couple pages into what promised to be very boring reading when Allison interrupted her.

"Your pet monster's here," Allison said, and Renee looked up in surprise. Allison jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "Get him out of my room."

Renee set her book aside and eased off her bed. Allison turned in the doorway to let Renee by and stayed put, unwilling to return to her duties so long as she felt threatened. Renee found Andrew waiting in the living room. Renee hadn't heard it start raining, but Andrew's coat

was dripping onto their carpet. He hadn't bothered to put a hat on, so his hair was matted to his skull. Water trailed down his face and dripped off his chin. She wondered how long he'd been out in the downpour.

More curious was what had brought him here, though. Since their first fight last June Andrew and Renee met up biweekly to spar. Sometimes Andrew was quasi-sober, the rest of the time he was manic-high. Andrew caught up with her outside her classes or after practice so they could decide on a time to meet. He'd never come to her room before, and Renee couldn't see him fighting in such a wrecked state. He was so cold she thought she saw him shivering.

Renee took one look at his face—and the distinct lack of a smile—and decided against a cheerful greeting. Instead she nodded silent hello and went past him to the kitchenette. She filled two mugs with water, dropped a teabag in each, and popped both cups in the microwave for a couple minutes. Andrew stepped into the doorway to watch, but the gaze that roved her kitchen was distant. The microwave gave a discordant beep when it was done, and she held a mug out in offering.

"Coat," Andrew said as he took it.

Renee put her own drink aside and eased past him. Allison was still in the bedroom, and she scowled at Renee.

"He's still here," she said pointedly.

"This is my room too," Renee said, gently so Allison wouldn't take it as an argument. "If you can have Seth over, I can have Andrew over."

"Except I'm dating Seth," Allison said, and even in her annoyance she was honest enough to add, "Occasionally. You didn't change your mind, did you?"

"No."

A few months ago it'd been amusing thinking the Foxes were betting on whether or not she and Andrew were going to start dating. These days it was more tiresome than anything else. She knew why it was impossible, but that secret wasn't hers to give away. So she endured the snide remarks from the boys and the significant looks Dan and Matt kept sending each other when they thought she wasn't paying attention. Only Allison believed her when Renee said it wasn't going to happen, because Allison believed Renee was as honest as she was.

"Good, because you'd cost me a fortune if you did," Allison said. She watched as Renee shrugged into her coat and said, "You're not actually leaving with him right now, are you? Did you not look outside?"

"I'll be back in a bit," Renee said, and smiled in the face of Allison's blatant disapproval.

Andrew was waiting for her in the kitchen. He passed her drink to her so she wouldn't have to get by him again, and Renee led him out into the hallway. They walked side-by-side to the stairwell and went down to the ground floor. Renee could hear the rain from the landing and pulled her hood up over her head. Andrew had no such protection, but he didn't think twice about stepping outside. Renee hugged her mug close to her chest and followed after him.

They went across the parking lot and onto one of the back roads. Renee was soaked through by the time they stepped off the asphalt and onto a concrete sidewalk. Andrew took two more steps and stopped, and Renee obediently stopped beside him. She took a sip of her tea, which was cooling quickly from the rain and chilly breeze. She watched Andrew over the rim of her mug, studying the way the shadows and rain blurred the features of his face. Andrew considered his tea another minute before upending the mug onto the ground at their feet. It splashed them both, but it was a fleeting warmth against her shins.

"I'm going to let him stay."

It took her a moment to realize he meant Kevin. That the displaced striker could have caused Andrew's dark mood tonight surprised her, and she lowered her mug to see Andrew better. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"Yes," Andrew said.

He told her about the Moriyamas' divided family: Tetsuji Moriyama, one of the creators of Exy and the most influential man in the sport, and Kengo Moriyama, the billionaire head of an international trading company. Tetsuji, the abusive, controlling coach of the Edgar Allan Ravens, and Kengo, the head of a criminal empire he'd moved to New York years ago. He told her about Riko, Kengo's second-born son, an egotist who had no standing in the yakuza hierarchy but who'd inherited a cruel psychosis all the same. He told her about Kevin's place in the sadistic puzzle, then told her how and why Riko broke Kevin's hand. Renee listened to it all in silence, heart pounding in her chest.

"Riko will come for him," Andrew said at length. "Of this, Kevin is certain."

"You believe him."

"If he was only property, he would still be valuable, injury notwithstanding," Andrew said. "He's a face, and a name, and a reputation years in the making. But he's not just a commodity. He's Riko's second, and he knows more secrets than he should about the Moriyamas."

"I'm going to protect him," Andrew continued, speaking slowly like he was still adjusting to the notion. "Him, and mine. They," he said, meaning the rest of the Foxes, "are not my concern. Do you understand?"

Renee couldn't see Fox Tower from here, but she looked over her shoulder anyway. She thought about what it would mean for them to tangle with Edgar Allan's fervent fans and the Moriyamas' murderous influence. She could only imagine the trouble this would bring to their doorstep, but such thoughts didn't sway her. The risks would have to be acceptable because the alternative was unforgivable. Letting Kevin out of their sights would be unconscionable.

"Leave them to me," Renee said. "I understand."

"Oh, I do hope so," Andrew said.

She took the empty mug from him and traded him her full one. It was probably ice cold by now, but Andrew drank it just the same. Renee watched him, wondering if all the shadows on his face were from the night. Somehow she didn't think so.

"You are remembering to sleep around all this rescuing, aren't you?" she asked.

"No rest for the wicked."

"So you're sleeping like a baby," she guessed.

Andrew just looked at her. "I will be downstairs tomorrow morning."

"Seven?" she asked, because it was easier to fight when the rest of the dorm was still asleep.

He returned the second mug to her without a word and set off into the storm. Renee headed back to Fox Tower alone. Her shoes squelched with every step up the stairwell, and she left a trail of water down the carpeted hall to her door.

Dan and Allison were waiting for her on the couch. Allison smacked the heel of her palm to her temple and looked to the ceiling for patience, but Dan was on her feet in an instant.

"You're soaked," she said, hurrying over to take the mugs out of Renee's frozen fingers. "You want to die of pneumonia or something? Go take a hot bath. I don't want to see you again until your blood is boiling."

"Yes, Dan," Renee said obediently, but she sloshed her way to the bedroom first. She knelt by her dresser and pulled open the bottom drawer. She was getting her folded clothes wet, but she didn't care. She found what she was looking for in the back left corner: the only knife Andrew had left her with when he'd confiscated her shoebox last June. She turned the weapon over and over in her hands, checking the blade for wear and tear, and finally tucked the knife under her pillow.

Dan was watching her from the doorway when Renee turned around. Renee went to her and said solemnly, "I will not let anything happen to you."

"What did he do?" Dan asked. "What happened?"

"He is not who you should be worried about," Renee said, "but it is a long story. We'll talk when I get out of the shower, all right?"

Dan hesitated, then stepped out of Renee's way. "Bath," she emphasized. "Boiling blood. Bad news can wait."

"Bad news can take a number and wait in line," Allison groused from out of sight.

"If only," Dan said.

Renee shut herself in the bathroom, set the tub to fill, and studied her reflection. She stripped out of her coat and clothes until she stood naked and shivering in front of the mirror. She traced her cross necklace, but her fingers were too numb to feel the silver. Her nerves were operating on muscle memory now, and all they felt were her knives.

Let me be strong enough to protect them, she prayed. Let me be strong enough not to fall.

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The Foxes lost their first game by a handful of points. They were disgruntled but not worried, because the first round required two out of three to proceed. If they could pull it together for the next two games they'd at least get to the death match. If not, well, it was good enough that they'd gotten this far, right?

Monday afternoon was a rude wake-up call, because Kevin Day was waiting in the locker room for them. The table in the lounge was covered with paperwork: graphs of plays, printouts of game reports from various sites, and copies of the Foxes' individual files. Shock kept the Foxes from immediately reacting to his presence, and that gave Kevin the opening he needed to tear them a new one.

Getting chewed out wasn't unusual, but having a national champion go up one side of them and down the other was a new feeling that none of them liked. The Foxes froze halfway into the room, too startled to even sit down to hear him out. Kevin demanded answers for how they'd played but didn't wait long enough to let them make excuses. Apparently he'd watched their game on Wymack's TV Friday night and spent the entire weekend humiliated on their behalf.

Andrew stuck around for the first part of the lecture, then got bored and started for the changing room. Kevin twisted in his chair and fixed Andrew with a dark look. "Where are you going?" he demanded. "You're not exempt. You're the worst offender here."

"Oh, oh, tell it to someone who cares!" was Andrew's cheery retort, and he disappeared down the hall.

Wymack intervened when Kevin might have gone after him. He was sitting beside the TV on the entertainment center and he'd watched the entire spectacle with a bemused look on his face. Now that Kevin had gotten temporarily distracted by Andrew's apathy, he spoke up.

"Foxes, Kevin Day. Kevin, meet the Foxes." Wymack arched an eyebrow at his dumbfounded team. "In exchange for our hospitality, Kevin's volunteered to be my assistant coach this spring. I expect you to extend to him the same courtesy and obedience you do to me."

Kevin barely let him finish before asking, "How did you make it to championships?"

"We, uh," Dan started uncertainly.

"We're getting better," Dwayne said grumpily.

Kevin didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. The look on his face said more than enough, and Renee could positively feel her teammates' shock giving way to uncomfortable defiance.

Oh, my, she thought. This is going to be a rough week.

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"Rough" was the understatement of the year. The Foxes had faced a lot of criticism and rudeness in their years, but they'd never gone up against such an unforgiving tutor in such close quarters. As far as Kevin was concerned, they couldn't do anything right. It took the Foxes only a day to get over the novelty of having a national champion help them out, and then they were so offended by his high-handed and condescending attitude they attempted a revolt.

Kevin didn't care that they couldn't stand him, and he had no problems yelling down the Foxes' strikers whenever they talked back. His left hand was in a cast, but his right was still free, and he didn't hesitate to shove his new team out of his way. This was the side of Kevin the

newspapers had never seen: the ruthless and relentless man who refused to accept anything but perfect results. This was no place for confident quotes and camera-ready smiles; this was a place where niceties came to die.

"Suck it up," Wymack said, the ninth or tenth time his Foxes demanded he kick Kevin off their court. "If you don't like what he's saying to you, then shut him up by getting better. Prove him wrong."

It wasn't the answer any of them wanted, but it was the only one they got.

Kevin couldn't attend their second game since he was still in hiding, but he watched it at Wymack's apartment. The Foxes hit the court with a savage energy, fueled more by the desire to shut Kevin up than any real interest in winning. They won six-four and spent the weekend wallowing in smug relief. Kevin ruined that on Monday when he had a list of things they'd done wrong.

"But we won," Reggie argued.

Kevin put his face in his good hand. "Just get out of my sight, all of you."

Kevin didn't deserve the last word, but they'd take any excuse to get away from him, so the Foxes left him seething alone in the lounge.

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Andrew was the only reason the Foxes didn't snap and murder Kevin in his sleep, and Andrew's medication was the only reason Andrew didn't take care of it himself. Kevin was brutal to all of the Foxes but downright merciless with Andrew. Andrew listened to Kevin's ranting because he had to, but he did it with that too-wide, mocking smile on his lips that said he wasn't going to give Kevin an inch. Kevin's lectures went in one ear and out the other, and everyone could see it.

"You'd have better luck teaching a stone to breathe," Matt told Kevin.

Renee privately agreed, but Kevin was undeterred. Kevin's existence revolved around Exy, and a man so obsessed couldn't forgive Andrew's attitude. Andrew's potential was squandered, withering away under the crushing weight of his apathy. Kevin wanted Andrew's best like a dying man wanted one more breath of air, but Andrew refused to play along. The more Andrew dug his feet in, the harder Kevin pushed, and the harder Kevin pushed, the more Andrew resisted. Kevin didn't stop sniping, and Andrew didn't stop smiling, but Renee could feel the tension growing between them.

It broke two weeks later, in the week-long gap between the Foxes' third match and the death match they'd miraculously qualified for. The Foxes were halfway through drills when Kevin interrupted them. He stomped right into the thick of things without warning. Dan called a quick halt on the court, and Matt aborted his throw with a short and frantic jerk. Kevin didn't seem to notice the near-miss but strode for Andrew. In one fierce move he wrenched Andrew's racquet out of his hand and threw it. It clattered hard against the ground and slid almost to the wall.

Renee was waiting on the half-court line to try and return any balls back to this half of the court, but at this new violence she started toward her teammates. She was still too far away to hear if Kevin said anything, but Kevin only made it a few steps from goal before Andrew went after him. Andrew used his body like a battering ram to knock Kevin down and stalked for the door before Kevin could get up again. Kevin cradled his cast to his stomach as he stumbled to his feet. He caught up with Andrew with a couple long strides and grabbed Andrew's shoulder to wrench him around.

"Get back in goal," Kevin snapped.

"Fuck off," Andrew said.

Dan shot Renee a quick, startled look as Renee stopped beside her. Renee didn't return it, too busy trying to make out Andrew's expression through his bulky helmet. She knew Andrew was on his drugs—Kevin's presence meant Andrew had to be more careful about when and how often he attempted to be sober. She'd never heard Andrew lose his cool while medicated, but there was violence in Andrew's jerky movements as he stripped his gloves off.

"We're not finished," Kevin said.

"We are finished for today," Andrew said, and pulled his helmet off next. He was smiling, but it was not at all nice. This was the smile of a crazed clown right before he opened fire on a laughing crowd. "If you touch me again I will rethink my decision to let you stay. Go away. Hear me? Go away. Go play with the rest of your toys. I'm not interested."

Kevin opened his mouth to argue, then shut it again soundlessly. He watched in frustrated silence as Andrew left the court. Andrew slammed the door behind him, and Renee could see him and Wymack arguing through the wall. Kevin snatched the ball from Matt and threw it at the court wall. His aim was off, but it smacked close enough to where Andrew's head was that Andrew got the hint. Andrew threw his helmet at the wall in response, and the thud of it echoed on the court. Kevin snarled something unintelligible and turned back on the Foxes.

"Do it again," he said, "and do it right this time."

The team exchanged considering looks and silently got back to work.

..

That evening they found out why Kevin was in such a foul mood. After accepting Andrew's offer of protection over New Year's, Kevin had given Wymack permission to talk to Coach Moriyama. Moriyama had expressed relief and gratitude for Wymack's patronage, and he'd had a story ready about a skiing trip that had ended badly for both Kevin and Riko. Wymack pretended to believe him, and the two ended the call without agreeing on what would happen to Kevin next.

As January progressed, they were forced to talk a few more times, as the Ravens had started championships with neither Kevin nor Riko on their line-up. Halfway through January Moriyama had a press conference to finally share his story with anxious reporters. He stressed

patience and promised updates. If he meant to quiet any rumors, his words did the opposite, and his vague answers about the famous strikers left their fans in a panicked uproar.

The day Kevin and Andrew fought was the day the nation found out about Kevin's hand. Wymack had taken out every loan he could and written Edgar Allan a check. He'd sent the envelope to the bursar's office and included a letter explaining the money as a repayment of Kevin's athletic scholarship. With an opening line like that, the receptionist had to read the rest of it, and the news was too big and shocking to not share. By lunchtime the story was everywhere: Kevin was sidelined with a broken hand. He wasn't fit to play, which freed him from his contractual obligations with the Ravens, and by repaying his scholarship he was making it clear he didn't expect them to keep him.

Moriyama retaliated with a press conference and confirmed that Kevin had lost his dominant hand and would never play again. He went on to say that Kevin hadn't just left the Ravens—he'd had to leave all four of his teams.

Two months ago, Kevin was a rising star with international fame. Today he had nothing except an unofficial position as Wymack's assistant. Renee watched Moriyama's conference and felt very bad for Kevin, no matter that he was making it hard to like him. The other Foxes weren't so quick to forget and forgive, especially when Kevin's sour mood persisted the following day. Perhaps that snide outrage was for the best; Kevin didn't seem the sort to handle sympathy well.

If Renee thought her teammates were unforgiving, they had nothing on Andrew. Andrew refused to get on the court so long as Kevin was around. He showed up for practice and changed out with the rest, but he wouldn't pick up his racquet and he wouldn't touch a ball. Wymack pulled Andrew aside to talk to him about it. They were too far away for Renee to hear them, but Wymack's pointed gestures and Andrew's energetic flailing said it was a pretty strident argument.

Later she wished she'd been able to eavesdrop, because it wasn't Andrew who stood down. She'd expected Wymack to bully Andrew back onto the court. It wouldn't have been difficult—for all his rowdy mockery and cheery disregard Andrew tended to follow Wymack's lead. This time was different, though, and Wymack let Andrew do laps and weights away from the rest of the team.

Renee didn't get a chance to ask about it until Wymack gave them a break, and then she coaxed Andrew into walking around the inner ring with her. As soon as the court was between them and the Foxes, she sent Andrew a curious look.

"I would think your medication made grudges impossible."

Andrew waved that aside. "Oh, Renee. This isn't a grudge! It's self-preservation." As wired as he was, he didn't need to be prompted to explain, and he flashed her a cheery grin. "He says he's going to save me from myself! The same promises, all these years later. Someone ought to give him a new script."

"He wants you to care about the game," Renee said. That much wasn't a secret.

"He wants me to be him." Andrew huffed like the idea offended him. "Another mindless drone with no other reason to live. You'd think he'd know better, considering how it turned out

for him! I warned him he'd crash, you know. He didn't want to listen to me. Now instead of learning from his mistakes he persists in his delusions. I'm obligated," he said, with exaggerated air quotes, "to live up to my potential."

"He is a bit dramatic," Renee said mildly, "but would it be so bad to listen to him?"

"You have no idea," Andrew said. "There is only so much of me left, Renee! I am not giving the scraps to him to ruin."

"Fair enough," Renee said, and she let it drop.

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In typical Fox bad luck, Palmetto State drew straws to play Penn State in the death match. The Penn State Lions were one of the "Big Three" in NCAA Exy alongside the USC Trojans and Edgar Allan Ravens. The Lions and Trojans were constantly battling each other for second and third place behind the Ravens in championships. When Kevin found out about the match-up, he had nothing polite to say about it, but part of that anger stemmed from bias: Kevin was a huge fan of USC and therefore destined to hate the Lions.

The Foxes didn't lose the death match only because "losing" implied they might have had a chance to win. In reality, the Foxes showed up, got steamrolled from the first minute onward, and went home feeling worse about themselves than they had in a very long time. For once Kevin had nothing to say to them about the game. Maybe he thought the nineteen-zero score said more than enough. Somehow his silence just made them feel worse, and the Foxes retreated to their rooms to lick their wounds in private. Their season was officially over and they'd ended on the worst possible note.

The Foxes had the rest of February off, but their break was anything but restful. Kevin couldn't hide in Wymack's apartment any longer, so he took the initiative and finally outed his location. The Ravens' fans took the news as well as the Foxes suspected they would, and the Foxes bore the brutal and maniacal retaliation as gamely as possible. After a couple campus riots, vandalized cars, and a few police raids, things finally started to calm down.

They were due back on the court in March. Spring practices were optional for the graduating seniors, so none of the three bothered to show up. Seth, who'd signed for five years instead of four, was the only one of his group to make it to the stadium. With no one to share a couch with, he took over one of the two chairs. Allison abandoned her usual spot with Dan and Renee to take the other chair beside him, and Matt filled in the new gap at Dan's side. The cousins took over the seniors' couch, with Nicky sitting between the twins.

And then there was Kevin, sitting on the entertainment center with a racquet in his right hand.

Seth was the first to think the racquet wasn't just decoration, and he stabbed a finger at Kevin. "What is that?"

"We can't scrimmage with just one striker," Wymack said, like it was obvious.

"He's left-handed," Allison said.

"Was," Wymack said. "While you lot were drinking your way through February he was down here practicing with me. Everyone's accounted for, so let's get moving. We've got a lot to get through today."

"Oh, this oughtta be rich," Seth said, getting to his feet.

"Awkward" would have been a better term for it, because it was painfully obvious from the get-go that Kevin was playing with his less-dominant hand. His aim was almost startlingly off, but he was decent at catching and carrying. He was rough enough to tangle with Matt and unafraid of challenging Nicky and Aaron, so at least he helped practice by controlling defense, but a striker who couldn't score added nothing to the game.

Seth thought it did more harm than good to have Kevin on his line, and he said so more than once, but Wymack ignored him and Kevin snarled rude appraisals right back. Dan said nothing about it until she was back in the privacy of the girls' room, and then she agreed with Seth's frustration.

Practices seemed endless as the team adjusted to the loss of their seniors and the unexpected arrival of Kevin on their court, and then the unthinkable happened: on Friday, Kevin scored against Renee using his right hand.

"Fluke," Seth said, except an hour later Kevin did it again.

That night the girls looked at each other over their dinner and whispered, what-if?

And on the tail end of that, why not?

..

On Monday, Andrew was on the court again, and Kevin was back to square one. His aim was improving daily, but he was a far cry from where he used to be and he wasn't ready to take on Andrew. Instead of getting irritated, Kevin got quiet. He stopped sniping at his team and toned down his nasty exchanges with Seth. He was too focused on Andrew now. Extreme concentration put a severe look on his face, and Renee could watch him thinking every swing through. Even when they were on break he drew invisible lines on the court walls, angles and approaches and nitty-gritty details that no one could possibly think about in the heat of a game. Andrew ignored him in favor of walking laps with Renee, and Renee wisely didn't ask why Andrew was suddenly playing again.

It took Kevin seven weeks—three alone with Wymack, one against Renee, and three more against both Andrew and Renee. Seven weeks, and then Kevin did the impossible and scored on Andrew right-handed. None of the Foxes knew how to react when the goal went red. Andrew was probably the most surprised, though the look on his face was closer to amused offense than shock. He considered his goal over his shoulder, head cocked to one side in consideration or disbelief, and tapped his racquet against the ground in an agitated rhythm.

Kevin missed his next four shots, but even Andrew knew he was firing wide on purpose. Kevin was drawing a cross around the goal: hitting too high, then too low, then to either side of

the goal lines. He was narrowing and placing his aim with those shots. On his fifth shot he moved like lightning and slammed the ball home against the goal before Andrew could react.

Then he did it again—and again.

"Dude, you going to let him show you up like that?" Matt asked, and Andrew hit Matt with the next ball he deflected. Matt threw the ball right back, and Andrew popped it over to Kevin. Kevin snagged it, tossed it, and heaved it right at Andrew's face. Andrew caught it with his glove and stared past his hand at Kevin. Kevin stared back, silent and unmoving. Renee felt the old tension sizzle again between them, and she half-expected another outburst.

But all Kevin said was, "Let's play."

Andrew burst into startled laughter. "You are obnoxious."

"I am?" Kevin demanded.

Andrew smiled in the face of that accusation. He turned his hand over and uncurled his fingers to consider the ball in his palm. At length he shrugged and tossed it to Dan. She got her team moving with a quick serve. The next time Kevin took a shot at goal, Andrew deflected it. Andrew stopped the next four shots, and then Kevin scored again. Renee saw a flash of teeth as Andrew smiled. It was more a sneer than anything else, there and gone again, but for a heartbeat it changed Andrew's entire expression. It wasn't until that night that Renee understood what she'd seen.

For one moment, for the first time all year, Andrew had looked—awake. Interested. Breathe, stone, breathe, Renee thought, and crossed her fingers for luck.

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The next day, a Thursday, Wymack took his Foxes aside one by one to talk to them about Kevin. Wymack wanted to sign him, but like with Andrew it wasn't a decision he was willing to make alone. Kevin brought too many problems with him, from his reputation to his fans to the distant threat of the Moriyamas. Added to that was his injury and the knowledge that Kevin was going to their court at half-strength at best.

Wymack laid it out for them and heard out their reservations and concerns in private. Seth had no problems repeating his angry resentment outside of Wymack's office, and his opinion made it back to Dan and Renee via Allison and Matt. Seth had pitied Kevin that first night, but he'd hated Kevin pretty much ever since. It was difficult to be a striker when Kevin was around, even though Kevin poured most of his energy into dealing with Andrew. Despite his boiling resentment, even Seth signed off on it.

Friday morning Wymack gave Kevin a contract. It took Kevin all day to make up his mind, and then he scrawled his name across the line on the last page. For now, he was still an unpaid assistant coach. In June, he'd be a starting striker for the Palmetto State University Foxes. It was a long way to fall, but it was the only way back onto the court and even Kevin knew that.

Nicky caught up with Kevin after practice, and only Andrew and Renee were close enough to overhear him say: "This is cause for celebration! We're gonna take you out to Columbia tonight, yeah? I'm guessing you don't have anything proper to wear. Don't worry, we'll grab something before we pick you up at nine."

Renee glanced at Andrew. "Coach will stop you."

"Coach knows he doesn't have to," Andrew said with a shrug. He slanted a look at Renee and grinned. "If I wasn't already an alcoholic, Kevin's issues would have me drinking to an early grave. Maybe next year Coach will recruit a quiet child that won't bother anyone."

Renee smiled, knowing Andrew didn't mean a word of it. "That would be boring, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, but you're right," Andrew agreed. "I take it all back."

He tapped two fingers to his temple in a cheery salute and went to collect his cousin and Kevin. Renee left them to each other's questionable care and went to find her friends.

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When Renee walked into the locker room on Monday afternoon, the sight waiting for her stopped her in her tracks. Andrew's lot had beat them to the stadium, and Kevin had traded his spot on the entertainment center for a place at Andrew's side. It should have been uncomfortable, having four of them stuffed onto a three-person couch, but Kevin fit between the twins like he'd been born to fill that space. Andrew had an arm propped on Kevin's shoulder and was gesturing at the travel guide Kevin was flipping through. He was rambling about heat and something called Montezuma's Castle when the rest of the Foxes showed up.

Kevin frowned, oblivious to the way the upperclassmen were staring at them, and said, "My camera is in West Virginia. We will have to get a new one before we go."

It was such an abrupt turnaround from the previous month's antagonism even Renee didn't know how to react. She looked over at Dan, but Dan was just as baffled. Matt met Renee's stare over Dan's head and arched an eyebrow at her in a silent but clear What the hell?

"You coming in or what?" Wymack asked.

Dan opened her mouth, likely to demand an explanation, then closed it again without a word. Renee understood her restraint. Somehow Kevin was clawing his way into Andrew's world. How and why and when didn't matter so long as he succeeded.

"What's in Arizona?" Renee asked as she followed Dan and Matt to the couch.

"Some know-nothing striker Kevin wants to recruit," Andrew said. He flashed Renee a wicked grin. "Coach is taking us to see him later this week. Maybe this one will last longer?"

"Us," Matt echoed.

"Kevin and Kevin's new bodyguard," Nicky said dryly. "Get this: the kid's only been playing a year. A year! Can you even imagine how people are going to react? Pissy Seth, prissy Kevin, and some clueless newbie from a water tower town."

Seth stared. "You're shitting me."

"You wish," Aaron said.

"No way!" Seth turned an outraged look on Wymack. "Coach—"

Wymack lifted his hands in a careless shrug. "Kevin's convinced we need him."

"He's off his fucking rocker," Seth said.

"Yeah, and who here isn't?" Matt asked.

"There goes my senior year," Seth muttered.

"Kevin's vouching for him," Dan said. "That's got to be worth something, right? This could be a good thing for us."

Renee privately thought she was going with this only because Wymack wasn't fighting it. Either Wymack trusted Kevin's judgment, or Wymack understood they were out of time. His first-choice recruit had attempted suicide a couple weeks ago and was currently committed to a ward. It was already April—most of the best players had already been snatched up by bigger, richer teams.

Seth scowled and said nothing. Allison sighed and reached for him, and Seth slipped his fingers through hers with only a moment's hesitation. Renee considered their joined hands, then sent a slow look around the room as she studied the new lines between them. Without the rest of the seniors, the gaps were few and shallow. Seth was connected to them via Allison, and Kevin's new place in Andrew's group would keep the cousins on track. They weren't a unified front, but this was the closest they'd ever been. One unknown striker sub couldn't shake things up that badly, especially if Kevin was hellbent on recruiting him.

"Oh, Dan," Renee murmured. "Next year is going to be so much fun."

*And all the suffering that you've witnessed
And the hand prints on the wall
They remind you how it's endless
How endlessly you fall*

*And the answer that you're seeking
For the question that you found
Drives you further to confusion
As you lose your sense of ground*

*So don't forget to breathe
Don't forget to breathe
Your whole life is here
No eleventh hour reprieve
So don't forget to breathe*

DAN AND THE MONSTERS

Q: In son nefes 2, Dan gets invited to dinner with the monsters, what happened during dinner? What did they discuss?

A: They talked about the same things Andrew talked about with Renee & Neil ((and Matt): what brought Dan to the Foxhole Court and what her story is. Andrew needed to assess her threat level. ((He decided she wasn't a risk factor)). Dan took the dust & drinks willingly.

WHO LIKED KNIVES

Q: After Renee and Andrew fight in son nefes, who did Andrew mean when he told Renee "He liked knives, and I like beating people at their own game."

A: Drake, whose appearance was actually chopped in half for this last version, alas

UNSTEADY

Seth and Allison, set ~3 years before TFC

Seth was on his way back to the stairwell from the upstairs bathroom when he spotted familiar blonde curls through a doorway. He detoured immediately, pushing the door open the rest of the way with a clumsy shove. Allison was stretched out in bed fully dressed, heels still on. Eyes closed, a regular Sleeping Beauty. A frat boy was already half in bed with her, one hand on the pillow by her head and the other pushing her shirt up her stomach toward her bra. Another was at the foot of the bed with his phone out and camera on. When he saw who'd walked in on them, he snapped it shut with a tired, "Ah, shit."

His friend didn't realize he was already dead and sent Seth an impatient look. "Hey man, wait your turn."

Seth could barely see straight, but in no universe could he not take a swing. He lurched forward, trusting the bed to stop him before he fell over, and caught hold of the guy's frat jacket to start wailing on him. Three hits were enough he could throw the man off the far side of the bed and more than enough to lose his balance. He sat heavily on the mattress, swearing as he waited for the world to stop spinning, and glared at the three men bobbing and blurring together at the foot of the bed.

"Sorry, man," the guy said, three mouths but one voice. "Didn't know she was yours." She wasn't; she never would be. But Seth refused to say that. Instead he gave Allison a rough shake. He thought she moaned, but it was more likely the man who couldn't figure out how to get off the floor again. Allison was warm to the touch but limp and unresponsive. Seth held his hand up by his face, watching and waiting for his fingers to settle down into five digits. As soon as his vision was sorted, he got up and stormed out of the room.

He almost missed the railing when he grabbed at it. For a second he thought he had; he saw the stairs swim up toward him before he overcorrected and bounced back up. He could only see the outer edge of the party from the second-floor landing, but he yelled "Reggie!" down there anyway. A couple was trying to squeeze past him to find an empty room, but Seth grabbed the guy's elbow and demanded, "Where is Reggie?"

"Don't know a Reggie," he said, pulling out of Seth's grip and shouldering past.

Seth put his hand on the wall and stumbled down the stairs with a graceless speed that left him tasting the shots he'd been throwing back all night. He pushed his way in circles around the lower level, from the hallway to the kitchen and through the back doorway into the living room. He found Damien on the couch with a bottle of gin in one hand and a roach in the other.

"Where is Reggie?"

“Claudia,” Damien said with a jerkoff gesture. “Left uhh...” He trailed off to think, but his grasp on time wasn’t good enough to figure it out. Eventually he gave up with a shrug. “He’ll be back sooner or later.”

“Allison’s fucked up,” Seth said.

“Who isn’t? It’s a party.” Damien held out the roach in offering.

Seth left him there and went back upstairs. Up was much harder than down, as he kept almost tilting backwards. He had to haul himself up the last few steps with both hands on the railing. When he stumbled back into the room where Allison was not-resting, there was a new man waiting for him in the same frat lettering as the guy he’d knocked out. He punched Seth on his way through the doorway and started hollering some dumb shit about frat rules. Seth let it go in one ear and out the other, taking just a moment to register the taste of blood between his teeth.

A second later he launched at the man. Something everyone always forgot about the ragtag Exy team taking up space on campus: they were used to hitting and being hit hard enough to hurt through armor. Seth could take a punch better than anyone in this house and he knew how to swing twice as hard. He beat the man until he was snotty and crying on the floor, then sat down beside Allison again and pulled his phone out of his pocket. His fingers ached so badly he wasn’t sure he could handle the buttons, and his vision was crackling black as nausea threatened to get the best of him.

“Wymack,” a voice said at his ear.

Seth hadn’t realized he’d managed to dial out. “I can’t wake her up,” he said. He kicked at the fallen frat boy until he rolled away and Seth could see the lettering on his jacket. He read it off to Wymack, who answered with just a brisk ETA before hanging up on him.

There was no way any of them would get invited back to a frat house once he called a coach to their doorstep, but Seth would deal with his teammates’ outrage later.

He knew Wymack arrived by the way the music abruptly cut out downstairs and by the nervous rumble of conversations as students gave ground with mumbled excuses. Seth checked his bloodied knuckles as he listened to footsteps on the stairs. He could have called out, but his stomach was all liquid and he didn’t trust it not to spill over.

There weren’t a lot of rooms with open doors up here, so it only took Wymack a few moments to find them. He held out a hand to help haul Seth to his feet, then moved past him to check on Allison. Seth watched him check her breathing and her pulse and wondered why it hadn’t occurred to him to do the same.

“We’re leaving,” Wymack said, more to Allison than to Seth. He hooked one arm behind her shoulders and another behind her knees, and he hoisted her ragdoll body off the bed like she weighed nothing. He carried her out of there and took the stairs down as carefully as he could. Seth hadn’t been invited to come along, but he followed after them anyway. Better to go with them and face Wymack’s judgment than have to fight everyone in here as soon as Wymack was out of sight.

“Door’s unlocked,” Wymack said when they reached his car.

Seth got the back door, and Wymack put Allison down across the backseat. Seth went around to the other side so he could help pull from the other end. He had to wrap her long hair up and tuck it against her throat; she'd kill him if he closed the back door on any of it. With her safe, he was free to take the passenger seat, and Wymack got them moving.

Getting in the car was the worst idea Seth had had all night, and Wymack had to pull over twice so Seth could throw up into the gutter. He didn't realize they'd stopped for good until Wymack got out of the car. Seth stared out the windshield, blinking as hard as he could until the lettering for Reddin Medical Center came into view. Abby was on the curb under the streetlight, pajama pants poking out beneath her coat.

Wymack got the back door open and began the process of getting Allison out. Seth started to reach for his buckle, but Wymack said, "Wait here," and Seth was tired enough to listen.

Wymack kicked the back door shut as soon as he had Allison clear of it, and Abby swiped her keycard to get them access to the building. She had to disarm the code before she could get the door for Wymack, and she rushed him out of sight. Seth considered going after them anyway, then put the chair back as far as it could go and fell asleep.

A careful hand on his shoulder woke him up some time later, and Seth pushed himself up to see Reddin was gone. He looked in the backseat, found it empty, and turned a bleary look on Wymack.

"We're at Fox Tower," Wymack said. "Can you make it inside?"

"Where is she?" Seth asked.

"Abby's staying with her until the morning," Wymack said. "Drink some water and get some rest, but know we're going to talk about this when you're sober enough to retain anything I have to say to you. Don't start," he said when Seth scowled at him. "Can you get inside, or do I need to come in with you?"

"I got it," Seth said, fumbling with his buckle. He half-fell out of the car but managed to catch the door before his knees hit asphalt. He checked his pockets, looking for his wallet, and showed it to Wymack in a moment of triumph. "See?"

"Seth," Wymack said as Seth started to close the door. Seth leaned over to peer across the front seat at him. Wymack's expression was serious, but not angry, and all he said was, "Thank you for calling me tonight."

Seth looked away. "She's going to be all right," he said. He refused to word it like a question. Allison would always be all right in the end. He was the one falling apart every time he looked at her. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He shouldn't have started looking in the first place. She was goddamned royalty and he was just—

"She's going to be all right," Wymack agreed.

Seth closed the car door and staggered to the rear door of Fox Tower. It took five tries to get the sensor to read his card, since he couldn't hold his hand still long enough to trigger it. The elevator ride was so terrible he had to squat in the car for several minutes after it reached his floor. When he thought he could risk it, he headed for his room, where he nearly broke his key

getting in. The others were all gone still, so Seth shuffled over to the couch, managed to kick out of one shoe, and passed out face down.

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Fox Tower was so hostile the next day Seth had to take his hangover out into the fresh air and too-bright sun. It was exactly the wretched mistake he expected it to be. He crouched on the sidewalk and scrunched back into what little shade the building cast at this time of day. He scratched angry lines through his stubble and hated everything about the world. He was starting an alphabetical list of the most annoying things he could think of for lack of anything better to do when a familiar car turned into the parking lot.

There was no reason to get his hopes up, but Seth folded his arms across his knees and watched until the car came to a stop at the curb. Allison got out alone and waved Abby off through the passenger window. It was another minute before the nurse pulled away, as if she wasn't quite sure she wanted to leave yet, but Allison stood still and watched her until she finally put the car back into drive. Seth took advantage of her distraction to study the willowy freshman. Her hair had obviously been washed and redone, but she was wearing what she'd had on last night. It was the first time he'd seen her in the same thing twice, outside of her Exy uniforms.

Only when Abby's car was out of sight did she turn toward Fox Tower. Seth expected her to head inside without a second look his way, the same way she'd rebuffed him all semester. As much as it pissed him off to be dismissed right out of hand, he knew she was too good for him.

But Allison wasn't heading for the door; she was coming over to stand in front of him. He held her gaze for only a moment before turning his attention on the parking lot. It wasn't like he cared that she was okay, after all.

"At least stand up when I'm talking to you," she said, a touch impatiently. "I'm not sitting on the ground in this skirt."

"I'm comfortable," he said.

She gave his thigh an ungentle kick. "I said get up."

"Annoying fucking woman," Seth said, but he stood up to glower at her. "What do you want?"

The curl of her lip said she was rethinking this entire thing, but finally she gave a sharp jerk of her hand and said, "To thank you, you witless tool. Don't make me regret it before I can get it out." It was enough to shut him up. Allison folded her arms across her chest and stared him down. At last her expression eased into something more troubled than annoyed and she said, "Thank you. Abby told me what happened."

If it was anyone else, Seth would have mocked them for needing rescuing. He felt the taunts biting at the back of his throat, but what came out was, "I thought you were dead. And—good riddance, obviously," he added, more to save himself than to rile her up again. "But Coach can't afford another scandal, so—"

“Shut up,” she said, reaching for him.

He did as he was told, too distracted by her touch to remember the rest of his tirade. She had one of his hands in both of hers as she studied his bruised and bloodied knuckles. The fists that had gotten him this far in life looked meaty and ugly in her long fingers. For a moment he wanted to apologize for the brute he was; for a moment he was so ashamed of all of his hard edges he wanted to yank free.

But then she skimmed her thumbs over his knuckles, and she sounded so soft when she said, “Thank you for looking out for me.”

He could have said I shouldn’t have had to, or I won’t do it again, or Don’t drink so much next time. Even in his head they sounded more like lies than truth. What he said instead was, “I want to. Wanted, I mean.”

She studied him with unabashed curiosity for another minute before finally letting go. A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, a little too smug for his likes, and she said, “No, I think you meant ‘want’.” She was undeterred by his fierce scowl, but since she wasn’t laughing him off he forced back every insult he could have thrown at her to reclaim the safe distance between them. The restraint paid off when Allison said, “You’re taking me to dinner tonight.”

“I didn’t hear a question in there.”

“I didn’t hear a refusal,” Allison said. “Pick me up at seven.”

She left without waiting for a response, and Seth could only stare after her. The door to Fox Tower swung closed behind her before his brain caught up with him again, and he gave a short fist pump of triumph.

He’d fuck this up, he knew. If not today, then tomorrow, or the next. She was taking a chance on him now that he was a little interesting, but once she realized he was a waste of space she’d move on to the next bright thing. Everyone left, sooner or later; that was just life. No one could stick around and stand him for long. But since Seth refused to be the first to bail, he’d hold on as tight as he could until she made him let go.

CHARACTERS

NICKY HEMMICK

#8 -- Nicky Hemmick, Backliner

May 23, Gemini

NOW:

Nicholas Esteban Hemmick is the only son of Luther (a Baptist minister) & Maria Hemmick (a make-up consultant at Macy's). His parents met while Luther was doing volunteer work in Ensenada, Mexico. Nicky was born and raised in Columbia, South Carolina.

Maria taught Nicky some Spanish once he started middle school, but Nicky switched to German his freshman year at Macon High. He was slowly coming to terms with his sexuality, and he needed a safe way to express his confusion and fear. He started keeping his diaries in (broken, misspelled, half-unintelligible) German and passed the pages off as a school project whenever his parents asked.

Nicky spent his senior year of high school on a study abroad program to Stuttgart, Germany, where he met and fell in love with his host brother Erik Klose. Nicky returned to the United States long enough to graduate and tell his parents the truth about Erik and his sexuality. He was on a plane back to Germany the next day.

After Nicky's Aunt Tilda died, Nicky came back to the States to keep an eye on his cousins. Erik gave him the green light when Coach Wymack tried to recruit him for the Foxes, so Nicky signed a contract to Palmetto State University.

Nicky is a sophomore during the trilogy, but his time between high school and college means he is the oldest player on the team at twenty-three years old.

THEN:

In the first (comic) version, Nicky was not on the team and wasn't even related to the twins. He was the only friend the six-man Exy team had outside of the line-up. He served as a potential suitor for Neil and a point of contention: constantly afraid Neil would forget or shun him the more time he spent with the Foxes.

MORE RECENTLY:

Nicky joined the team when the comics transitioned to book format. Erik was invented several drafts ago, but until the current draft Erik always died before the books began. In those versions,

Erik moved to South Carolina with Nicky to help get the cousins through high school (to work on his English and give him an edge when applying to international law firms).

In the book Nicky says he was attacked outside of Eden's Twilight. Andrew intervened when security called him and almost beat the men to death--laying the groundwork for the deal that put him on his current medication. In the original version, Nicky and Erik were both jumped when some drunk homophones saw them making out. Nicky survived the fight, but Erik died in the hospital. Andrew killed the men over Christmas break and brought Nicky the newspaper clipping as proof.

Nicky wore Erik's ring on a chain the rest of his college career. After graduation he moved to Germany to work at a PR firm and got a position on the summer major league team in Munich. Five years after graduation, he met a business-to-business salesman named Jon at a New Year's party and fell in love once more.

SETH GORDON

#6 - Bryan Seth Gordon, Striker

April 21, Taurus

*It's taken a lifetime to lose my way
A lifetime of yesterdays
All the wasted time on my hands turns to sand
And fades in the wind*

*Crossing lines, small crimes
Taking back what is mine*

*I'm fine in the fire
I feed on the friction
I'm right where I should be
Don't try and fix me*

Seth Gordon was one of the first Foxes signed to Palmetto State University. Born and bred in Birmingham, Alabama, he was the fourth of seven sons. His parents were never married, and his father left in the middle of the night when Seth was eight. Seth, who was named after his father, had gone by Bryan until that point. After Bryan Sr.'s abrupt disappearance, his mother (Rebecca, never Becky) started calling Seth by his middle name.

His mother went from working one job to three to make ends meet. She kept her family afloat but was suddenly absent all the time, leaving her children to be raised by her second-oldest son (Jeremy, twelve years old at the time). The older children couldn't cope with their father's disappearance and their mother's new absenteeism, so unsurprisingly the household became a rowdy disorganized mess. Bullying was the major means of keeping the younger children in line, and it oftentimes got out of hand.

Before long Seth was taking out his frustration and stress on his classmates. He spent the rest of elementary school bouncing between detention, the principal's office, and the guidance counselor's office. Halfway through his fifth-grade year Seth's teacher Mrs. Everett introduced Seth to her husband, who coached Exy at the local high school, while Seth was staying late for detention.

The Everetts thought Seth just needed a healthier physical outlet so pushed him to start sports. Seth started Exy at the YMCA during middle school, catching the bus to and from the court alone every day for practices. For a while Seth showed real improvement. The Everetts stayed in touch with Seth up until Seth's ninth grade year—at which point Coach Everett accepted a position in another state without telling any of his players. Seth never heard from either of them again, and his attitude took a turn for the worse.

Seth signed with the Foxes because it was a way out and the smart thing to do, but he moved to South Carolina believing it wouldn't last. Seth was sure Coach Wymack would give up on him sooner or later, so refused to fully commit to the program.

SETH & ALLISON

Seth & Allison were never together for more than a few months at a time. His swing-first attitude, cyclical depression, and commitment issues and Allison's too-honest, haughty nature had them fighting as often as they were fucking. Seth was scared of her—of how he felt for her, of how easily she swept into his life to turn him inside-out, and of how forceful she was about his behavior and life choices—and he hated that she made him feel that way. He hated being on the defensive and hated the what-if of a real relationship.

The two first hooked up after they went to a frat party off-campus (Allison's freshman year, Seth's sophomore). Allison let her competitive nature get in the way of her common sense and had too much to drink around too many drunk strangers. She hit the point between black-out drunk and total unconsciousness, and a couple frat brothers helped her upstairs to a bedroom so she could "sleep it off". Seth passed them on his way downstairs from the toilet, made a decision by the time he reached the first-floor landing, and went back upstairs to save her. He got in two drunken fistfights getting Allison out of that house, but he finally managed to get Allison into the back of a taxi. The driver helped Seth carry her as far as Fox Tower's elevator, and Seth left her in Dan and Renee's custody.

It was the first sign that Seth could be anything besides a loudmouthed aggressive jerk, and Allison latched onto that potential with fiery determination. The girls needed influence over their uncooperative male teammates, and Allison thought she could use Seth as that foothold in. She and Seth spent a couple months bickering, then a couple years falling in and out of each other's beds.

SETH & NEIL

Seth wears Neil's original number--when there were only 6 Foxes on the line-up in the comic, Neil was #6.

In previous drafts, when Neil was a little chattier about his truths and the upperclassmen had more screen time, Neil and Seth had a couple scenes alone together around the dorm or downtown. Neil was just forceful enough, with just enough insight into why Seth acted the way he did, to finally get Seth started on the right track. Neil convinced Seth it was time to let his past go and stop letting it poison everything he did.

FOXES - 2006

"He didn't do this," Allison said brokenly. "He called me. He called me not even an hour ago! He was drunk and rambling but he was happy for the first time in weeks. He was talking about how he finally thought graduating would be okay, about how he wanted me to help him look into grad schools. He wanted to go into social work and help people like he helps us."

She was crying again and fighting to speak through her tears. "I teased him and asked him how much he'd had to drink. He promised he'd stopped after we left him there. He said he talked to Neil, said that maybe he wasn't so bad after all and we'd have a good season for once. He wanted me to be his date for fall banquet. He can't just--he can't just lie there and not wake up. He can't, not when he finally wants to hang on. Why would he have--Abby, tell him he wouldn't have done this!"

The officer looked like he'd rather be anywhere but here right now. "Miss Reynolds, the doctor says he has a history of overdosing."

"No!" Allison shrieked. Neil flinched and hunched deeper into his coat, wishing he would sink through the sidewalk and disappear. He was afraid to look up at her and see that wild grief on her face. "I know he wanted to die! Everyone knows he wanted to die! Every time he said he was done with life I walked away from him and every time he came chasing after me. This is the first time--he wanted to live. He was going to stop drinking and come clean and maybe let me make an honest man out of him. A couple more drinks before he called me and he would have proposed, he said. Don't tell me that he's never waking up! I don't believe you!"

AARON MINYARD

#5 - Aaron Michael Minyard, Backliner

November 4, Scorpio

Aaron is a difficult person to talk about considering his role in the upcoming book. There's not much I can say about who he is now without digging too deep into what's coming, and little reason to discuss where he's from considering how much of his past Nicky gave up in Raven King. That leaves us with what-ifs and the sparsest entry in our countdown.

Originally, Andrew and Aaron were inseparable. For years their obsessive devotion to each other made them a reliable cornerstone for the Foxes story to wrap around. Their brotherly love was partly destroyed by the evolution of Andrew's character--the more of Andrew I took away, the less room there was for Aaron--and mostly doomed by their destructive mother.

In the beginning Aaron was the protector, presenting himself as the target instead of his terminally ill twin brother. Toward the middle he was the betrayer, taking his mother's side and willfully writing Andrew out of his life. With this last draft the entirety of the blame has passed back to Tilda, but Andrew & Aaron are too broken by now to fit neatly back together again.

Cut scene from book 3, cleaned up of any potential spoilers (maybe). Matt's mother Randy came into town to watch a game, and the cousins (and Neil) finally got a chance to meet her. The scene got yanked when I decided to send Andrew's lot to NYC at the end of Raven King--this conversation needed to happen the first time they met Randy, and that edit meant they met her off-screen in December.

It took Aaron most of Thursday afternoon to work up the courage, but he finally approached Randy at the end of practice to thank her for paying his bail. Neil was in charge of the stick rack and ball buckets today, but he deliberately slowed down his work to eavesdrop. Aaron's gratitude was the stilted mess of a man not used to admitting when he was wrong.

Randy looked a bit baffled, then recovered enough to stress, "You gave me back my son. Do you understand? There is nothing I can do to make that up to you."

Aaron was honest enough to say, "That wasn't my decision."

Randy reached for him, but Aaron flinched at the first brush of her fingers against his shoulders. Aaron recovered quickly, but the damage was already done. Randy's smile vanished and the look she gave Aaron was heavy enough to make Neil uncomfortable ten feet away.

Last summer Neil had recoiled from Wymack much the same way, so certain of being hurt for his transgressions and stupidity. For months his stomach had knotted a bit every time Wymack raised his voice at practice. Even as recently as January Neil willfully told himself

Wymack's concern was anger because fear of older men was a powerful enough motivator to get Neil through his second thoughts and nightmares.

Only now did Neil understand that a person could fear an older woman the same way. Neil's mother had hit him and screamed at him, but she'd always been on his side. She'd always been his mother first. He'd known Aaron's mother was abusive, had heard it from Nicky and had it affirmed by Andrew back in November. He'd thrown it in Aaron's face knowing it would hurt, but somehow he'd still always thought it a different matter. Neil couldn't imagine a world where mothers weren't actually mothers.

Neil finally understood, though he didn't know if it was stupidity or prejudice that had blinded him this long. Cass Spear could have been Andrew's mother once. These days Andrew leaned on Betsy Dobson. Aaron, on the other hand, never had anyone to fill that role. Aaron wouldn't let the Foxes in because of Andrew, but he couldn't let Nicky in because he didn't know how. He'd gotten this far in life on his own, surviving on willpower and sheer desperation.

For a moment Neil thought Randy would take offense at Aaron's reaction and walk away. Instead she slowly raised her hands to Aaron's face and cradled his cheeks in her hands.

"Hey," she said, more subdued than she'd sounded all day but somehow still hard with conviction. "I'm so proud of you. Do you hear me? I'm so proud of you. You did what you had to do to defend your family, and tomorrow you're going to do whatever it takes to defend our family. Okay? It's going to be okay."

Aaron stared back at her, silent and frozen. Randy nodded at whatever she saw on his face and made a slow attempt at hugging him. Aaron didn't fight her off, and Randy held on until Aaron finally relaxed.

MATT BOYD

#4 - Matt Boyd, Backliner

August 5, Leo

The first time the girls saw Matt shirtless, it was distraction enough to forget their conversation. All of the men on the team were built, thanks to the strenuous workouts they had every day, but Matt had the body of someone who was devoted to his fitness routine. He was endless hard edges and muscle, an eight-pack and perfect pecs, with not a single ounce of fat visible on his frame.

If he realized he'd stopped the girls' hearts with his entrance, he didn't show it. He flashed them an easy smile in greeting and didn't slow on his way by.

Allison barely let him get out of the room before she said—too loudly—"Oh my God."

Dan might have answered, except she didn't trust what she wanted to say.

Matthew Donovan Boyd was supposed to be the answer to an unavoidable, looming problem: namely, Randy & Donald's failing marriage. Randy resisted the idea at first, fearing the impact childbirth would have on her body and therefore her boxing career, but decided to make the leap after talking to female colleagues and rivals about her concerns. What neither Randy nor Donald really considered was how Matt was supposed to save them if they didn't actually raise him themselves. Matt spent his early years in the care of a nanny so his parents could work.

Randy and Donald gave up trying to get along when Matt was in the fourth grade. Too much had changed in them and between them since they married; they were no longer compatible even as friends and had fallen way out of love. Not even their social circles overlapped anymore; Randy's down-to-earth friends hated Donald's privileged companions. When Randy moved out she left Matt behind: not because she didn't want him, but because it was the smart thing to do. Donald was a bit of a snob, but he could provide a good education and a stable home. Randy traveled too much to have a child underfoot.

Things might have turned out alright if Donald's friends didn't drag Donald into a harder party scene in Randy's absence. Donald let Matt's nanny go and started bringing drinks and drugs into the house. He encouraged Matt to try anything he wanted, and Matt seized on the offer as a means of bonding with his father. They cycled between addictions and sobriety for years, slowly teetering toward harder drugs. Matt went from pot and shrooms to cocaine and heroin in a couple years.

Matt started skipping school with his father's permission and lost his virginity to the prostitutes Donald hired for parties. When his father wasn't looking and Matt had enough drugs in his system, he let Donald's friends fuck him, too. (To this day Matt doesn't consider it to be rape,

despite the fact he was too wasted to give real consent--the men did ask him, and they weren't violent or demanding. Matt doesn't regret it. He accepts what he did as a side effect of the times, and he knows he is straight. He has only ever told Dan about it, though.)

Matt's nanny found out about the drugs when she bumped into Matt by chance, and she reached out to Randy for help. Randy immediately took time off from the circuit and pulled Matt out of New York City for rehab. In the aftermath she and Matt finally got to know one another. They hit it off better than either one of them expected and quickly grew close. Randy found healthier things for Matt to do with his time, getting him back into the sports he'd given up when his drugs got in the way and teaching him everything she knew about cars. Matt learned how to box and picked up fitness as his anti-drug.

Signing with the Palmetto State Foxes was supposed to be Matt's reward of sorts, the pot of gold at the end of a long and arduous recovery. Matt didn't care about the team's reputation; he cared that his life was back on track. He was clean, he was going to get a good education, and he was going to play with a Class I team. Matt wasn't prepared for his teammates' problems or the toll it would take on him to be with them.

He was less prepared to fall in love with Dan.

Matt raked a hand through his hair, trying to look casual and almost succeeding. "I was just wondering if you'd like to get dinner sometime."

Dan folded her arms across her chest, not wanting him to see her heart pounding through her shirt, and tipped her chin up in defiance. "You're wasting your time. I don't put out."

He looked startled, then relieved, and Dan felt her defenses weakening at a rapid-fire pace. "No, that's--that's good," he said, and damn him if he didn't sound like he meant it. He started to reach for his hair again but must have realized he was fidgeting. Instead he stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I'm not ready for that kind of relationship yet. I just want to spend time with you. I want to get to know you better. I think you're amazing."

"Why should I believe that?" Dan asked. "Why should I believe you're different from any other guy?"

"Don't take my word for it," Matt said. "Find out for yourself one day at a time."

MATT AND HIS FATHER

Q: How is Matt on good terms with his father after what he did to him with the alcohol and drugs?

A: Matt made a very important decision on his first process to recovery: he could hold his father's flaws against him, resent him for everything that he enabled, and cut his father out of his

life—or he could choose to accept what had been done both to him and by him and attempt to move past it.

For better or worse, Matt chose the second route. He chose not to hate his father. He understands his father is intensely flawed, and he understands his father's failures and he still feels that betrayal from time to time if he lets his thoughts spiral a little too far into the dusty corners of his mind, but he decided that—for him, at least—it was important to still keep his father in his life.

Their trust is a little ragged around the edges, and Matt will avoid all major social events at his father's house from here on out, but Matt wants to keep his father in his life even if it's just at arm's length. If his father fucks up again, Matt will have to rethink this strategy, but for now this works for him.

It has nothing to do with his father's feelings, and everything to do with Matt's—sometimes, acceptance is the best you can manage for yourself if you want to heal ((or at least heal over)). It's not forgiveness, technically, but it's almost enough to live with.

DAN WILDS

#1 - Danielle Leigh Wilds

April 29, Taurus

DAN'S HAIRCUT

Q: when does dan cut her hair?

A: Her freshman year, partly in response to all the nagging from the men. Allison didn't give a rat's ass what the men wanted to say about her and her pristine appearance, but Dan chopped off her hair and rolled up her sleeves and went to work trying to beat the boys into submission.

The day passed as a blur of bells and droning voices. Dan spent half the day trying to not fall asleep and the other half doodling Exy strategies in the margins of her textbooks. Her teachers said little to stop her. They'd never figured out if she had a learning disability or if her upbringing just put her at a disadvantage compared to her classmates, but the ongoing debate meant they were more lenient toward her flagging grades than any teacher should be. As they saw it, things were hard enough for her without them making life any harder. They were just relieved she was still in school—she was the only kid from the mobile home park still attending public school. The others had dropped out in favor of homeschooling. She knew she should try harder, but she'd run out of energy for school years ago. All that mattered anymore was Exy.

"What dedication," Coach Francis often said. "What passion."

What a lie, Dan thought, but she could never say that aloud.

Dan could get herself out of Hunters Pointe. If she was patient enough, she knew she could scrounge together enough money to move far away from here. As soon as Joanna was old enough, Cathy would go back to work, and Dan wouldn't have to worry about supporting them. She could move to the big city and finally have a life of her own. She wanted it so badly she could taste it.

Exy was the answer. Exy was her only ticket to freedom and a higher education since Dan's grades were too far gone to get her any regular financial aid. She didn't have a lot of free time these days, but what little she had she poured into honing her skill. Now, after four years on a high school team, with her team in championships a third year straight thanks to her hard work, Dan was praying that it would all pay off.

She threw herself into afternoon practice with everything she had and forced her team to keep up with her. The Hunters Pointe Bears were up against their greatest rivals this Friday: the West Jackson Wolves. The two schools were only fifteen miles apart, and the rivalry between their sports teams stretched back a good hundred years. West Jackson was the first one to put together an Exy team, and Hunters Pointe formed one in response. As they were both small

towns with fairly new teams, they were pretty evenly matched in skills, but residents in both towns attended their matches with a nigh-religious fervor.

Dan didn't care much for traditional hatred. Her grudge was personal, and the focus of it was West Jackson's newest goalkeeper. Playing against her was pretty much an exercise in futility. Dan's team had lost every game against the Wolves since she'd started two years ago. Losing this Thursday's match meant getting booted from championships, and Dan would lose her last chance at catching a recruiter's eye. Fear kept her at practice later than she meant to stay, and she had to run home after.

Cathy was sitting at the kitchen table when Dan arrived, looking pale and worn. She glanced up at the sound of the door but quickly dropped her eyes again. "How was school?"

That was suspicious, because Cathy never asked such things, but Dan didn't have time to play games with her tonight. "Fine."

She locked the door behind her and hurried for her quarter of the trailer home. A curtain served as her door, so she tugged the edge aside and chucked her backpack at the blankets that made up her bed. She took as quick of a shower as she could and hurried back to her "room" to change. She dug through her crate for tonight's outfit, stuffed the skimpy pieces in her coat pockets, and put on the same clothes she'd worn to school. Checking the lock on her lockbox was habit even though she knew it was empty, and she brushed her long hair into a high ponytail.

"Danny," Cathy called. "We need to talk."

"Later," Dan said. "I gotta go to work."

"This can't wait."

"But it has to," Dan said. She tossed the brush aside, buttoned her coat to her throat, and patted her pockets. She never brought her wallet with her—she wasn't stupid enough to bring her real ID anywhere near Snowy Starlets. Her boss knew as well as she did that she wasn't eighteen, but so long as she had a realistic piece of plastic saying otherwise he wasn't going to stop her. She was a good worker and fairly profitable. That was all that he cared about.

"Danny, don't pull this attitude with me right now," Cathy said. "I'm too tired to deal with it."

Dan yanked open the curtain and sent her aunt a livid look. "You're tired?"

Cathy opened her mouth to argue, but they both knew she couldn't win this fight. She looked back down at the tabletop without another word, and Dan was out the door a few seconds later. She slowed just long enough to lock the door behind her, then took the stairs two at a time. She didn't make it far before the door rattled open again, and Cathy's words froze her heart in her chest.

"Danny, I'm pregnant."

Dan rocked to a stop so fast her left knee popped, but she didn't look back. She couldn't.

The two stood in silence for an endless minute, and then Cathy said, "Say something."

Dan said the first thing that came to mind: "Get rid of it."

Cathy said nothing. Dan didn't wait for her to come up with a response. She wasn't sure her legs would hold her up, but she started walking away anyway. By the time she reached the edge of the subdivision, she was running. If she couldn't breathe, she couldn't scream, and if she couldn't scream, she wouldn't cry. Her lockbox flapped back and forth at the end of its short handle, banging against her knuckles as she ran, and she thought about the money she'd hidden inside her suitcase last night. She thought about diapers and bottles and hospital bills and her dream of getting out of Hunters Pointe.

Maybe trash was always trash, and she'd been fooling herself all along.

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The bus dropped her off ten blocks from the club. The sidewalks were busy, but not as busy as they'd be in another couple hours. Dan hid her lockbox under one arm and kept her head down as she made her way to Snowy Starlets. There was a back entrance, a door without an outside handle on it. She knocked and waited for one of the bouncers to answer. He let her through unchallenged, and Dan went down the hall to the dressing room.

Starlets employed nineteen strippers, though they rarely had more than eight on schedule a night. The front doors opened at eight-thirty, which meant all of tonight's girls were still chilling in the back rooms. The bouncers hadn't noticed anything amiss, but Dan's stage sisters took one look at her face as she swept into the room and knew something wasn't right with their youngest dancer.

"Hey, Hen." Scarlett turned on her stool when she saw Dan in the mirror. "What's with the long look?"

Dan shook her head, but Destiny wasn't deterred. She slid an arm around Dan's shoulder and tugged the teenager up against her side. "You look like someone ran over your pet cat," she said. "Not a good look for our pretty little sister."

"It's nothing," Dan said, and even she heard the lie in her raw voice.

Destiny quirked a brow at her, challenging that, but Dan lifted her chin in defiance. Destiny sighed and kissed her temple. "Come on. Get changed out and let me do something with your hair."

Dan set her lockbox down on the vanity counter and shrugged out of her coat. Her sweater and jeans were easier to get off, and she buried them in one of the empty lockers. She traded plain underwear for something flashier and skimpier and let Destiny sit her down in front of the mirrors. Dan knew how to style her own hair by now, but there was something comforting in letting her sisters take care of her. Destiny understood that, and she started on Dan's makeup as soon as she'd finished with a curling French braid.

"Do a routine with me," Dan said when Destiny paused to inspect her handiwork.

Destiny couldn't hide her surprise. Girl-on-girl stage acts weren't rare, but Dan rarely participated in them. She was more comfortable doing her own thing. When she was up against one of the other girls in such proximity, she felt her inexperience keenly. They were beautiful and

graceful, with an intoxicating confidence from years of working men's wallets from the stage, and she was dolled-up trailer trash too young to even make it through the front door. Tips for such shows were always triple what a girl could make on her own, though, so Dan was ready to feel the fool.

"You sure?" Destiny asked.

Dan managed a weak smile. "Yeah. Got bills to pay."

"Thanks for reminding me," Ginger moaned. She inspected her rear in the mirror and adjusted the strings of her thong.

"Rent's up in two days and I'm six lap dances short."

"Told you to wear the blue outfit." Chastity flicked a pistachio shell at her. Ginger scowled at her reflection, debating, then stalked off to dig through her wardrobe. Chastity smirked victory and slid off her chair with boneless grace. "You don't want Hennessy, I'll take her," she told Destiny. "I wouldn't mind the extra money."

"No way, Hen's mine." Destiny wrapped her arms around Dan in mock-possessiveness. "I'mma make her feel real good."

"If you could just make her relax that'd be a start," Scarlett said. "Either loan her your buzzer or take her into the back room for a minute."

"One minute!" Desiree said, feigning scandal. "My, you're stingy."

"Maybe I'm just that good," Scarlett said, examining her blood red polish.

Ginger gave an unladylike snort as she slipped into her blue skirt. Her bra was little more than translucent blue gauze a half-size too small for her ample chest. Ginger hated this getup and complained about it nonstop as the most uncomfortable set she had, but Ginger was right—it definitely earned her the most money. They were used to making compromises when it meant making bank.

There was a knock at the door a couple minutes later, and Maurice shepherded the girls into the main room. They lounged indolently against the walls to wait for the front doors to open. Dan stayed close by Destiny's side as their first customers trickled in. The stage was in the center of the room with short chairs all around it. Taller stools lined the wall for those who didn't get in early enough to get a ringside seat, and the bar was far back enough from the lights to give the illusion of intimacy.

Angelo was at the microphone, welcoming the night's crowd and laying down ground rules. The girls smiled from their places along the back wall and let their patrons find seats before working their way through the crowd. The music started, a slow beat that was typical of Ginger's routines, and the redhead was the first called up on stage.

Wash rinse repeat, Dan thought morosely.

The first half hour was a jumble of lights and sound: girls taking turns on stage while the rest of them worked the crowd and generated interest. Dan kept an ear out for her name as she teased and flirted with the men around the room. Scarlett was finishing up her routine when Dan heard the summons over the speakers: "Hennessy to the stairs."

She smiled apologies at the men she'd been talking with and started down the length of the stage to the steps. She was almost there when Angelo said, "Ohhh, lookie here, we've got a bachelorette party in the house! Ladies, ladies, welcome, welcome. Please make yourselves at home."

Dan's smile was a little more real as she set her lockbox down beside Scarlett's. Girls were infrequent visitors to Snowy's, but the Starlets never minded their presence. Women tended to tip just as well if not better than the men did, and they watched the shows without the gnawing, hungry interest that made Dan's skin crawl.

Scarlett collected her dollars and clothes on her way off the stage. Dan waited until she'd cleared the stairs before starting up them.

"Applause is nice, but dollars are better," Angelo announced, buying Dan time to clean the poles. The cloth she'd brought on stage with her had alcohol on it, both to sterilize the pole and to dry it. She wasn't interested in slipping off wet metal halfway through a routine. "Let's show our love for Snowy's fiercest Starlet, Hennessy! Come on, I don't see nearly enough ones out there. Yeah, that's a little better—for now!"

Dan dropped her cloth by her lockbox and was ready when the beat to her first song started. She started at one end of the stage and worked her way to the other, moving with the music. Most nights she zoned out, content to think about Exy strategies. Tonight she focused on the crowd to keep her thoughts from going back to Cathy's problems. She'd hoped the bachelorette party would be seated up against the stage, but there wasn't enough room for them there yet. They hung back in the shadows still, drinking and enjoying the show from a distance.

She brushed aside her annoyance before it could trip her up and concentrated on finishing her routine. She was almost done with her solo act when the crowd finally shifted. Angelo was advertising a lap dance special, which helped thin the crowd a bit. It made room for the bachelorette and her friends to finally take ringside seats, and Dan gave them a smiling once-over now that she could finally see them. She only made it halfway down the line before she saw a too-familiar face.

Her world ground to a sickening halt, and only instincts saved her. She kept moving like nothing was wrong and bit the inside of her lip hard to keep her smile. She turned her gaze and didn't dare look back. There was no point in taking another look; there was no mistaking who she'd seen. She'd only met one other person with hair like that, bright white most of the way with rainbow streaks taking up the bottom inches. West Jackson's precious goalkeeper was sitting at her stage.

Impossible, Dan thought wildly. She's not old enough to be here.

But then, Dan wasn't old enough either, was she?

"Don't look now, but Destiny's come a-knocking," Angelo said.

A rush of heat in her face made her lightheaded. She didn't know if she was relieved or horrified to be joined on stage when a rival was barely out of arm's reach. This was worse than spotting a teacher in the crowd. An adult might at least understand if Dan laid out all the reasons

for being here. Another teenager from a rival school, though—? Dan would hear about this for the rest of her short high school career.

Destiny pinned Dan against one of the poles and laced their fingers together. She dragged their joined hands up Dan's bare body, careful to keep Dan's hands on the inside, and tipped her hand in as if kissing a line up Dan's throat. No one in the crowd could tell those kisses weren't landing, and only Dan could hear Destiny's quiet, "What's wrong, babe?"

Dan turned her head into Destiny's and breathed the name into the scant space between their mouths: "Rainbow Bright. I know her."

"I'm cuter than she is," Destiny said. "Just look at me, Hen. Just look at me. I'm the only one who matters to you right now."

It wasn't much, but it was all she had, so Dan forced herself to blank out everything and everyone outside of Destiny. She let Destiny lead her through the dance with rolling hips and whisper-light touches and exaggerated intimacy. She focused on the feel of Destiny's breath against her skin and arched into the touch like it meant anything to her. The crowd bought the show hook, line, and sinker, and the stage was littered with green by the time the last note petered off.

Destiny helped her get dressed again afterward. Dan collected money from one half of the stage, and Destiny gathered the cash from the bachelorette party. Dan smiled at the men as she took money from their eager hands and met Destiny at the stairs. The interlude beat was already going, giving Destiny time to straighten and clean her stage for a solo act. Instead of tucking her earnings into her lockbox, though, Destiny stuffed folded bills into Dan's bra.

"Keep it, Hen."

"That's not fair," Dan said. "Half of it's yours."

"Come on now," Destiny said with a hint of her usual wicked smile. "You think I can't earn it all back and then some by myself? I've got skills you've never even seen." Dan arched an eyebrow at her, clearly skeptical, and Destiny laughed. "Off my stage, amateur, and let me show you how it's really done."

Dan gave up arguing and went down the stairs. Destiny trotted back to the poles to clean them, and Dan secured her savings in her lockbox. When the lock snapped shut again and she'd given it a testing tug, she sneaked a look at the six women at the stage. The goalkeeper had disappeared.

Too disgusted to stay? Dan wondered.

There was a light touch against her elbow, and Dan shot a startled look over her shoulder. Rainbow Bright was standing at her back. Her expression was calm, not triumphant or mocking, and she kept her gaze on Dan's face. Such serene consideration was a little eerie after the lust Dan had put up with all night from the rest of her customers.

"Tell me if you need me to leave," the girl said.

"Go," Dan said immediately.

The girl nodded and turned away. Dan moved without thinking and caught her wrist. Mindful of the four bouncers around the room, Dan slipped in close to the other girl to speak. If it bothered the goalie to have a nearly-naked rival standing up against her, she didn't show it. Dan smiled when she didn't want to, not wanting Angelo or Maurice to think something was amiss.

"Don't say anything about this to anyone," Dan said. "You hear me?"

"Don't threaten me," the girl said. "This isn't anyone's business—especially not mine. I know that."

Dan searched her eyes, looking for a reason to believe her, and then the girl dug her fingers into Dan's wrist and twisted free. The goalie smiled brightly like they were long-lost friends parting on good terms and went around the stage toward the rest of her party. Dan watched as she spoke at one woman's ear and hugged a couple of them goodbye. She left the club without another look back.

"Wake up, Hennessy," Ginger warned her in an undertone.

Dan dragged her stare away from the front door to see Devon watching her. Dan flashed her manager a grin she wasn't at all feeling and nodded at the unspoken order to get back to work. She clenched her hand tight around the handle of her lockbox and set off in search of the night's next sucker.

..

Dan had Wednesdays and Thursdays off from Snowy Starlets—Thursdays were game nights, and Dan needed all the rest she could get on Wednesdays—but an hour after Wednesday's practice she was still sitting outside the court. She hadn't spoken to Cathy since Monday night and she wasn't looking forward to tonight's inevitable fight. She felt sick just thinking about it.

The jangle of keys said she'd stalled long enough that Coach Francis was finally done with all of his paperwork. She listened to him lock up behind her and didn't look up when he came to stand in front of her.

"Holding up alright?" he asked.

She wondered if he honestly cared or if he felt obligated to ask such things. "Just thinking about tomorrow's game," she lied.

"It's not the end of the world if we lose," he said. "Don't lose sleep over it."

She hated that about him—his willingness to accept a loss before it had even happened. It was his way of consoling his team, she guessed: he believed it was better to expect the worst and be pleasantly surprised than to be crushed by an unexpected loss. Dan thought a coach had no right to be so pessimistic. She didn't want a coach who softened the blow. She wanted a coach who believed in the impossible.

"I can't afford to lose," she told him. "I need to make it to finals if I'm to catch a recruiter's eye."

There was an accusation in her biting words, and judging by his frown Francis had no problems picking up on it. She'd made it clear at the start of the year that she

wanted—needed—an athletic scholarship. As far as she could tell, he'd done nothing to help her. He'd never said a word about sending out her files or inviting recruiters to the games. She'd never seen officials in their stands. After everything she'd done for him she'd expected better, and she almost hated herself for relying so heavily on his favor. She'd sent out packets of her own this spring, but no one looked favorably on a young athlete's self-promotion.

"Danielle," he said at length, "I need you to understand something."

"I'm good," Dan insisted. "I'm more than good enough to make the cut."

"You're very talented," he agreed as he crouched in front of her.

"Don't patronize me, Coach."

"You're amazing," he said, ignoring that, "but it's not enough to be good."

Dan stared hard at him, daring him to explain himself. He didn't look a whit ashamed of what he was saying. If anything, he seemed surprised that he needed to spell it out for her. She knew where he was going with this, but she needed him to say it, needed to hear that close-minded prejudice out loud.

"You're a girl."

"That means nothing."

"That means everything in the NCAA," Francis said. "Maybe it's not fair, but it's a fact. Men are faster and stronger. They can hit harder and throw further. Nothing you do can change that bias. If a coach has one spot open on a line and he can choose between a man and a woman, he will choose the man every time."

"There are plenty of women playing for college teams."

"How many can you name?"

Dan counted them off on her fingers. "Laila Evans, Theodora Muldani, Jessica Stanson, Erica Smith, Jasmine Macon, DeAndra Willis..." She stopped only because Francis looked like he was going to interrupt her. "Even the Big Three have women on their lineup, so don't tell me it can't be done. The difference is those schools are smart enough to not look at weight room numbers. They look at stats. If it's down to me and a guy and my stats are better, I'm the smarter choice for the team."

"I didn't say there aren't women," Francis said. "I'm saying they're the exception."

"So you think I shouldn't even try."

"I think it's good to have dreams."

Dan got to her feet. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He wished her a pleasant goodnight, undeterred by her abrupt exit and oblivious to what he'd done to her with his words tonight. Dan walked away from there with her head high and her world crumbling under her feet. She held her racquet so tight her fingers were numb by the time she made it home, but she'd take numbness over the ache chewing at her chest and throat.

She stood at the entrance to the trailer park, stared at the mobile homes pressed too close to each other, and hated everything about her life. The temptation to turn around and just keep walking was almost overpowering, but Dan couldn't walk away from the only family she had.

"I am more than this," she whispered.

If she didn't believe in herself, no one would, but how much longer could she hold her ground when everyone else kept kicking her feet out from under her? Not even Cathy would stir herself to settle Dan's fraying nerves. She'd settled into this life and saw nothing wrong with dead-end jobs and penny pinching. She didn't see the point of aspiring to anything else and pitied Dan's desperation to break free. Now she was dragging Dan down with her and she wasn't at all sorry.

Dan swallowed hard against hurt and rage and went up the front steps at their trailer. She had her key out, but there was no resistance in the lock. Cathy had left the door open again. Dan had tired of this argument some twenty-odd fights ago, but she was saved from having to give Cathy another lecture. A strange man was sitting with Cathy at the tiny kitchen table, and he was infinitely more offensive than Cathy's complete lack of security.

Dan pointed her racquet at him. "Who the fuck is that?"

Cathy frowned. "Watch your mouth."

"Get him out of here right now."

"This is my house," Cathy shot back. "I can have friends over if I want to."

"So long as I'm the one paying the bills for this rathole, it's my house," Dan snapped. "Get him out before I throw him out."

The man wasn't smart enough to feel threatened, but he wasn't interested in watching them fight. He muttered an aside to Cathy about coming back later and patted her hand as he stood. Dan glowered at him as he came around the table and barely moved enough to let him out past her. As soon as he was through the doorway she slammed the door and bolted it. Cathy looked put-out when Dan rounded on her again, and it was all Dan could do to not throw her racquet at her aunt's face.

"You can't talk to me like that," Cathy said.

"Oh, fuck you," Dan snarled, stalking for her bedroom. "You disgust me."

"Like you have room to talk," Cathy said hotly. "You're just as much a whore as I am."

Dan threw her racquet at the curtain separating her corner from the rest of the trailer, needing it out of her hands before she did something they both regretted. She grabbed the hem of her shirt with both hands as she turned, and in one easy move she peeled her tee and sports bra off. The bold move startled Cathy into momentary silence, and Dan gestured at her bare chest.

"Oh my god," Dan said, enunciating every word. "You see these? They're called breasts. Does this make me a whore? This?" She jerked a hand between them, and Cathy shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "This is what I do. I strip. I dance. I work a stage five nights a week. I give lap dances to creeps who can't get enough action on their own. But I don't let them touch me, and I still make enough money to keep us afloat. What do you do except sit at home and wait for my checks?"

"You got yourself into that mess," Cathy said. "You're the one that decided you wanted to play on a team. All those hours wasted at practice—you could be working a respectable job closer to home."

"At what, Taco Bell? Food Mart?"

"At least Food Mart gave you an employee discount. You never should have left."

"At least I have a job. You could be working if you'd keep those legs of yours clamped shut. You can't even turn tricks on the corner. Why would they pay you for something you already gave them for free? Huh? What are you going to do when I leave?"

"Leave," Cathy echoed. "Grow up, Danny! There's nowhere to leave to."

"I don't believe that."

Cathy said nothing, but she didn't have to. The look on her face said enough.

"Fuck you," Dan said, then louder, angrier: "Fuck you! I'm seventeen! I'm too young to be your mother!"

"No one asked you to be my mother," Cathy said.

"I asked you to be mine. Thanks for failing so spectacularly at it."

Cathy actually flinched at that. Dan stomped into her makeshift room and yanked the curtain closed between them. Neither woman said another word to each other that night. Dan went to bed early and slept curled around her Exy racquet.

..

Their game against West Jackson was away. Dan stared out the school bus window as the driver parked, only sparing Francis half a mind. He was standing by her seat at the front, droning on and on about good sportsmanship and doing their best. Dan had believed his speeches once upon a time. After last night's conversation, she didn't care what he thought or said anymore.

She was captain of the Hunters Pointe Bears, so she was the first off the bus. She waited to one side and counted heads as her teammates filed off after her. Francis did the same a couple spots down. Satisfied that everyone was accounted for, he let the security guards lead them to the Away locker room. The Bears had come dressed to play, since the two schools were only a half-hour's drive from each other, so they went right through the locker room and into the court's inner ring.

The West Jackson Wolves were on the court and the stands were already packed. Matches between the schools were always guaranteed to sell out, but the tension during championships was unparalleled. The Wolves' fans greeted the Bears with a roar, loud enough that the Wolves could hear it through the court walls. A couple gray helmets turned their way, and Dan wondered if she was imagining the goalie's heavy gaze.

The referees called the Wolves to a stop, and Dan led her team onto the court for warm-up drills. Dan watched her teammates work out their tension and nerves in sharp passes and shots. It took a couple minutes, but they finally relaxed into their usual easy style. By then it

was nearly time to exit the court again. Dan ignored Francis' gesture to gather close and called her teammates to her side.

"I want each of you to look me in the eyes and say We're going to win tonight," Dan said, looking around at them. "I want you to believe it with everything you have in you. Don't you dare listen to him when he says it's okay to lose. Don't buy into that or you'll always sell yourself short. Have faith—in yourself, in us. We are a good team, and we deserve to win this game. We deserve to go to finals. That's what you want, right? You want to win. So hold tight to that thought with everything you have and refuse to let go. We can do this. We will do this. Okay? Let's go! We're going to win tonight!"

The Bears repeated it back to her one by one, each voice louder than the one before until the last Bear was shouting and they were all clapping along. Dan thrust her hand into the circle, and the others were quick to pile their gloved hands on top.

"Hunters Pointe!" she yelled.

"Bears!" they returned, and they jogged for the open court doors.

Francis said nothing about the delay but motioned his team close for his own version of a pep talk. He cautioned them against injury and red cards and reminded them that having fun was always more important than winning. Dan's teammates were fidgeting by the end of it, torn between the energy Dan fed them and the premature consolation Francis offered. In the end they sided with Dan, and they hit the court for first half with an almost savage energy.

Enthusiasm led them through a stellar first half. The score stayed even for the most part, neither team pulling ahead for long. Dan was feeling good when they stopped for halftime break, and she answered her teammates' cheery shouts with a toothy grin.

The Wolves were the first onto the court after the break, and they were led by Rainbow Bright. Dan watched through hooded eyes as the rainbow-haired goalie crossed the court. The Bears' strikers were muttering anxiously to each other further down, confidence shaken by the very sight of her. Dan hadn't thought it possible to hate the other girl any more than she already did, but she quickly discovered all new depths to her dislike.

Dan sat out the first twenty minutes of second half. There was nothing she could do but watch her teammates start to unravel. The Wolves' goalie was too good for the Bears' offense, and the strikers started panicking. They made one stupid mistake after another in their frantic attempts to score, and the Wolves' backliners helped take them further apart.

By the time Dan stepped onto the court again, her team was four points behind and she was so mad she could barely breathe. Her mark only made things worse. In an annoying coincidence, the Wolves' captain was also their starting dealer. He was a big guy who'd let his status as most popular kid at school go straight to his head. The worst part was that he was really good, so he deserved to be a little arrogant. His attitude was unforgivable, though. Dan ignored his taunts as best she could and vented her frustration through physical aggression. She fought him up and down the court, doing everything she could to give her teammates an edge.

Desperation helped her get past the captain time and time again, but no matter how many times she got the ball to her strikers they failed to score on the Wolves' goalie.

"This is pathetic," the captain said as Rainbow Bright knocked away another shot. "I can't wait until I'm playing for NDU and get to face off against real teams."

"That bitch goalkeeper of yours is the only reason you're winning," Dan said. "Without her you wouldn't stand a chance against us. Don't try to take the credit."

"What, should she take it?" He raked Dan with a contemptuous look. "What's the point? No one's going to sign her. She's going nowhere almost as fast as you are."

Dan had had enough. Cathy had the right to say such things to her, on account of being family. Coach Francis could think what he liked, since he supposedly knew more than she did about Exy. But some rich jackass no older than she was trying to put her in her place? That justified violence.

Dan put a week's worth of rage behind her fist and knocked him clean off his feet. The bell sounded, calling both teams to a stop, but it wasn't like anyone needed a heads-up. Athletes could smell a fight halfway across the court, and they were all too happy to jump each other. The only ones who didn't start swinging were the goalies, who were too far away from the action to get in any hits, the captain, who wasn't getting up again anytime soon, and Dan, who had no reason to keep fighting. She stood silent watch over his crumpled form and waited for the referees to catch up with her. They threw her off the court with a red card, but Dan didn't care anymore. Her team had lost. Their season was over.

She watched the last four minutes of the game from the sidelines and closed her eyes when the final bell rang. She didn't want to watch the Wolves celebrate an undeserved victory.

She had no choice but to face them again when she led her team through post-game handshakes. She kept her expression as impassive as possible as she slapped hands down the line. She sent her Bears off the court ahead of her and stayed behind on the center line. She stared up at the scoreboard and tried not to panic.

It's okay, she cautioned herself. There's always another way out.

She could pick up more shifts at Snowy and get a day job as soon as she graduated high school. Maybe she'd piece together enough money to take classes at the community college, and in a couple of years she'd have good enough grades to qualify for financial aid. She could transfer to another school far away from here and—

"Father Ballesteros will ream me for saying it, but Lord knows that boy needs to get beat within an inch of his life at least once."

The amused voice startled Dan out of her frantic planning. She dropped her gaze and saw the Wolves' goalkeeper only ten feet away. They were the last ones on the court, and the referees watched from the door to make sure another fight wasn't about to break out. Dan ignored them in favor of staring hard at the goalie. She tried not to hate her on sight, but it was hard. Rainbow Bright was smiling like what had happened tonight was at all fair.

"We were never formally introduced. My name is Renee Walker," the goalie said. She held out her hand and didn't seem bothered that Dan wouldn't take it. If anything her smile softened. "You're very good. I've wanted to tell you that for two years now. Thank you for the games. I appreciated the challenge."

It was an acknowledgement and a farewell, because their rivalry meant nothing now. Renee's team was proceeding through spring championships, but it didn't matter how far they got. Dan and Renee were seniors and girls. In a couple months they'd graduate and it wouldn't matter that they'd once been the best players on their respective teams.

Dan wondered if Renee was okay with that, if it honestly didn't bother her that she'd been used and discarded so easily. Maybe this game meant nothing to her; maybe the rivalry had always been one-sided. Maybe this was just a hobby, not the only way out of a dead-end life. Maybe Renee was going to college with her parents' money or an academic scholarship and she'd rush a sorority and wear trendy clothes and study medicine and be set for life. Maybe she wouldn't spend graduation night crying into her pillow and trying hard to not be overheard.

"Why are you talking to me?" Dan asked, angry all over again. "Go celebrate with your friends and stop pitying me."

"Oh, they're not my friends," Renee said, not an attempt at earning sympathy but simple, unconcerned fact. "And I certainly don't pity you. Why should I? You're all fire. A tiny loss like this can't put such a great flame out, right? You and I are the same that way, I think. We don't sit well with being told no."

"But you're right," she said, and looked toward the far wall. "I should congratulate them on their win. Good night, then, and good luck."

She finally let her hand fall back to her side and walked alone toward the door. Dan watched her leave the court, not sure what had just happened or what was supposed to happen next. All she knew was that the loss didn't hurt quite as much as it had a moment ago.

It was annoying finding comfort in a rival's parting words, but Dan clung to them all the same.

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Dan woke up in a tangle of limbs and heat. She blinked fuzzily at the ceiling, trying to figure out where she was and what that awful taste in her mouth might have been. A pounding headache kept her thoughts from going too far, and in the end she gave up trying. She let her eyes fall closed again and drifted back to sleep.

When she woke again, it was to the quiet rumble of a voice near her ear. She blinked until her eyes finally focused and the blurry shapes around her made sense. She was curled up in the middle of a futon, half-buried beneath pillows and blankets. The warmth at her back was Destiny. The older stripper was talking to Scarlett, who was struggling with a coffee maker halfway across the room.

Scarlett glanced back, mouth open to answer Destiny's admonishment with a likely smart remark, but she stopped when she saw Dan's eyes open. A grin twisted her mouth instead, and Destiny shifted at Dan's back. "Look who's up," Scarlett said. "Morning, Hennessy. How's your head?"

Dan groaned something incoherent. Destiny laughed and pulled a blanket over her head. "We'll make a champion drinker of you yet," Destiny promised. She untangled herself and slid off the bed. Dan waited until her nausea subsided before trying to sit up, but it was another minute before she dared open her eyes again. Destiny brought water and a few pills back to her and watched as Dan choked it all down. "I guess you don't want breakfast?"

Just the thought turned Dan's stomach. "Oh, god no."

Destiny went to help Scarlett with the coffee. Dan focused on her water and fumbled with her memories. Facing Cathy after Thursday's loss had been painful, but her aunt had—for once—known to keep her mouth shut. Somehow her silence only made Dan feel worse about the result. When she showed up at work Friday night she told Destiny she didn't want to go home. Her sisters took her drinking after Snowy closed and they'd ended up here to sleep it off. Dan wasn't sure whose apartment it was or what time they'd stumbled in. She remembered stubbing her toe on the stairs and someone falling down in the elevator, but anything beyond that was gone forever.

The t-shirt she was wearing wasn't hers, but it smelled clean. Dan was a different story entirely, but the other two weren't much better. They reeked of liquor, cigarette smoke, and sweat. Despite the stench they lounged around with coffee until nearly noon, and then Destiny finally volunteered to take the first shower. Dan went last. She had nothing to put on but what she'd worn the day before. She stared at her reflection, trying not to feel secondhand all the way through, and went to rejoin the others in the living room.

She would have left, except by then it was already early afternoon. Scarlett and Destiny reasoned that there was no point going all the way home just to come back for work in a couple hours. Dan let them talk her into staying without putting up much of a fight. They were finally sober enough to be hungry, so Destiny cooked a greasy lunch that they ate in front of the TV.

They passed the rest of the afternoon laughing and talking, sharing horror stories about customers and news from mutual friends up and down the entertainment district. They left the apartment early so they could do a bit of pre-game drinking. All of the bouncers on Broadway knew them, so they had no problems getting into the clubs and bars. Scarlett bought the first round, so Dan got the second with last night's money. Destiny got the third, and Dan put money down for the fourth.

Fuck Cathy's bills, Dan thought, and downed her Jameson in one easy swallow.

When they'd had just enough to drink to feel good about life, they made their way up the street to Starlets. Dan didn't have a clean outfit on her, but a few of the others kept spare clothes on hand in case they changed their mind about what they wanted to wear. Destiny managed to

patch something together for her, and Dan shrugged into the borrowed clothes with quiet apologies.

"How have you done this for so long?" Dan asked.

Destiny shrugged. "Got comfortable with it, I guess. I haven't decided what I want to do next, so this is good enough for now. Pays my bills and buys me booze—what else can I ask for?"

"A future."

"Hell, Hen, I'm still young," Destiny said. "I'mma be around for a while yet. Why should I rush sorting things out when I could be having fun right now?" She looked at Dan's expression and pressed a careful finger to Dan's temple. "Find the one thing that makes this good and hold tight to it with all you've got, okay? For me it's days like today, living it up with my friends and not caring about a thing. Scarlett hoards her winnings so she can travel. You? Well, only you can figure out what this is worth."

Dan said nothing, but she thought about it until the bouncers collected them. When it was time to go she still didn't have an answer, and a sick flicker of panic had her clinging to her lockbox. She didn't want a reason. She didn't want an answer. She didn't want a reason to settle into this routine. She wanted something more than this—and she'd run out of ways to reach for it.

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Dan got home at five Sunday morning, and she knew as she stepped through the trailer door that something wasn't right. For starters, the trailer was clean, and Cathy had never been a tidy person. The kitchen counters were cleared and wiped down, the table chairs were neatly in place, and the living room had been straightened. On the heels of surprise was anger, and Dan wondered who Cathy had been so eager to clean for. It was almost enough for her to turn the entire mobile home on its head again, except Cathy's bedroom door was open, which meant she was alone.

Someone knocked at her door, and Dan rethought her murderous impulses. She undid the locks and yanked the door open. There was a streetlamp at the corner, so it was easy enough to see Cathy's newest suitor. He was older than Dan expected—twice her age at least. He hadn't shaved in a day or two, and he had two cigarettes going, one perched between his lips and the other safely tucked between his fingers. He was dressed in ragged jeans and a sweater that had seen better days, and he stood with a folder propped under one arm.

"I think you're lost," Dan said.

"You have a nice right hook," he responded.

"If you want another look at it, I'm happy to oblige."

"Maybe in a minute. You going to invite me in or what? I'm freezing my balls off out here."

"No major loss there," Dan said coolly. He seemed startled for a moment, and then he grinned. It was a slow expression creeping across his mouth, and Dan had the distinct impression

he was pleased. She tried to shut the door in his face, but he caught it with his hand. She raised her other fist in a warning. "Fuck off."

"Two minutes," he said.

"She's asleep. I'm not waking her up."

"I'm not here for her," he said. "She said you'd be back about this time, so I've been waiting."

"You're a real creeper, aren't you?" Dan demanded. "I don't know what the fuck she offered you, but—"

"Hi, can I finish?" he interrupted. "How about I talk, then you talk, since what I have to say is infinitely more interesting?"

"How about you go home and leave me alone, because I'm not interested?"

"I'm asking for two minutes."

She stared at him, fighting the urge to just hit him in the face, and said, "Ten seconds."

"Good enough." He held out his hand but didn't wait for her to take it. "Coach David Wymack, Palmetto State University, South Carolina. I need someone to captain my Foxes next year. You feeling up to the job?"

The silence that followed that was absolute. Dan couldn't breathe; maybe it was because her heart was lodged in her throat. The stranger gazed back at her, content to wait it out. Dan swallowed hard, but there was still a hoarse edge in her voice when she said, "Is this your idea of a sick joke?"

"Jokes aren't my style." He gave up waiting for a handshake and offered her his folder instead.

Dan went through it with unsteady fingers, staring at the official letterheads and lengthy contract details. There were brochures for Palmetto State as well, and a course catalogue at the back. The man—coach—gave her a couple seconds to rifle through it before he started rattling away about some of the finer details. It was a full-ride scholarship for five years at Palmetto State. She'd never even heard of them, but apparently the Foxes were Class I.

"Dan is short for Danielle," Dan said hollowly. "My coach said universities almost never recruit girls."

"Fact," Wymack admitted.

"But you...?"

"Fuck 'em," he said. "Gender doesn't mean anything to me. Kayleigh Day taught me how to play and I'm sure she'd have a thing or two to say about biased policies. I don't care what my school board wants—I care what my team needs. That means you."

Her mouth moved, but nothing came out. He gave her a minute to find her voice again, then asked, "You have a coffee maker in there? No? Then we're going. This conversation requires more caffeine."

He turned and went back down the stairs. Dan lingered for a moment longer, torn between disbelief and fear, and then ran to catch up.

Five a.m. was one of those rare lull hours at Jelly's Diner—after the late-night drinkers and night shift finally turned in but before most of the regular work crowd was out and about. Aside from the waitstaff, Coach Wymack and Dan had the place to themselves aside. Wymack set them up in a corner booth and spread his paperwork out. Dan waved at her coffee to try cooling it off, but Wymack drained half of his like it wasn't scalding his tongue.

"Okay," he said. "I'll tell you what I need from you, then what's in it for you if you succeed. You can decide from there if it's a fair enough trade. Sound good?" She nodded, and he emptied the rest of his mug. A wave of his hand brought a waitress around for a refill, and he waited until she'd left before speaking again. "Have you heard of my school?"

"No," Dan admitted.

"Good," he said, to her surprise. He tapped his fingers on his mug, gaze distant as he thought. If he'd prepared a speech for her, he found it wanting now, and Dan wondered why he was having so much trouble finding a place to start. She wanted to tell him that it didn't matter what he said—he was offering her a way out of here. She'd put up with anything in exchange for that.

"Gandhi said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world'," Wymack said. "I don't think a man can change the world, but I know he can change his little corner of it. My corner is Palmetto State. The Foxhole Court is more than a stadium. It is a second chance. It is a halfway house for athletes who have nowhere else to go. I recruit orphans and victims and addicts and impoverished dreamers, and I give them five years to put their lives back together. Five years to learn self-worth and self-confidence and how to respect those around them. I give them the means, but I cannot show them the way. That is what I need from you.

"I can't give you a team except in name. The Foxes are a new team; this past fall was their first season. As you might expect, we have... kinks to work out." He considered that and huffed a bit. "I'm offering you a collection of talented individuals who have no concept of teamwork or trust, and no real desire to learn either one. I am asking you to help me make a difference. I need you to inspire them. I need you to lead them. I need you to make them believe. It is not going to be easy," he cautioned her. "You'll be fighting your team and your team's reputation, and the latter will take years to turn around."

Dan idly wondered if she was asleep, because this was too strange to be real. "You already have a reputation?"

"Consensus is that we should withdraw our team from the NCAA. We scored straight losses last season, including two forfeits when half the Foxes decided they didn't want to show up for the games." He dug cigarettes out of his pocket, belatedly remembered he was in a no-smoking establishment, and tossed the pack onto the table. "I don't care what the reporters say, or what the athletic board says, or what any of our rivals say, but that's me. You, as the team's captain, are going to shoulder some of that burden. You're going to be harassed for being female, for being a Fox, for a thousand reasons you can't even imagine yet. I need to know that you're going to be okay, too."

It was the second time he'd called her captain. Dan swallowed hard. "What about this year's captain?"

"Quit," Coach said breezily. "We started with eleven players last year. Two left in December. Four have made it clear they're leaving in May. I warned you: kinks." He emptied his coffee again, and Dan had the niggling sensation he wished it was something harder. "I'm recruiting six more for this year: three girls, three boys. I've edited the contract, too, to make it harder for my players to walk out on me."

"Why me?" she wanted to know. "You shouldn't even know I exist."

"That's where we're both lucky," Wymack said. "I was at your game Thursday monitoring the West Jackson goalkeeper. I saw how you played, and I liked what I saw. I spent Friday and Saturday asking around about you, getting people's opinions and borrowing tapes. Your teammates had nothing but praise for you."

Dan wasn't expecting that, and she had to look away. She hid her face in her coffee cup. The rush she felt wasn't quite pain, wasn't really pride. "Do you mean what you're saying?" she asked. "About your team, I mean. Your little foster system wannabe thing."

"Every word," Wymack said.

"Why?" she pressed. "What's in it for you?"

He considered it, and she liked him a little bit more for that. She let him mull his reasons over. "Redemption, perhaps," he said. "The ability to sleep at night."

She lifted her chin, met his stare boldly, and said again, "Why?"

He didn't answer her immediately. He studied the bottom of his empty coffee cup, searching it for answers, and finally beckoned for the waitress to refill it. He held it while she poured, cradling it in one big hand, and nodded absently when she left.

"I'm going to tell you a story," he said, carefully setting his mug to one side, "if you can tolerate me talking about myself for a while. It's a bit cliché, but it's the only one I've got."

Dan nodded, but she wasn't sure if it was encouragement or acknowledgment that he was sharing something very personal.

"My mother was fifteen when she had me. She never finished high school—she dropped out her freshman year when she got pregnant. My father was seven years older than she was and was pressured by parents on both sides to marry her. When they met, he was a lousy drunk. By the time I was eight, he'd moved on to other things and brought my mother with him: LSD and ecstasy and huffers and whatnot. When I was twelve, he started on PCPs. And that... Well, let's just say he went from being angry and useless to being violent and insane.

"I was fourteen when he took my mother's eyes out with a corkscrew," Wymack said. Dan recoiled, mouth open on a horrified protest she didn't have the air for. "I beat the ever-living shit out of him and threw him out of the house. Not quite sure how," he mused. "He was a big fucker." He considered the backs of his hands as if looking for his father's blood on his knuckles, then shrugged it off as unimportant.

"I stayed at the hospital with my mother that night. The following morning, when we were talking about what had happened and what we were supposed to do next, she looked at me and said, 'Don't worry. You'll never amount to anything, either.' They were the last words she ever said to me. I moved out that same day and never looked back. I didn't see her again until her funeral."

"I'm sorry," Dan said through numb lips.

He shrugged. "I moved up to Baltimore. Lived on the street part of the time and at the local shelters the rest. I picked up a couple odd jobs and went back to school when my bosses pushed me to. Got into sports and finally found my niche. My junior and senior years I helped coach the local little leagues. I went to college knowing I wanted to be a coach, but it wasn't until Exy hit the States that I figured out what to specialize in.

"I've been coaching Exy for about nineteen years now," he said. "I started with neighborhood teams in New York City. Amazing people, but it didn't make enough money to pay rent. Worked my way into the high school systems and now I'm here, with a Class I university team. And since I have the chance to start a team from scratch, I'm going to build it however I see fit.

"Long story short, moral of the monologue, whatever: I am living proof that success is not determined by socioeconomic status," he said, stabbing the table with his finger. "I am proof that big dreams don't belong to those with the easiest means of achieving them. All it takes is heart—knowing what you want and having the fortitude to go for it day after day, no matter the odds.

"So you tell me," he challenged her, "what do you want more than anything?"

Dan floundered, but only for a moment. She'd been living with this ache for so long, she knew the words by heart. "I want someone to give me a chance. I want someone to believe in me."

"Danielle Wilds," Wymack said, speaking slowly to give his words emphasis, "I will never give up on you."

Looking into his eyes, Dan knew that was the truth. She had no reason to believe him, but she knew with every fiber of her being that he was the real thing. Her vision blurred. She blinked to clear it, and a hot tear streaked down her cheek. She scrubbed it away with an impatient hand and swallowed against the tightness in her throat.

"I don't care what anyone says about the Foxes," she said thickly. "I want to believe in the impossible. I want to be something. I want my chance to change a piece of the world. Let me have your team and I'll make of it whatever you want."

"Yeah," he said, studying her with a distant look on his face. "I think you just might."

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It took two hours to eat the big breakfast he'd ordered and go over all the paperwork he'd brought to North Dakota with him. Afterward Wymack drove her back to the trailer in the

airport's rental car and left her with his business card. He didn't care how small or big the question; if she had any concerns at all he wanted her to reach out to him as soon as she could. Neither Cathy nor Dan had a phone, but Dan knew she could borrow Destiny's if she needed to get in touch with him.

Dan watched him drive away, forced away the fear that she'd dreamed all this up, and went inside to find Cathy at the table. Dan didn't know how much Wymack told her when he first dropped by looking for Dan, but the look on Cathy's face now was expectant.

"I'm going to college," Dan said. "Class I NCAA team, full ride scholarship."

"It won't change a thing, you know," Cathy said. "All it's going to do is buy you time. When it's over you'll be back where you started, and you're not going to be able to live with yourself."

"I hate you," Dan said quietly. "After everything I've done for you, can't you even pretend to be happy for me now?"

"You're leaving me," Cathy said. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to learn how to take care of yourself again," Dan said.

She shut herself in her room and sank to her knees on her blankets. She stared down at the folder Wymack gave her, struggling hard against a rush of hurt anger. She hadn't expected Cathy to react any differently; she knew better than to let Cathy's selfishness get to her. But her throat was still tight when she finally opened the folder and pulled Wymack's papers out.

PALMETTO STATE UNIVERSITY FOXES, the front page said, in embossed glossy orange.

She traced the letters with her fingertips, reading the promise in those four words, and managed a smile.

The curtain rattled a bit. When Dan didn't say anything, Cathy pulled it to one side and peered in at her. "When do you leave?"

"May 31st," Dan said. "He's going to send the ticket to my school so someone can sign for it."

She found the college catalogue halfway down the stack and thumbed through it, amazed by how many choices there were. How could anyone settle on just one topic? Palmetto State offered everything from computer science to equestrian studies to international trade. She wanted to take a little of everything just because she could, but on the heels of that heady glee was a painful bit of reality. Cathy was right; Dan's grades had never been that good because she'd never tried harder than she had to in any of her classes. It was one thing to slide by here, but Wymack had warned her there was a minimum GPA to maintain at the collegiate level. She'd lose her scholarship and her spot on the team if she couldn't keep her grades up.

The only hope she had was in the academic assistance program Wymack said Palmetto offered its athletes. Dan was going to take advantage of every single one. This was a chance to start her life over. She was going to do everything right this time.

She wanted to read the catalogue from start to finish, but she was too tired to fully appreciate it right now. Instead she picked up the visitor's guide and flipped its pages. Pictures of the sprawling campus filled every other page, showing off luscious gardens and brick buildings. Dan had never been outside of North Dakota. She couldn't even imagine what the south would be like. Warmer, for sure.

"Give me a loan," Cathy said.

Dan sent an incredulous look over her shoulder. "You're dreaming."

"For the abortion," Cathy said impatiently. She answered Dan's shock with a mulish look. "I called Planned Parenthood after your fancy coach came by. There's a bus route nearby to the clinic, but I need fare and the fee. I wrote the number down around here somewhere. What's that look for? It's not like you left me a lot of choices."

"You mean it?" Dan pressed. "If I get you the money, you'll take care of it?"

Cathy huffed. "You can even come with me to the clinic if you don't trust me, you stingy ho."

"Stingy," Dan echoed. "I hope you starve to death when I'm gone." Cathy pointed at her as if those cold words proved her point. Dan, in turn, pointed at the curtain. "Get out of my room."

Cathy scowled but left. It was one of the few rules they had to adhere to no matter what if they wanted to keep their sanity in such a small place: whenever they were asked to, they had to leave each other's rooms, no matter what they were in the middle of. A curtain did a lot to cut arguments in half and kept their occasional screaming matches from escalating to violence.

Dan waited until she was alone before looking back at her things, but Cathy had ruined her good mood. Dan stacked everything neatly off to one side. She didn't bother to change out before curling up in her blankets, and she drifted to sleep thinking about her future.

She and Cathy didn't say a word to each other when Dan woke up again. Dan got showered and dressed for the night, and the two ate separate dinners. Dan took her oatmeal back to her room to skim through her brochures some more. One packet explained the different meal plans available for purchase. Wymack had circled the one included in her scholarship: unlimited access to the meal halls and the right to use the athletes' separate dining hall whenever she wanted. There were a few sample menus printed on the page opposite the street view shots of one of the dining halls. Dan's mouth watered as she perused it.

She left earlier than she needed to, wanting to share the good news with her girls. They responded with the unabashed enthusiasm Cathy should have shown her, and they had enough time for Scarlett and Destiny to take her out for celebratory drinks. The girls' excitement only helped rekindle her own, and that night was the easiest shift Dan could remember. Her joy made her smiles brighter, and the knowledge that she was so close to being free of all of this put a triumphant, cocky edge in her dance.

The Starlets wanted to take her out afterward, but it was a school week and Dan needed to reassess her grades. She allowed herself a couple rounds, then regretfully excused herself from their cheerful company.

"No worries, love," Chastity promised her as she left. "We'll throw you a proper farewell party when you go."

"You might even remember some of it!" Ginger added.

Dan laughed and left them at the bar. She stood on the sidewalk, oblivious to the swirling crowd around her. It was late and it'd been a long day, but she was wired and restless. She'd never felt so alive. She tipped her head back and stared up at the sky, looking for stars. The street was so well-lit she could only see one, but one was enough.

"Make a wish," she whispered, and hugged herself for luck.

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She had a headache until fifth period on account of her two hours of sleep and her seven drinks beforehand, but she didn't care. Instead of sleeping through study hall she went over her most recent report card and planned for finals. Her Exy season was over, which opened a chunk of time in the middle of her afternoon. Dan had planned to add in more shifts at Starlet. Instead she prioritized her classes by whichever ones were the most dire and blocked off time to study. Her GPA was a 2.0, which was enough to qualify for the team, but Wymack had said there were risks in just barely scraping by.

The bell rang, forcing her to pack her things before she was ready, and she went to her last two classes. At the end of the day when the student body president was making closing remarks, Dan was issued a summons to Coach Francis' office. Dan didn't want to see Francis again anytime soon, but she grabbed her bag and set off in grim search of the teachers' offices.

The teachers' offices were in groups by subject. Francis taught geometry during the day, so he was in one of the smaller lounges with the math and astronomy teachers. Mrs. Davies looked up from her desk when Dan stepped in but bent back to her reports when she saw the visitor wasn't hers. Dan swallowed an automatic greeting and slipped past her desk for Francis' in the back. She was only a couple steps into the room before she realized Francis already had a guest: Rainbow Bright was sitting across from him. Dan stopped alongside the other girl to stare. Renee had a heavy book open in her lap and a finger on the page to guide her eyes. She didn't look up but held up her other hand in either a greeting or a bid for patience.

"Congratulations, Danielle," Francis said. "I heard from Coach Wymack this weekend."

"Thanks," she said stiffly, and slanted a look down at Renee. "Thank your coach for me, would you? Coach Wymack would never have found me if he wasn't there looking for you."

"Unfortunately my coach had nothing to do with that." Renee finished her verse and closed the book. The gold letters on the front read HOLY BIBLE. It wasn't Dan's idea of a good read, but Renee was mostly through the massive tome. Renee smiled up at Dan, but there was a sly edge in it. "He doesn't think women should play on the collegiate level, you see."

Francis motioned between them. "Miss Walker wanted to talk to you, so I let her in. I have a couple things to check on, unless you two need anything else?"

"No, thank you," Renee said politely, and he left. Renee got to her feet and turned to face Dan. "I apologize for barging in like this, but I wanted to talk to you. I didn't have your address, but I knew I'd find you here. How are you feeling?"

"You have a lot of nerve showing up here," Dan said. "A good two-thirds of the student body would love to pound you into the dirt."

"I'm sure they'd like the chance to try," Renee agreed pleasantly. "Likewise, I'd like the chance to get to know you better. I promise not to take up too much of your time."

"You really need to get your own friends."

Renee smiled like she found Dan's rudeness endearing. "Friendship comes later in its own right. Right now I'd settle for a reason to respect my new captain."

It hit Dan then. Wymack hadn't said outright that he'd signed Renee, only that he'd come here to consider her and found Dan by extension. Dan should have put the pieces together and realized they were going to be playing on the same team this year. Dan's first response was denial, because there was no way she could tolerate playing with a girl she despised so much. On the tail end of that was a bit of resentment. She wanted to trust Wymack's judgment. Besides, she'd rather have Renee guarding her goal than her opponent's.

Renee took her silence as encouragement. "Fifteen minutes?"

"Fine," Dan said grudgingly, "but not here. I'm not going to be the one who tells Coach Wymack you got your dumb self killed."

Sneaking Renee off school grounds proved to be impossible, though. With Exy such a big thing and West Jackson their greatest rivals, there were maybe a handful of students who couldn't put together Renee's reputation and her distinctive coloring. Her face had been on target signs at the start of the year as a morale boost, at least until teachers tore the posters down and started looking for the culprit. This soon after the final bell rang the halls were crowded, too, so Dan had to push her way through clumps of students and pull Renee along behind her. She looked back once or twice to make sure Renee was keeping up, but Renee didn't seem at all concerned to be the new center of attention.

"Dan, what the hell?" someone demanded.

Dan followed the voice to see one of her backliners. "It's a long story. I'll have to tell you later."

"You lost, Rainbow Bright?" someone else called. "You're on the wrong fucking side of town."

Just like that, the girls couldn't move any further. The group ahead of them planted their feet and refused to budge, walling off the way to the door. They weren't on the Exy team, but they were athletes from other teams, and they were ready to rally against the girl who'd cost them championships.

"Out of the way," Dan said, taking a threatening step forward. "I'm trying to get her out of here."

"She shouldn't be here in the first place."

"Hey, hey, hey." A teacher shoved into the throng and sent a fierce look around. "What are you all doing? The bell rang. School's out. Get your things and get home. There's nothing to see here. Go before I start calling parents." She waited until they started to drift off, then motioned for Dan and Renee to follow and escorted them as far as the door. Dan nodded gratitude, but the teacher just did an about-face and headed back inside.

Dan started across the emptying parking lot. "You're so stupid. You shouldn't have come here."

"I wasn't trying to make things difficult for you."

"Yeah?" Dan demanded. "What did you think would happen?"

"I wasn't thinking," Renee said. "I was too excited to think, perhaps."

"Stupid," Dan said again.

"Reckless," Renee corrected her, "due to an unforgivable arrogance. But I'm working on it, I promise. It's just going to take a little more time to learn humility." She smiled at the bewildered look Dan sent her and said. "It's not as crazy as it sounds. I'm a bad person trying very hard to be a good person. There's a learning curve there I haven't fully got the knack of."

"Not crazy at all," Dan said derisively. Wymack had said he recruited troubled kids, but she hadn't thought he meant mentally unstable ones. Renee had taken one too many balls to the helmet.

They'd gone a half-mile down the road before Renee asked, "Is it Dan or Danielle?"

"Dan," Dan said. "Coach Francis is the only one who calls me Danielle even though I've told him for years that I hate it. I think he has a learning disability. At least Coach Wymack got it right the first time." She glanced over at Renee. "You said your coach didn't nominate you, so how'd you get a Class I school to stop by?"

"That was Stephanie's idea," Renee said. "My foster mother, I mean. She works for a newspaper and covers sports. She'd heard about Coach Wymack's team and seemed to think I'd be a good fit. She tried to get Coach Lewis to send my file over and, when he refused, contacted Coach Wymack herself." She smiled, tucked her bible under her arm, and said, "They don't give up easily, do they?"

Dan thought she meant her foster mother, but then Renee looked over shoulder. Dan followed her gaze to see a small group of students following them. One or two were from the angriest group in the hall; the others were brothers and sisters of her teammates. A quick headcount said there were seven of them, which was five too many for Dan to deal with. The thought of running never crossed her mind; she would rather get kicked to the dirt than flee before a couple bullies. Dan had very few things to call her own: pride and dreams were just about it.

"Go on ahead," Renee said. "If you're still willing to talk to me, I'll meet you wherever you like."

"What, you going to preach peace at them?" Dan asked.

"That's always an option."

"Just do us both a favor and stay out of the way."

They stopped and turned to face their would-be attackers. Smiles twisted some of the boys' faces when they realized the pair was going to make this easy for them. The seven fanned out as they got closer and formed a loose circle around the girls.

"You can go," one of the girls told Dan. "Just say this ain't your business, and it ain't."

Dan put her hands on her hips. "Why don't all of you fuck off?"

"That was your only chance," the biggest boy, a footballer named Tray, said.

"Shaking in my boots," Dan said. "Am I supposed to be scared of you?"

The girl fixed her with a mean look. "You should be, now that everyone knows you're a sell-out. You're buddy-buddies with the Wolves?"

Tray nodded. "How long've you been planning that one? Woe, woe, everyone hates me, nobody likes me, let me screw them over in championships. You planned it, didn't you? You threw the game on purpose."

"Say that again," Dan warned him, "and you'll regret it."

"You'll regret not walking away." Tray cracked his knuckles. "You're finished, see? The team doesn't need you anymore, and if they don't, no one does. No one's going to mind if you have a couple broken bones at graduation."

"Take her teeth out, too," the second girl said. "She doesn't need 'em to be a whore like her Auntie Cathy. It'll even make blowing people that much easier."

Dan didn't know she'd lunged at the girl until Renee caught her shirt and hauled her back. Renee's smile was gone, but her expression was calm as she surveyed the group. Dan tried to wrench out of her hold, but the goalie didn't even seem to notice her struggle.

"Apologize," Renee said. "That's a terrible thing to say."

"You going to make me?" Tray asked, getting right in her face.

Renee let go of Dan. "I would prefer not to."

Dan heard the scratch of gravel behind her, but Tray was starting to move for Renee. Dan left her back wide open and shoved Tray as hard as she could. She didn't get a chance to chase him, because someone caught her ponytail in a fierce grip. There was a stab of icy heat down her neck as she was yanked back the way she'd come, and then Stan whipped her around and threw her at the ground. Dan slapped her hands out to brace her fall, shredding her palms on the asphalt, and scrambled to her feet. She turned around, fists up and at the ready despite the angry throbbing in her hands, and froze to gape.

Stan was already on his hands and knees and making an awful choking noise. Renee was taking on two of the other boys, dodging their holds with a laughable ease and swatting their flying fists away from her face. She ducked and weaved between them like it was nothing and

systematically took the whole group apart one-handed. The girls figured out fast they didn't want any part of this and backed off with their hands up. Renee skipped them in favor of clothes-lining Peter. Tray grabbed her wrist and hauled her around. He caught her high across her face with a meaty fist.

Renee moved her arm, loosening her grip on her bible so it fell, and caught the book when it reached her hip. She pulled hard against Tray, using his hold on her to drag him closer, and slammed her bible into the bridge of his nose. Dan heard bones crackle under the impact, and Tray let go of Renee to howl into his hands. Renee looked around to see if anyone else was ready for another try, but the students were staring at her in white-faced anger. Renee nodded and went past them to Dan.

"Should we go?" Renee asked.

Dan stared at her: first at the glittering cross necklace around her neck, then at the blood-smeared bible in her hand. She looked at Renee's bruising face, and this time she really looked. She stared past Renee's easy smile to the darkness in her pale stare.

"You might be a little fucked up," Dan said.

"I did warn you," Renee said.

So had Wymack, but Dan was late in putting the pieces together as usual. He'd told her what sort of athlete he recruited. The girl Dan had always assumed Renee was, the well-to-do and well-adjusted child who had everything she wanted, was so far from the truth Dan almost felt the need to apologize.

"You and I are the same that way," Dan said. Renee recognized her own words, judging by the slow smile that curved her lips. Dan looked past her at the beaten students, then started off down the road like none of this had happened. Renee caught pace with her easily and wiped the bloody spine of her book off on the hem of her shirt. Dan watched her do it and said, "Pretty nasty fighting style for a Jesus freak."

"Thank you," Renee said.

She didn't explain how such a thing was possible, but Dan didn't push her yet. They were going to spend the next five years together, after all. She had plenty of time to figure everything out.

ALLISON REYNOLDS

#7 - Allison Reynolds, Defensive Dealer

July 16, Cancer

ALLISON'S MIDDLE NAME

Q: Any reason why Allison's middle name is Jamaica or is it only because it sounded good?

A: At the time Allison was conceived, the Reynolds Resort in Montego Bay was Mrs. Reynolds' favorite vacation spot ((she has since changed her opinion to the resort in Bangkok)). "Jamaica" had a little more flair than "Montego" as far as she was concerned. Rich socialites, man, what can ya do?

It was through Renee that Dan eventually learned about the third girl Wymack recruited, Allison Reynolds. The Reynolds were apparently big news to anyone who followed celebrity gossip, both for their recent scandals and for their excessive wealth. Their fortune was founded in a chain of resorts that catered to people with the most money to throw away, and although they were not celebrities themselves in the traditional sense they rubbed elbows with powerful people in nearly every industry.

Allison was the Reynolds' only child, and therefore the heir to the family business and fortune. She was a modern day princess, destined for a life of globetrotting and luxury if only she would accept the crown and everything it entailed. Unfortunately for her parents, Allison wasn't sensible enough to accept her easy fate. At thirteen she discovered her estranged grandfather, a lonely man working as a high school janitor to stave off boredom, and spent a summer under his roof. It was inevitable she'd find out about Exy when she was following him everywhere he went, but only the tabloids were happy when she picked up a racquet.

"Her parents weren't quiet about it," Renee said as she pushed balls back toward the first-fourth line, "but when they tried to keep her from playing she started embarrassing them in public—starting arguments in front of the cameras, refusing to show up at charity events, and giving away family secrets. In the end it was easier and safer to just let her have her way, so Allison enrolled at a private high school and tried out for the team."

"Tried out," Dan echoed with a derisive snort. "Like anyone would tell someone like her 'No'."

"A less honest coach would have," Renee said. "Everyone knew her parents disapproved—who would side with an impetuous child over her influential parents? There could have been repercussions, or he could have asked for bribes for his negative assessment. But he signed her and put her on his line-up."

"Still sounds like a scam," Dan said. "She didn't know anything—she'd been playing Exy for what, a year? And she made the cut for a private team? Maybe he wasn't smart enough to take her parents' money, but he definitely had ulterior motives."

"If he wanted the publicity, it worked," Renee said. "Paparazzi hounded the school and her teammates. Ticket sales went up, but the stress and cameras took a toll on all of them. There was a lot of pressure on her—to succeed, to fail, to do something outrageous, anything."

"So?" Dan asked.

"She struggled." Renee leaned on her racquet and stared down the court. "She had potential, but it was obvious she couldn't keep up with her teammates. That's when people assumed what you did: that her parents had gotten her the position. Revenge, maybe, for everything she'd put them through. She was becoming a public failure, and everyone assumed she'd crawl back home to lick her wounds. Then she collapsed."

Renee glanced at Dan. "Allison's parents wanted a picture perfect daughter: a body to show off the latest fashions and a face to put on magazine covers. Apparently that was the compromise they made when they let Allison enroll, was that she would maintain her image. Allison couldn't do it, not with all the training and practices her coach put her through. She became bulimic in an attempt to stave off muscle growth."

"That's stupid."

"How are we to judge?" Renee asked.

"Hi, bulimia?"

"We don't know what it was like for her," Renee said. "We can't understand how much pressure her parents were putting on her to fit into their pristine mold. Her worth was measured in artificial standards and weighed against the court of public opinion. It must have been very difficult, trying to stand her ground in the face of such cold disapproval."

"Still," Dan said.

"It's a knee-jerk reaction to judge harshly those who were born with more than we have," Renee said, "but it isn't fair. Just because she hasn't experienced the same things we have doesn't mean her life was easy. We can't keep assuming that money automatically makes a person's life better."

"It'd make my life better," Dan said. "I'd've given Cathy a cut and gotten out of here a long time ago."

"But Allison couldn't leave, at least not without the tabloids and creeps following her. She was beautiful, young, rich, and rebellious—she was a sensation and the regular topic of gossip columns. There was nowhere for her to escape to."

Her words were close enough to Cathy's harsh rejection that Dan had to look away. Renee saw she'd hit a nerve and went quiet, waiting for Dan to sort things out on her own. Finally Dan said, "She did get out, though. There's always a way out."

"Hers was self-destruction," Renee said. "When she was hospitalized, news got out about what she was doing and why. The backlash was in her favor, and Allison had all the ammunition

she needed to pick her side. She chose this," Renee said, gesturing at the court and smiling at the far goal. "She started eating right and taking better care of herself, and by the end of the season she'd earned her place on the line-up."

Renee slanted Dan a sideways look and small smile. "Rumor has it she cost herself her inheritance with such a stunt, but none of the Reynolds will confirm it."

"She threw away millions of dollars for a sport?" Dan asked.

"Net worth for the Reynolds is actually in the billions," Renee said with deceptive mildness.

Dan thought she was going to throw up. "She's insane."

"Or unbelievably spiteful," Renee suggested. "I can't wait to meet her. She must have quite a personality."

KEVIN DAY

#2 - Kevin Day, Striker

February 22, Pisces

Q: Please tell me, Nora, does Kevin have a middle name? Or did Kayliegh decide to name him Japanese style with just first and last? Also what is Kevin's favorite alcoholic drink, when he's actually at the club getting drinks and not downing hard liquor to calm his poor nerves?

A: Kevin doesn't have a middle name. I don't really consider it to be Japanese style? It's uncommon around here to not have one, but I've gone to school with a handful of people who didn't have them. Vodka is Kevin's drink of choice, so anything with a vodka base. He can drink it straight if it's not the cheap stuff, and usually considers that the better route whenever possible because boy is pretending to count calories while knocking back bottles. Black russians are an easy go-to; sweeter concoctions like chocolate martinis are avoided.

Q: Has Neil or Kevin ever wanted to kiss the other for a split second?

A: The final versions of Kevin & Neil: No

Q: If Kevin were to make out with any of the Foxes, who would it be?

A: Allison, because she's gorgeous and there'd be no strings attached.

FAVORITE THINGS

Q: Nora, PLEASE tell me you have a reservoir of Kevin Day snippets/info. Please please. My life is so lacking when it comes to Kevin stuff and I feel so deprived. Hit me with it, man, good and bad please. I just need more Kevin. DX

A: A small list of Kevin's favorites:

Kevin loves history, but since Exy is all-encompassing he has to carve out tiny patches to indulge in reading. He reads over his lunch break or while his tutors are checking his work, and he keeps books on his bed under his pillow so he can read while he's trying to fall asleep. When he first came to Palmetto State & was trying to recover from the Ravens, he couldn't say *I shouldn't have left* or *I miss my team* or *who am I when I can't play*, so he complained bitterly and at length about having to leave his books behind. His roommates, being the unsympathetic bastards

they are, told him to shut up enough times that Kevin no longer talks about history to any of them.

Kevin also likes classical music. He listens to it when he's studying, whether he's working on schoolwork or Exy research. He is not at all a fan of the EDM they play at Eden's Twilight, but he goes where Andrew goes, and he tolerates it out of necessity. When he retires he'll toy with the idea of learning how to play the piano, but he won't actually go through with it until Amalia has left for college.

Kevin is the most conscientious eater on the team, but he's come a long way this last year or so. Before he came to PSU he didn't even drink; the monsters kind of corrupted him in that regard. He still prefers to save his desserts for weekend indulgences. Andrew's sugar intake gives him palpitations, and he is beyond irritated over Nicky's eating habits. He attempted only once to write out a dietary plan for the Foxes, and Wymack was smart enough to put it in the trash after reviewing it.

Kevin doesn't like running, but he knows it's important, so he does it anyway.

Kevin is left-handed, but PSU isn't his first attempt to use his right hand. Japanese is murder on left-handed individuals, so Kevin's first attempts to be ambidextrous started when Riko and the master forced him to learn Japanese.

Kevin's favorite color is red, which is a little tragic because he looks terrible in it, too fair-skinned for it to ever look right. His favorite season is fall, because of Exy. He loves pineapples.

His birthday is 2/22, because I couldn't resist.

Kevin loves Thea, but not the obvious way Dan loves Matt or Aaron loves Katelyn. Their relationship is built initially on intense physical attraction and athletic respect. It deepens over the years, but Exy will always be tangled up in the midst of it. They're less about romantic getaways and more interested in beating each other up on the court. But they have their moments, when they're tangled up in the shower after a bruising practice or Kevin's learning to do Thea's hair, and the older they get the more obvious it will be to everyone around them.

In earlier drafts, Kevin & Dan were BFFs. Dan used to be the only one willing to defend his awful attitude, at least until Neil came along and acted as an enabler. They're not as tight now, but they'll grow a little closer over the years. Wymack is important to both of them, the father one never had vs the father one is learning to have. Most of the change occurs after Dan becomes head coach at PSU and Kevin starts aging out of the game. He's in and out of South Carolina to see Wymack and Abby, with and without Amalia in tow, so they have more chances to talk and catch up.

BEST NON-EXY MEMORY

Q: What's one of Kevin's best memories? (Other than Exy related?)

A: Finding Kayleigh's letter to Tetsuji & discovering his father.

BEST FRIEND

Q: Who is Kevin's best friend, if he has one? Or who is he closest to? I'm always wishing the best for Kevin. Forever and always

A: Who is Kevin's best friend? Who are Kevin's friends, period? Ha! We see how well his friendship with Jean turned out, yeah? Friendship is something Kevin is still learning ((something he doesn't see a point of learning, tbh, what a time suck, what a distraction!!)), and it's going to take him a while to figure it out. He can't be friends with people who aren't into Exy, but if they're bad at Exy or don't try to his standards, he's too annoyed with them to tolerate them for long. So that needy, competitive, high-handed streak does more for making him enemies than friends.

But he's not beyond saving. Andrew & Neil could be his friends, technically, especially after Andrew & Kevin stop fighting over Exy all the time. Neil & Kevin squabble more often now that Neil's stolen his game & style back from Kevin, but they're still intensely obsessed with each other's talent and potential and they'll never walk away from each other.

Kevin & Thea get much closer once the Moriyamas stop intervening with their flirting. Kevin & Jeremy stay in touch once Jean moves to the Trojans and will eventually become proper friends instead of just mutually adoring rivals. Kevin likes his professional team, for the most part, but he's more likely to be "friends" with the best of the US Court.

And then one day, when Kevin's finally grown up a bit, he and Thea will befriend some people at the dog park who not only don't play Exy but *who cheer for all the wrong teams* and that is when Kevin will finally be a functional and mature adult.

Q: Do Andrew & Kevin or Kevin & Neil stay friends after graduation, or do they only really interact on court?

A: They're still friends, albeit long-distance ones. They don't go out of their way to see each other, but if they're nearby they're likely to drop in for a drink or a bite. Neil and Kevin are more

likely to text than call, but now and again Kevin will call Andrew. ((He knows Andrew will pick up))

KEVIN AND THEA

Q: How did Thea and Kevin meet? When did Kevin come to terms that he liked her?

A: *I promise this was only supposed to be like five sentences long but*

Thea was a Raven, and Kevin grew up at Evermore. He got to know the team pretty well even before he was old enough to join the line-up, so he met Thea when she first showed up EAU for her freshman year. Thea is.. four? four and a half? years older than Kevin, so Kevin was only fourteen or so when he met her the first time. His first opinion of her was that she was pretty but she had a very brutish playing style. By spring championships he was used to it, and he started appreciating the presence of an angry tank on their court.

After Riko & Kevin slept with Lydia, it was probably inevitable that he'd look at Thea differently. Lydia was not at all Kevin's type, with strawberry curls and constellations of freckles, but he'd known better than to argue when Riko picked her. *Thea*, though, who was tall and dark and muscled ((and wore exactly two expressions: pissed off or murderous)), Thea was nice to look at. ((*in a certain light*, Riko added snidely, the one and only time Kevin was stupid enough to say something about her))

For a while Kevin was sure he was just interested in her playing style, and for a while that really was it—yeah, she was attractive, but her athleticism was what he was really in love with. Exy first & always, right? *win win win*. The first few times he caught her making out with the goalkeeper all he had to say about it was that if the goalkeeper was too busy watching her ass to watch the ball the master would have their heads.

The Ravens worked in short extra scrimmages for Kevin & Riko wherever they could in their crazy schedules, but it wasn't until Kevin & Riko started EAU as freshman that Kevin and Thea really started getting anywhere. Now that Kevin was fully integrated into the team, he saw Thea *all the time*, and they faced off on the court more often than not. ((Kevin's request—he wanted to test his quick shots and sharp instincts against her unyielding, unapologetic violence)) They bickered a lot, critiquing each other's performances in increasingly petty ways, until Riko finally got bored of watching it and told Kevin to “just fuck her and get it over with” ((at the end of practice, with everyone present, because Riko is the king of tact and give-a-shit)).

So Kevin did*—but didn't get over her. Fucking Thea took the bite out of their on-court tension, but it didn't get rid of it completely, and Kevin didn't know what to do about that. Kevin had a destiny, had a purpose, had a leash stretched tight from his throat to Riko's hand, and Thea was

not part of the plan. Thea was more than willing to do a repeat performance (*you fuck like a virgin, maybe some practice will make you better at it*)), but Kevin knew he could only get away with it so many times before Riko & the master caught on. That was the only rebuttal Thea needed, because Thea was a Raven. She understood.

So Kevin did the only thing he could think of, and he and Thea started passing notes. Kevin hid his in his textbooks so he could reread them with Riko none the wiser. Most of what they wrote about was ((predictably)) about the day's practice and scathing reviews of their teammates, but once in a while something real would sneak in, some hint of who they were beyond this team, like Kevin mentioning an interesting fact he'd read in a history book or Thea being angry that the campus gym had shut its pool down again.

But this was a little bit of unexpected stress at the worst possible time in Kevin's life. He and Riko had too many teams, had college classes, had Raven jerseys now and too many eyes on them. This childish, secretive "flirting" with Thea was more weight where too much weight already was. Kevin looked forward to her graduation if only because he'd lose contact with her and would have one less thing to worry about.

Thea's last words to Kevin—until she showed up at Fox Tower in TKM—were to get some more practice in with the girls so he'd be ready for her when he graduated. Halfway a joke, but also a promise that she would still be interested four years from now—because they were Ravens, because they were the best, because they deserved the best, and for better or worse that meant each other.

***((Remember that "line of sight" thing Riko and Kevin have going on? Riko was definitely in the room when Kevin & Thea fucked that first time. Eyyyy. Ravens, thy issues know no boundaries.))*

KEVIN AND ANDREW

Q: The first time Kevin and Andrew have their little shoot out what are they saying to each other? Especially when Kevin grabs the front of Andrew's helmet and Andrew aborts punching him

A: It started off with Kevin making sure Neil hadn't sent Andrew on the court and Andrew reminding him that Neil doesn't tell him what to do ((the lies, Andrew, the absolute lies)). When Kevin loses his temper with Andrew's performance he chews him out, demanding to know why Andrew keeps holding back, why Andrew continues to sell himself short when they both know he can do better than this. Less "Stop wasting my time, you suck" and more "You're choosing to waste our time by pretending you're not as good as we both know you are."

Kevin tells him that if he's not out there on that court for himself then there's no reason for him to be there—Kevin doesn't need a babysitter after all this time, so Andrew can play for himself or

he can get the fuck out of Kevin's way. And Andrew, being the totally mature one of the two of them, reminds Kevin that Kevin doesn't tell him what to do, either. But he stays, and that's all that matters.

This back-story takes place roughly two years before the start of Foxhole Court, during the twins' senior year at Macon High School in Columbia, South Carolina. The Ravens offered Andrew a contract with them but were rejected. Now they've come in person to see why.

Apologies if it reads rough; the original version was from Andrew's POV and I rewrote it with the help of copious amounts of wine.

"Was that really what we came all the way down here for?"

It was a wonder he heard the words over the rest of the locker room chaos. Aaron's hands went still on his shoelaces and he looked up. The infamous Kevin Day had somehow elbowed free of the fawning Macon High Eagles and was crowding Andrew at his locker. Andrew's grin was ear-to-ear, but it was a toss-up as to what Andrew found more amusing: Kevin's stunning lack of survival instincts or Kevin's thinly-veiled rage.

"Three guesses and the first two don't count?" Andrew asked.

"Stop being obnoxious."

"Oh, I haven't even started being obnoxious yet. Wait a moment and you'll see." Andrew slung his racquet across his shoulders and wagged the butt of it in Kevin's general direction. "You know, you could have saved yourself an apoplectic fit or two if you'd listened when I told you I wasn't interested. Your stupidity is your problem, not mine."

"But yours is mine," Kevin said.

"I think he just called me stupid," Andrew said, wide-eyed with feigned shock. "Give me a moment to recover. I haven't felt this shamed in a long time." He tipped his head back against the locker and shushed Kevin when Kevin started to speak. "A moment, I said. Nice to see that hearing problem is an ongoing thing. One too many balls to the helmet, I think? You'll want to retire before it becomes permanent."

Kevin slammed a hand into the lockers a breath from Andrew's face. The locker room went silent; awkward tension replaced the excited atmosphere. The curious stares of their teammates was an unnerving weight on Aaron's shoulders and it was all he could do not to shrug it off. He risked a single glance back, searching for Kevin's other half, and found Riko on the far side of the room. Riko's easy smile was gone; he watched Kevin now through hooded eyes. Aaron dragged his attention back to his brother before Riko noticed the attention.

"You should be ashamed of the way you played tonight," Kevin said, low but angry. He was keeping his voice down to cut the rest of the Eagles out of their conversation, but Aaron was

sitting just close enough to understand. "Tell me it's the medicine. Tell me you'll be better than this if we take you off these drugs."

"If you what?" Aaron asked, startled into speaking.

"Deaf and deluded," Andrew said, sounding delighted. "This isn't a ten-step program, you know. It's kind of a permanent thing."

"Not if we don't want it to be," Kevin said. "We can overturn the ruling."

"A couple signatures for the judge, a photoshoot with the lawyers—"

"Riko always gets what he wants. So do I."

"There's that Raven arrogance we've heard so much about." Andrew loosened his grip on his racquet enough to drop it and leaned forward into Kevin's space. He shaped his forefingers and thumbs into a frame and considered Kevin's face through it. "I've seen cheerleaders with more modesty. Does it help you sleep at night thinking you're better than everyone else?"

"How do you sleep when you're such a failure?" Kevin shot back.

Andrew tapped a finger to his temple. "I count sheep."

Kevin made a frustrated gesture and lowered his hand. "I refuse to take you back with us if you're going to play all of your games like you practiced tonight. You have no place on the Raven line if you're not willing to be the best."

"What a hypocrite," Andrew said, "considering you've built an entire career around being second best."

Aaron watched them stare each other down, wondering if that was that and Kevin would finally get the hint. He leaned over and tugged at his laces again, but he kept his stare on the two standing just a couple feet from him. Andrew gave up waiting for Kevin before Aaron did and turned away. He gave the combination lock on his locker a couple spins to open it and dropped the lock near his racquet. He had one hand on the latch to tug his locker open when Kevin spoke again.

"You're worth it."

It was barely a whisper, but Andrew went still.

Kevin only gave him a second to respond before pressing on. "You have so much potential I can taste it, but you're squandering it. You could be Court. You could be the greatest goalkeeper in the game. You could have everything, but you won't even try. You sabotage yourself at every turn instead. Watching you play like you don't care who wins makes me sick to my stomach."

"We're done here," Andrew said. "Go away."

"Not until you tell me why. I need to know. Look me in the face and tell me you don't care."

Andrew obediently turned to face him. "I don't care."

"You don't mean that. You can't be this good and not feel a thing." Kevin flicked Aaron an impatient look. "Tell him I'm right."

"What's the point?" Aaron toed out of his shoes and kicked them aside. He peeled his knee-high socks off so he could undo the straps of his shin guards. "He always knows when I'm lying to him. It wouldn't do you any good to drag me into this."

"It's not a lie. He—"

"—is a Minyard," Aaron said, "and Minyards don't get higher than rock bottom. Now leave us alone."

Kevin stared at him like he wasn't sure who he was looking at, then whirled on Andrew. "Fifteen minutes," he said. "Spend fifteen minutes on the court with me. If you still want me to go after that, I'll leave. Coach Felder," he said, turning away before Andrew could answer, "I'm borrowing your court and your goalkeeper, but you'll need to loan me some gear. I didn't bring any of mine."

"I told you to go away," Andrew said. "If you make me say it a third time they'll be carrying you out on a stretcher."

"Mind your manners, Minyard," Felder said.

"Coach?" Aaron asked.

"The other Minyard." Felder snapped his fingers at the nearest dealer. "You're about the same height. Get out your away gear and make it quick. As for you," he raked Andrew with a scathing look, "get that expensive racquet off the floor and get down to the court. And if I see you disrespecting school property again you'll be benched."

"Not the bench, Coach." Andrew mimed scrubbing away a tear with one gloved fist and scooped his racquet up. "Anything but that."

Felder ignored his sarcasm with obvious effort. "The court's all yours, Kevin. Anything else you need, just say the word."

"I'll take a backliner with me." Kevin motioned at Aaron. "Put your shoes back on."

"Don't tell me what to do," Aaron said.

"He said strap up," Felder said.

Aaron scowled but did as he was told. It took only seconds to tighten his shin guards and tug his shoes and socks back on. He grabbed his racquet and followed Andrew back to the court. Unsurprisingly, the rest of the Eagles followed close behind them. By the time Aaron reached the court door the team had taken over the home benches to watch. Andrew crouched at the home goal to wait, so Aaron took up his place on first-fourth. It didn't take long for Kevin to change out and join them, and he brought a bucket of balls with him.

"Begin," Kevin said, and he proceeded to slaughter them.

Aaron knew Kevin was good. It was hard to play Exy and not know Kevin's name and reputation. Aaron had never seen him play before, though, and he was not at all prepared to face him on the court. When the initial shock wore off he put every ounce of energy he had left into the fight. It did absolutely no good. Kevin broke past him time and time again, and Kevin scored on every shot he aimed at the goal.

Aaron had never really given a damn about Exy. He learned it because it got him out of the house and kept him out of his mother's reach, and he stuck with it because he was good at it. He didn't necessarily like his teammates and the words his coach liked to throw around—teamwork, passion, dedication—were just words. They meant nothing. But for one small moment, Aaron was impressed. He wondered if Andrew felt it too, but he crushed that thought as quickly as it formed. It didn't matter. It wouldn't matter.

The indifference he clung to couldn't last, because Andrew was starting to wake up and push back. Andrew lost eight goals before he slammed one of Kevin's balls right back at him. The blue neck guard Kevin had borrowed kept it from crushing his windpipe but the force of impact was still enough to make Kevin stumble a bit. It had to hurt, but Kevin's mouth twisted in a quick, fierce smile. The game quickly escalated from there, both in violence and speed, but the twins weren't strong enough.

Riko was standing in the inner court behind the goal and he banged on the wall when their time was up. Kevin caught the ball on the next rebound and dropped it to one side as useless. Aaron slowed to a grateful stop and rubbed at an aching shoulder, but Andrew set off immediately for the court door.

Kevin intercepted him and hooked a finger through the grating on Andrew's helmet. "You're still holding yourself back. Why won't you just show me what you're capable of?"

"Is it a hearing problem or a horizontal learning curve?" Andrew asked. "Refer back to the part where I don't care."

Kevin didn't fight when Andrew tugged his hand loose, but he did say, "Didn't you have fun?"

Andrew thought about it, then said, "No. Not even a bit."

He tapped two fingers to his temple in a mocking salute and left. This time Kevin let him go. Aaron collected the scattered balls from around the court and brought them back to the bucket. By the time he made it back upstairs Andrew was already in the shower. Aaron put his gear away and washed up as quickly as he could. There was no reason to stick around after that; they'd been finishing up their post-practice talk when Riko and Kevin showed up uninvited. Aaron checked in with Felder just in case and got a grumpy dismissal.

Andrew was already halfway across the parking lot when Aaron left the locker room. Aaron caught up with him at the car. Nicky was waiting for them in the driver's seat with the engine running and the heater on. He twisted around to eye them when they were both in the backseat.

"I was about to send in a rescue squad," Nicky said. "Why'd practice run so late?"

"Oh, you know," Andrew said.

Nicky huffed at that unhelpful response and faced forward. The rest of the Eagles were sticking around to hound Kevin and Riko some more, so it was easy to get out of the parking lot and on the road. "Good thing I don't have work tonight or I'd have missed the start of my shift."

Tell your coach to give us a heads-up the next time he wants to punch a hole through people's schedules, would you?"

"There won't be a next time," Aaron said. "Nicky, tell Andrew he's a terrible liar."

"First off, that phone tag thing got old about ten months ago," Nicky said. "Second, why should I tell Andrew something he already knows? Andrew makes up outrageous lies because they amuse him, not because he thinks he's fooling anyone. I think. I might be wrong. I don't understand all the fine print of that woo-hoo." Nicky twirled a finger near his ear to indicate Andrew's questionable sanity and grinned at Andrew in the rearview mirror. "Why, did I miss something good?"

"No," Aaron said. "Not much."

"Just the usual nonsense," Andrew said. "Don't be jealous, Nicky!"

Nicky accepted that without argument. "Speaking of jealousy, Roland called earlier and..."

Aaron tuned Nicky out in favor of watching the world go by out his window. It was late enough the street lights occasionally cast his reflection on the glass. He studied the outline of his face, the curves and angles he and Andrew had in common. They were twins, whether they wanted to be or not, whether they could stand each other or not, and it was as much a blessing as a curse. A childhood apart meant nothing, and Andrew's drugs were inconsequential in the end. Aaron still saw himself on every inch of Andrew's skin and in the tiny gestures and tics they shared. He always knew when Andrew was lying.

He'd just never before seen Andrew lie to himself.

"Aaron?" Nicky asked. "Did you hear anything I just said?"

Aaron slanted a look across the backseat at Andrew. "Not even a bit."

THEA MULDANI

Theodora “Thea” Muldani

Recruited to the Ravens as one of their token women. Advised from the get-go that the master is against both her race and her sex, and that she will have work twice as hard to earn her place. Spends years fighting her way up the ranks until the master finally approves her for starting line-up. Nominates self for vice-captain her senior year (soundly rejected). Had been seeing the captain at the time, but broke things off with him when he laughed off her irritation (“of course he wouldn’t pick you, you’re a girl”). Spends her senior year in a casual fling with the Ravens’ starting goalkeeper.

Summer practices before her 5th year, the perfect Court officially join the lineup. Sees a lot of Jean, who follows her around wanting advice and insight. Sees more of Kevin & Riko (always together, since the two never leave each other alone in a room). Knows Riko is King, but is predisposed to be annoyed with Kevin who has already made snide comments about her goalkeeper and who dispenses nonstop opinions and judgment without invitation. They spend the next several months shit-talking each other’s skills until Riko gets tired of it and tells Kevin to just fuck her already. Finding out that’s why Kevin has been such a wretched bitch to put up with finally makes him interesting.

Thea drops things with her goalie, but Kevin is leery of actively pursuing her long-term when it puts her under Riko’s microscope. They settle for harassing each other on the court and passing notes (sometimes using Jean as the bitter go-between). Kevin fusses at her for turning down the national team; she tells him he’s better than Riko is. Bit by bit they see pieces of who they are past the Ravens, his love of history and her dream of climbing Kilimanjaro. Bit by bit they see how much they both want to be the best on the court, to be unchallenged and unstoppable. They’re compatible, and Thea knows it, but Kevin has years at Evermore still, has a King!brother in his line-of-sight at all times and a master who is hawking him out to the press on a regular basis.

Thea promises to cut him out when she graduates. She has the national Court calling her back and professional teams trying to sign her to their line; she has enough to keep her busy and new lineups to hone her skills against. She’ll focus on her own growth and let Kevin get through Evermore’s hurdles. She says “Tell me if I should come back”, and Kevin says “Yes”. She jokes that he should get some practice in with the ladies while she’s gone so he’ll be ready for her: a joking insult against his skills to rile him up, a promise she’ll wait as long as it takes, and reassurance that he isn’t bound to her and can pursue other people if he so desires. Thea graduates, signs with the Houston Sirens and the US Court, and goes on to earn a fearsome reputation.

Almost two years later, the news is out: Kevin has been injured in a skiing accident and has vanished. Thea breaks her promise and tries to reach him, but his number is disconnected. She tries Jean next, and Jean tells her Kevin wants nothing to do with any of them anymore. Then Kevin starts helping at an unworthy scrap of a school, and he joins their lineup like he's not ashamed to be associated with dead-last losers. The future Thea was waiting for is burning; she puts everything she has into her own career and life to try and figure out where to go from here.

And then one day Kevin opens his mouth on live TV and says "Did you know I've never been skiing?"

She can't reach Jean for an explanation. She can't even reach Riko. So Thea breaks her promise a second time, and this time she buys a ticket to South Carolina to get the answers for herself.

DAVID WYMACK

Foxes' Head Coach

Kevin Day's Father

WYMACK AND THE MONSTERS

Here's a story (that took too long to write, for how short & rough it is) of how David Wymack meets Andrew's group. Takes place shortly after Kevin & Andrew's first meeting.

He caught up to them at Subway. The place was busy but not crowded, as the dinner hour had peaked an hour and a half ago. Andrew was the only one who noticed the arrival of one more body; he flicked an instinctive look David's way before turning back to the glass case in front of him. David Wymack stood off to one side, folder safely tucked one arm and hands in his pockets. He kept his eyes on the menu as if considering his options but tracked the cousins' progress in his peripheral vision.

Andrew was the first to peel away from the counter. He detoured to the nearest open booth, slid his tray across the table so recklessly it almost slid off the edge and onto one of the seats, and carried his empty cup to the drinks station. As soon as he turned away David helped himself to Andrew's table. He snagged the corner of Andrew's tray and pulled it back to a safe distance. By the time he looked up Andrew was already back, his plastic cup only a quarter full.

"Oh, perhaps I blinked," Andrew said with wide-eyed surprise. "I did not see you sitting here."

"I got here after you did." David cast a critical eye over Andrew's sandwich—bread, lettuce, and jalapenos? Seriously?—then pried open the bag of chips. He helped himself to one and arched a brow up at Andrew. "Get your drink and sit down."

"But I am no longer thirsty." Andrew set his cup to one side, plucked his chips from David's unresisting fingers, and dumped the bag onto the tabletop in front of David. A quick slap of his hand crunched most of the chips into unappetizing chunks. Andrew wiped his hand off on one jeans thigh and sat opposite David. He gave the empty chip bag a considering look before dropping it on the floor. "Hello. I don't know you."

David leaned over, scooped the bag off the floor, and tossed it onto Andrew's tray. He glanced toward Nicholas and Aaron, who were eyeing him as they filled their cups. Aaron's stony expression wasn't promising, but Nicholas looked at least a little curious to see a stranger sitting with his wilder cousin. David turned back on Andrew, who was still watching him with a too-wide smile on his face.

"You're Andrew Minyard," David said, and rattled off Andrew's statistics from memory.

The numbers were impressive, especially considering Andrew only had two seasons' experience with the Macon High Eagles, but Andrew waved it off with a flick of his fingers. It wasn't modesty; it was apathy. Andrew took no pride or satisfaction at being first-ranked goalie

in the southeast. Coach Felder had said it, but David didn't believe it until he had seen Andrew play. Andrew defended his goal like it was a minor inconvenience.

"I know all that," Andrew said, and pressed again. "I don't know you."

"I'm your new coach."

"Felder is quitting?" Andrew mimed scrubbing tears from one eye. "Alas, how sad, I'm sure an outcry was heard across the state! Ah, but I lie. No one will actually miss him. But odd timing, yes, to quit this time of year? And odd of you to waste your time with me. I am a senior, you see, and they are desperate to let me graduate. You would perhaps have better luck playing hello-how-are-you with the underclassmen. They will still be here next year. Good luck and goodbye."

David ignored the pointed dismissal. "Why don't you shut up for a moment and let me explain?"

"Hey, man." Nicholas had finally caught up to them. "We don't want any trouble, yeah?"

"Isn't that a first for you?" David asked. "What I've heard, you three attract trouble like you need it to breathe."

"You a cop?"

"He's a coach," Andrew said. "New Felder, he says."

"I said no such thing," David said. "Is Aaron coming or what? I'd like to get this conversation started at some point today."

"Oh, is he here?" Andrew asked. "Nicky, do us a favor."

Nicky looked to Aaron and jerked his chin in a come-hither. Aaron's expression didn't change but he obediently joined them at the table. David slid further down to make room, and Aaron took the spot beside him. Andrew got up to let Nicky take the inside seat before sitting cross-legged on the bench. David pushed crumbs out of his way while they got settled, trying to make room on the table for his paperwork. Aaron watched him in silence for a couple seconds, then reached out and swept all of the broken chips onto the floor.

"Glad to see good manners run in the family," David said.

"Go fuck yourself," Aaron said with more boredom than heat. "What do you want?"

"Like I said to Andrew here, I'm your new coach," David said. "The three of you are playing for Palmetto State University this fall."

"Uh," Nicky said, but it took a couple tries before he managed an uncertain, "What?"

Andrew slapped his fist into his palm in excited realization. "Wymack, David V. Foxhole Court. Last-ranked Class I school. Yes?"

David shouldn't be surprised. Considering his team's ugly reputation it wasn't farfetched to think even Andrew would recognize him with a little nudge. They played in the same state, after all. But Felder swore up and down that Andrew could barely name half of his own teammates. David filed that away to think on later.

"That's right," David said. "I need a new defense line and last I heard you're still unclaimed."

"The three of us," Nicky repeated. "I think you pulled the wrong files, because I graduated a couple years ago."

"I already checked," David said. "You haven't aged out and you're not enrolled anywhere else yet. You're eligible for a little while longer."

"But I'm not—I mean, I'm just here in passing. I was planning on heading back to Germany this fall after the midget mites—uh, well—" Nicky made a hopeless gesture at the twins. His flailing confirmed what the high school counselor had said last month: neither Andrew nor Aaron had any concrete post-graduate plans. They hadn't applied to any schools and weren't employed anywhere that anyone knew of. "I've got a life there I kind of want to get back to."

"No one's keeping you here," Aaron said, a cool reminder that made Nicky grimace.

"I am," David said, and tipped his folder's contents onto the table. He didn't miss the way Nicky's gaze darted to the contracts. "Put Europe on pause; it'll still be there in five years. A free education and a chance to play with a Class I team isn't something you want to pass up."

Aaron's laugh was short and sharp. "Are we supposed to be flattered that you're inviting us to play with your trainwreck nobodies?"

"Harsh," Nicky said.

"It's true," Aaron said. "He's only here bothering us because we fit his loser profile."

David had heard a lot of rude things said about the Foxes since their inception, but few people were callous enough to say it to his face. Luckily he'd spent enough years wrangling difficult personalities that he could answer Aaron's mockery with a neutral expression and a calm, "Make the smart decision here. I'm offering you a full ride—everything from school supplies to meal plans and court gear. All you have to do is keep your grades up and play for my team. Give me one good reason why you'd turn me down."

"Is that true?" Andrew asked like David hadn't spoken. "You like us because we're losers?"

"If you were losers I wouldn't be here," David said. "Yes, I have recruiting standards, but your doppelganger here completely misunderstands them." Andrew gave an expansive gesture, inviting him to explain himself, but David wasn't waiting for his permission. "I look for people who've been given up on—people who've given up on themselves. The Foxhole Court is a place to regroup, to catch your breath and find your feet again. It's a second chance."

"It's a scam," Aaron said. "I don't know what sick pleasure you get out of watching people mock your reject team, but—"

"How curious," Andrew cut in. He propped his elbow on the table and cradled his face in his hand. "Maybe it is a marketing scheme? It must be fantastically successful if you've stuck with it this long. But Coach, oh Coach, be careful what you ask for, yes? You will bite off more than you can chew if you try to drag us into it."

David looked him dead in the eye. "Try me."

"You would put them all at risk." Andrew sounded almost admiring. "How single-minded."

"My team started paying attention to you when you spat on the Ravens," David said. "They know your reputation and they've heard every awful rumor. I told them I intended to sign you, and for the first time ever I let them vote on it. It was unanimous. It had to be if we were going to win the school board over."

"How many?" Andrew asked.

"Nine are staying on next year," David said.

"Hear that, Nicky? Nine people said we're not going to be a problem."

David corrected Andrew with a shake of his head. "Nine people said you would be a serious problem but one they were willing to live with. You three are the answer to an impossible problem. We need a cohesive defense line to rebuild our team around."

"And you came to us," Aaron said.

It wasn't quite an accusation, but David wondered what he'd missed. He'd talked to at least a dozen people at Macon before approaching his team with his decision. None of them, not Felder or the guidance counselors or the teachers, had reported any issues with the twins. They shared most of the same classes and traveled to and from school together. They complemented each other well on the court. Nicky wasn't a student, but he was the twins' legal guardian, so the principal and counselor had met him several times. Felder said Nicky came to almost every game, too, and he'd vouched for the easy relationship between the cousins.

"Yes," David said. "Your personal dramas are above my paygrade. I care about how you are on the court and I like what I see. I made my decision and I'll stand by it. Make yours, but do it fast. I won't wait forever."

"Got somewhere to be?" Andrew asked.

"The top," David said. "I'm tired of sitting around on my ass in the trenches."

"Oh, well, let us know how that works out for you." Andrew hooked a finger around the corner of his tray and pulled it in front of him. His other hand shooed David away like he was a bothersome gnat. "Goodbye, Coach David V. Wymack. I am going to eat now."

Aaron stood and gave a pointed gesture for David to beat it. David moved his stack of paperwork across the table to Nicky. Nicky leaned away from it with a quick glance at Andrew. Andrew didn't look up from where he was scattering lettuce and jalapenos all over his tray, but he smiled.

"My office number is inside," David said. "You've got one week."

He slid off the bench without another word but didn't go far. The people he needed now were in the booth right behind the cousins': Dan and Matt had come in while the trio were distracted and seized the best spot to eavesdrop. Judging by their tight expressions they weren't happy with what they heard. David didn't care. They'd been warned; they'd all been warned. Besides, it wasn't news how little disregard people held for the Foxes.

"What are you still sitting around for?" David asked them. "We're finished here, in case you two didn't notice."

"Finally," Dan said. "I'm starving."

"If you were starving you'd be moving faster."

Nicky and Aaron watched with blank faces as Matt and Dan got up to stand at David's side. Even Andrew looked up at this new development, and his smile was all teeth. Dan motioned for David to wait and turned a quelling stare on Aaron.

"Call us losers again," she said.

"You are losers," Aaron said, unashamed of being overheard. "Your record speaks for itself."

"So you're stupid and an asshole," Dan said, and put a finger in his face before he could retort. "Losers aren't people with weak statistics. Losers are people who won't try, who look at insurmountable odds and give up prematurely. My Foxes aren't losers. We put it all out there day after day because we believe there's got to be something better than this. It's not about getting there quickly; it's about sticking with this no matter how long the fight."

"We're fighters," she said with emphasis, and this time she looked each of the cousins in the eye. "We chose you because we thought you were, too. If you aren't, I'll rescind my vote. I don't have time to waste on people who are too scared to take risks."

"You must be on some fantastic drugs," Aaron said.

"It's called optimism," Nicky chipped in.

It was a funny thing to hear, because David had never considered Dan to be an optimist. Optimists believed things would pan out for the better. Dan forced her life to improve through sheer force of will and hard work. She knew nothing in life came free and was willing to shed blood, sweat, and tears to get what she wanted. It was why he'd given her his team; he wouldn't trust the Foxes in anyone else's hands.

"Oh, is that what that is?" Andrew asked. "I've never seen it up close before. Captain, how do you stay standing? Sounds exhausting, always thinking things will work out."

"It's far more exhausting to think things will stay the same," Dan said. "I've been there; I've done that. I've woken up and faced every day feeling like there was never going to be anything else. I'm over that and I'm never going back. Now it's your turn. Come with us."

"Maybe next time," Andrew said with a bright smile. "I am eating now. Goodbye."

Dan didn't look finished, but even she knew better than to push it. She looped her arm through Matt's and preceded David to the door. David sent one last look at the table, was satisfied by the way Nicky was holding onto the edge of the folder, and followed his Foxes out. Matt waited until they were in the car before speaking up.

"Think they'll sign?"

"They'd better," David said.

His temples twinged with the start of a tension headache as he turned the keys in the ignition. Finding Andrew's lot was a stroke of luck. David paid a couple guys to help him track high school Exy rankings across the US, but he handled all the South Carolina teams. David recognized Aaron's name after watching him slowly rise in the rankings these past four years.

Aaron wouldn't have been his first choice—maybe closer to sixth or seventh—except last spring David turned his list one page too far and saw a new name in the goalkeeper rankings.

It might have been coincidence, but it wasn't. Andrew and Aaron Minyard were related. More importantly, they were twin brothers playing defense on the same team. Their junior year Andrew was the second-ranked goalkeeper in South Carolina and Aaron was a top-ten backliner. This year Andrew was first, with better statistics than either of David's current 'keepers. Andrew's percentages would likely drop when he had to face NCAA-ranked players, but David wasn't going to pass that talent up.

David spent the summer digging up their tapes and finding everything he could about them. What he unearthed gave him pause, not because he was swayed by Andrew's violent past but because he knew selling the school board on such a man would be borderline impossible. He tried looking elsewhere but kept coming back. Discovering Nicky Hemmick sealed the deal. Nicky was rusty but he'd had good statistics when he played backliner at Macon High. He and the twins were a complete set.

David meant what he told Andrew: the Foxes needed a solid defense line or they were finished. David's initial four-year contract was almost up and the Foxes were another rocky season away from being downgraded to Class II. The only way to save his job and the Foxes' ranking was to turn the team around. He needed a backbone to build his team around. Matt had heart-stopping talent, but he avoided his male teammates like the plague. Reggie and Damien were on a fast track down if they didn't clean up their act. He had suspicions they'd graduated past the pot the strikers preferred to harder substances, but he couldn't prove anything yet. They had until fall to sort it out before heads were going to roll.

Andrew's lot was the answer. David could feel it in his bones. Almost losing Andrew to Edgar Allan last month put more gray in his hair than the last ten years combined had. The very next day he'd sat Dan down and laid it all out for her. She'd been more excited than he was at the prospect of hauling in an entire family. Some of her enthusiasm had dimmed as the reality and rumors started to filter in, but she'd made her decision and would stick by it.

"They'll sign," Dan said.

David didn't think he was imagining the silent 'or else' following that confident declaration, but he wisely decided not to comment. The ball was in their court now. David had given them a week to respond but he honestly wasn't sure what he'd do if Andrew never got back to him. He had back-up choices, of course, who were all talented and would do well at the Foxhole Court, but he wanted—needed—the cousins to take the bait.

"Enough of this mess," David said, because he wasn't about to give himself an ulcer waiting by the phone for a week. "What are we eating?"

"Are you paying or is the school?" Dan asked. David fished the team's p-card out of his pocket and held it where she could see. "I vote lobster."

"Perfect," David said. "Beer's on me."

In the end, the beer tab ran almost as high as their food did, but David figured they deserved it after today's mess.

*

Saturday morning started the same as any other: David got up at four when his phone buzzed him awake, he detoured to the bathroom to piss and brush his teeth, and he headed to the kitchen just as his coffee maker finished gurgling. He'd have a mug, then go downstairs to get the paper and take his morning walk, and he'd be back in plenty of time for the morning news. It was a routine he'd adopted shortly after moving to South Carolina and David stuck to it whenever possible.

Today required a change of plans, because Andrew Minyard was sitting at his table with an ashtray and a familiar bottle of scotch. The last time David saw his Chivas it was unopened and locked in his glass liquor cabinet. Now it was well on its way to being half-empty. David wasn't sure what to react to first, the break-in or the blatant theft of his liquor. Either one required more caffeine than was presently in his system. He settled for scowling at Andrew on his way to the cabinets.

Andrew grinned in response and stubbed his cigarette out. "Hello, Coach. I let myself in. You don't mind, do you? I didn't think you would."

"That depends," David said. "Did you break anything?"

"Not yet," Andrew said. "I didn't see anything of value."

"Except the seal on my Chivas."

"Oh, yes. Except that. If you need it back it's in the trash can by your desk."

"So you do know how to use a trash can."

"I learn something new every day."

David filled the biggest mug he could find and sat opposite Andrew. "I don't remember giving you my address." The smile on Andrew's face said he wasn't going to get an explanation for that one, so David continued, "And last I checked there was a fence around this complex. Whose card did you steal to get through the gate?"

"The fence isn't that tall."

"You scaled it?" David arched a brow at him. "You could have just called my office during normal business hours. It would have been easier."

"How boring. This is more interesting, don't you think?" Andrew gestured between them. "That's important, you see. I like things that are interesting. I have a very weak attention span, Coach. Boring things are a waste of my time. Perhaps it's a side effect of this?" He twirled his finger by his ear as if calling himself crazy, but David didn't know if he was referring to his issues or the medicine his lawyer signed him up for. "I can't remember. Too much time up, up, up. Don't remember what the ground is like anymore. They say it's for the best."

"Do you agree?"

Andrew laughed. "Above your paygrade, Coach. Remember? That's not why I'm here."

"Then why are you here?"

Andrew leaned forward and motioned to David as if trying to urge him closer. "They're saying this is the end of your Foxes. One more season and you're out. They'll rebuild this place from the ground up and they'll make it in their uppity image. They'll spend the next twenty years trying to scrub your failure from the rafters and fifty years overcoming your reputation. I imagine they can't wait."

David refused to take the bait. "I said, why are you here?"

"Because I like the way you say please," Andrew said. "Noose already around your neck but you look at us and say Fuck you, I need you, but I'm not going to beg. Pride? Stupidity? I don't know. But I know that you have nothing without me. Nicky wants you. Aaron is unconvinced. Neither of them will sign with you unless I tell them it is okay. Therefore, this."

"Are you listening?" Andrew leaned back in his chair. "I don't like Exy, and I don't need a higher education. If I sign your papers it will be for the entertainment value. It's a big 'if', Coach. The papers you left are for a five-year contract. Five years! I've never been anywhere for five years. It's a miracle I've lasted two in Columbia. You really think you can keep my attention that long?"

"Yes," David said.

His immediate response earned him another toothy grin. "Such confidence."

"You haven't met my Foxes," David said. "They're interesting."

"Not a word the press has ever used on them."

"Don't believe everything the press has to say."

"I don't believe anything anyone has to say. I believe myself only occasionally."

"I can't imagine why."

"You aren't afraid of me," Andrew said. He knocked back the rest of the scotch he'd poured and got up. David watched over the rim of his coffee mug as Andrew came around the table. Andrew hoisted himself up onto the table beside David's chair and tilted forward to get right in David's face. "Curiosity killed the cat, maybe? But indulge me and my self-destructive tendencies. Why aren't you?"

"When you've lived as long as I have, you'll understand," David said.

"How is your balance?"

"I have a bad hip," David said. "Broke it in three places in a wreck several years back and it hasn't been the same since. This relevant at all to the current conversation?"

"It is a very fine line," Andrew said. "I'm wondering if you can balance on it."

"You'll have to elaborate."

"The last person who thought I wasn't worth fearing spent two days in an ICU when I felt compelled to prove him wrong."

"Don't flatter yourself," David said. "You're a fucked-up druggie with a bloody past and every person I've talked to about you has advised me to walk away. They say you're dangerous. I've heard the rumors, but I don't care how many of them are true. I can't change the past; none of

us can. All that matters is what we are now and where we stand to go from here. I am not afraid of you. I never will be."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"I'm not particularly fond of cockroaches."

Andrew flashed a toothy grin and leaned back. "Oh, Coach. How unexpected. You might be growing on me."

"I am taking a chance on you," David said. "Take a chance on me and my Foxes. Sign the contract and play on my team."

"What will you give me in exchange?"

"Aside from a scholarship and a Class I record?"

"Neither of which means much to me," Andrew reminded him.

"What could you possibly want?"

Andrew considered it for an endless minute, staring at David and through him. Finally he dug something out of his pocket and set it upside-down on the table near David's mug. It was a medicine bottle—Andrew's prescription drugs. The bottle was nearly empty. At the rate Andrew was supposed to take them he'd be needing a refill before next week was out. David looked from the pills to Andrew and said,

"I can't take you off that."

"For another two years, no," Andrew agreed. "But perhaps you'll loosen the chain a bit. Are you willing to let me off this on game nights?"

"Are you going to raze my stadium to the ground and slaughter my Foxes if you're sober?"

"Maybe," Andrew said with a shrug. "But don't fret. I wouldn't be sober, see. They knew what they were doing when they chose this drug. Find the man who made these pills and give him a medal; can't stay off them long enough to get sober. I tried it six times just to see if I could. No good, Coach. No fun at all."

"I need an able-bodied goalkeeper and a strong defense line," David said. "Why should I sign you if you want to cripple yourself on game nights?"

"You don't think," Andrew said. "I told you, didn't I? I don't like Exy. I don't like teams; I don't like teamwork. I was not born and raised to be a team player. You want me to do them any good you have to narrow the playing field. When I crash the only thing I feel is me, and I will do what comes naturally."

"Which is?"

Andrew's smile was wide. "Fight everyone who thinks he can best me."

David said nothing for a while, weighing the pros and cons and adding up the hundred things that could go wrong with this scenario. "What if you're caught?"

"They won't catch me."

"My Foxes will," David said. "I won't let you on my court like that without warning them. They need to know who's guarding their backs."

Andrew shrugged again, like it was all the same to him. David emptied his coffee and got up for a refill. He put the coffee pot back, drummed his fingers on the side of his mug, and turned back on Andrew. Andrew was getting into the Chivas again, but now he was drinking from the bottle. David considered calling him out on it. He refrained only because he was sure Andrew was trying to get a rise out of him. David wasn't going to give him that satisfaction.

"Okay," David said. "You can come off it for game nights under two conditions: you don't get caught, and you keep your stats up. The second you start wrecking my games I'll bench you. You can go through withdrawal on the sidelines."

"So demanding," Andrew said, but he didn't sound bothered. "But fair enough for now."

"For now?" David asked.

Andrew got to his feet, screwed the cap back onto the Chivas, and shoved his pills back into his pocket. He padded out of the kitchen, taking the whiskey with him. David followed him to the front door, a little bit jarred by the abrupt end to their conversation. He wasn't entirely convinced Andrew really was leaving until Andrew was out the door.

Andrew stopped a couple feet into the hallway. "The contracts are on your desk. Nicky's number should be in there somewhere. Call him if you want to argue about the details; you bore me with it and I'll just hang up on you. Yes?" Andrew looked back at him to see if he understood, then said, "You've got my attention, Coach. Can you hold it?"

"As long as I have to," David said.

Andrew's grin was all teeth. "We'll see."

David watched until he'd disappeared into the elevator, then closed and locked the door. He went down the hall to his office and found a stack of signed paperwork on his desk. He sifted through it, making sure everything was in order, and sat down when he was done. He stared through the far wall for a few minutes. Finally he reached for his phone and dialed Dan's number from memory.

She answered on the third ring with a slurred, "It's early, Coach."

"I've got you a defense line," David said.

Dan whooped—ragged with sleep but triumphant—and David knew he'd made the right decision. The risks were negligible compared to what the Foxes stood to gain. For a moment David felt real hope: that the Foxes' chances would improve, that the ERC would give them more time, that Palmetto State's board wouldn't terminate him at the end of the next year. He forced it all aside because hope only set people up for disappointment.

"Go back to sleep," David said. "We've got a lot to talk about Monday."

"Yes, Coach," Dan said.

David hung up, sat at his desk for a little longer, and then decided his routine could kiss it. He cracked open his liquor cabinet, pulled out the most expensive bottle he had in stock, and spent the rest of the day watching recordings of the Foxes' fall games. It wasn't healthy and definitely wasn't practical, but there was no way he'd rather spend his day than reliving every moment of his team's savage efforts.

WYMACK AND ANDREW RE: NEIL

all smiles and no one remembers our names

Timeline: takes place during the events of The Foxhole Court, the first day all of the Foxes are back in South Carolina for summer practices. An older story, so not as refined as it should be, but...

David reached for the lightswitch as he came through the front door, but his hand stilled halfway to it. The hall light was already on; someone had beaten him home. Abby and Neil both had keys to his place, but they would have said something to him before dropping by. That left only one other option, but the silence didn't bode well. David locked the door behind himself and went down the hall in search of his uninvited guest.

Andrew was sitting cross-legged on his couch, hands clenched white-knuckled around his ankles. A bottle of whiskey was half-empty on the coffee table and the plastic beside it sure as hell wasn't from sugar packets. Despite everything Andrew was choking his system with to ward off withdrawal, there was a tightness to his mouth that said he was two seconds away from being violently ill. He slid a dark look David's way as David paused in the doorway.

"You're a fucking idiot," David said.

"Shut the fuck up," Andrew said, but he couldn't sound threatening when he was speaking through clenched teeth.

David shook his head and continued to the kitchen. The absence of dirty dishes on the counter had him tossing his mail onto the table with disgust. Andrew knew better than to mix alcohol and crackers with his medication, and he definitely knew better than to do it on an empty stomach. That he'd done it anyway was stupid beyond words and so predictably Andrew David was tempted to choke him. He pushed around the slim pickings in his cabinet before settling on sandwiches. He made four, divided them between two places, and went back to the living room. He sat on the coffee table facing Andrew and put one of the saucers on the cushion at Andrew's side.

"You're cleaning this place before you leave," David said. "You leave even a speck of that dust behind in my apartment and we're going to have a serious problem."

"We already have a serious problem," Andrew said.

"Eat first, bitch at me later."

It was almost a minute before Andrew finally relaxed his grip enough to reach for the food. He tore his sandwich into shreds, then took the shreds apart and ate it one small piece at a time. He managed three-quarters of it before giving up and going for the whiskey again. He swigged straight from the mouth, which was a pretty good sign he was pissed at David. Until Neil moved in this May, Andrew had made an almost biweekly habit of breaking into David's

apartment. Most of the time he was just after David's alcohol, but he'd started using cups around the tenth visit.

Andrew drank until he had to come up for air, then asked, "What color are his eyes?"

"Green."

Andrew looked at him like David was being stupid on purpose. "I'm not talking about Kevin."

"For once." David set aside his saucer.

"Who have you let on my team?"

It was not at all the accusation David was expecting. This shitfit was supposed to be about the bombshell he'd dropped on the Foxes at today's meeting. How Neil outranked the Ravens' district change on Andrew's skewed list of priorities, David had no idea. "Kevin picked him. I just signed off on him."

"Mistake. He can't stay. If you don't chase him off I will."

"Leave him alone," David said. Andrew didn't answer but reached for the whiskey again. David slammed it back down onto the tabletop. "Andrew. Leave him alone. He's got just as much right to be here as any of you do."

"He is losing that right at an alarming rate," Andrew said. "I'm sick of his lies."

"I'm sure he's sick of your sunshine attitude, too."

"We missed something," Andrew said as if David hadn't spoken. "I don't know how. I don't know where. It doesn't add up. Did you know? The only truth he tells is Exy. That isn't enough, and it isn't going to last. He can't spend every second of every day with us without unraveling at the seams. The cracks are starting to show. Do you know what he's hiding?"

"It's not my business unless he makes it mine."

"You saw the way he looked at Kevin."

"You used to hate Kevin too," David reminded him. "Kevin's not exactly a people person."

"I won't tolerate loose ends," Andrew said flatly. "Not this year, not with Riko in our district. He isn't safe."

"Have you even tried talking to him?"

"Like talking to a politician," Andrew said. "Fake smiles and bullshit. Complete waste of time. No. He had his chance to come clean and he ignored it. I'm taking him to Columbia this Friday."

"Don't you dare."

"You can't stop me."

"But I can end you," David said. "All of you. If you do to him what you did to Matt, I will cut every last one of you from my roster."

"You don't even know who you're protecting."

"A Fox," David said, "same as any of you."

Andrew didn't look moved, but David knew he'd won. Andrew wouldn't think twice about screwing himself and his relatives out of their scholarships, but Kevin was a different story entirely. David wouldn't really cut Kevin, not when he was Kayleigh's son and not with Riko a fast-approaching threat on the horizon, but Andrew would never call his bluff. The consequences of being wrong were too severe for even Andrew to accept.

David gave it a few more minutes just in case, but finally Andrew turned his attention back on the whiskey. David understood the retreat for what it was and got to his feet. He took their plates with him out of the room and spent the rest of the evening working in his office. He smoked half a pack of cigarettes in the time it took him to arrange travel arrangements for their away games. Andrew's phone going off down the hall startled him into looking up from his computer screen. David checked the clock and went to grab a spare blanket from the linen closet.

The cap was screwed tight on the whiskey bottle, so David threw the blanket at Andrew from the doorway. Andrew pushed it around on the floor with his shoe a moment. David half-expected him to leave, but at length Andrew dragged the blanket up onto the couch.

"You wouldn't really cut Kevin," Andrew said.

David ignored him and went back to his office. He looked at his screen, but he couldn't focus on the words. His thoughts teetered between Andrew and Neil until he finally pulled Neil's sparse file from his cabinet. He studied Neil's profile picture, from his impassive expression to the guarded look in his eyes. He thought about Friday and wondered if there wasn't more he could do to try and rein Andrew in, but then he thought about Kevin and Riko and Kayleigh.

David liked Neil. The kid was a bit ragged around the edges and ice all the way through, but he was all right. But David had loved Kayleigh, and he wouldn't risk losing her only son. Kevin was all David had left of her.

"I'm sorry," David said, and he put Neil's file away.

WYMACK AND ANDREW GETTING HANDCUFFED

Q: Hello :) I wanted to say that I love, adore and worship your books <3. They gave me so much feelings and I can't stop thinking about Neil and Andrew, and Kevin and all other Foxes - they captured my heart. Sorry if it was asked before, but I'd love to know how exactly did Andrew end up handcuffed to coach Wymack? And, I'm really, really interested in what happened in Andrew's head since Neil was kidnapped to when he saw him at the hotel <3

A: Thank you so much for taking a chance on the Foxes! I'm really glad you enjoyed the books ;_;<3

Andrew ended up handcuffed to Wymack because Andrew was being problematic. He kept getting in the FBI's way, tried walking out to look for Neil on his own, and almost took a swing at Kurt when Kurt tried to stop him. Wymack intervened in the nick of time, hauling Andrew

back by the collar of his shirt. After that Wymack was deemed Andrew's babysitter, and they were handcuffed together so someone would have eyes on Andrew at all times. Unfortunately for Andrew, that meant he had to go with Wymack when Wymack moved the team bus out of the hotel parking lot, so he missed Neil's return.

The in-between of the riot & the hotel was mostly quiet after Andrew's first attempt to choke the life out of Kevin. Andrew finally had answers, and while he knew they weren't all the answers, he was busy putting together every scrap Neil had told him with everything Kevin had given up under duress. There was nothing else to do for the ride to Baltimore, so he thought about Neil and that promise and that number on Neil's phone, that dead look on Neil's face that said he'd known this was coming, and tried to figure out why the fuck hadn't Neil run

Andrew spent so much time trying to figure out Neil that he didn't—perhaps on purpose?—waste a second figuring out why he was so, so angry. Maybe he should've. It might've helped soften the blow when he stormed into the hotel and saw Neil again.

WYMACK AND KAYLEIGH

Q: Were Kayleigh Day and Wymack an item or just a casual fling? also she must have been a formidable woman to be friends with Tetsuji Moriyama.

A: They were in an open relationship for several months— Kayleigh made it clear when Wymack first expressed interest that she wasn't going to tie herself to just him. She didn't have the time or patience for monogamy; she had places to be, people to see, and a sport to spread. That's how she got away with hiding the truth re: Kevin from him for so long. ((Sex, sports, and salted caramels - three of her favorite things, ha.))

Wymack was definitely sweeter on her than she was on him, and it killed him a little that he couldn't win her over, but he respected her wishes and never pushed her for more than what she wanted to give him. He did a lot of drinking on the nights she was out with her other lovers, though. His head understood why it was better this way—she had dreams, and he had dreams, and they would spend most of their lives apart because of the paths they needed to walk even if they were each other's one & only—but it took his heart a couple years to catch on.

Kayleigh was definitely a force to be reckoned with! She intimidated most of her classmates when she was on the exchange program. She wasn't aggressive so much as she was completely unapologetic to be taking up space, staking claim on what she wanted, and speaking her mind. If people wanted to talk over her at Tetsuji since this was a sport & he was the man, she'd let herself into the conversation like she didn't know she wasn't invited and she'd dominate it until she felt like letting it go. That took Tetsuji a little while to get used to, but it was more because he

was a Moriyama and less because she was an outspoken woman. They got along really well ~~until~~
~~his brother killed her~~

Q: Did Kayleigh know about the Moriyama family business? Did she know what she was getting Kevin into with a godfather like Tetsuji?

A: Kayleigh did not understand, no, Tetsuji was never so indiscreet with her. Pobrecita might have hidden her son a little bit better if she'd known!!

WYMACK AND ABBY

Q: What happens with Abby and Wymack in future? if anything....

A: Abby & Wymack never get married, but they finally move in together during Neil's fifth year. Around the same time Abby tries to get Wymack to stop smoking, because she doesn't want that smell in her house. Andrew finds out when he stops by PSU to check on Neil.

Andrew only got the cigarette halfway to his mouth before Wymack took it away and broke it in half. Andrew watched the pieces roll across the ground before slanting an unimpressed look at Wymack.

"Coach gave up smoking," Neil said. "For twenty-four hours or so."

"Abby's doing," Andrew guessed. "If Neil told me to stop smoking, I'd kick him out. I would've thought you had more spine."

*"She didn't tell me," Wymack said. "She **suggested**, and it's not really your business."*

Even after they retire, they go to all of the Foxes' games, and they act as stand-in grandparents and de facto babysitters for Dan's children. *((They are actual grandparents for Thea & Kevin's daughter Amalia when Thea finally retires from the sport and invests her energy into raising a champion of her own))*

They grow old together and are buried together.

All of the Foxes present and future attend Wymack's funeral.

WYMACK'S PARENTS

Q: What happened to Wymack? With his parents? I know they're dead now, but what happened with them?

A: Here's his explanation, taken from Dan's excerpt. Dan is the only Fox on the current line-up who knows the whole story.

"I'm going to tell you a story," he said, carefully setting his mug to one side, "if you can tolerate me talking about myself for a while. It's a bit cliché, but it's the only one I've got."

Dan nodded, but she wasn't sure if it was encouragement or acknowledgment that he was sharing something very personal.

"My mother was fifteen when she had me. She never finished high school—she dropped out her freshman year when she got pregnant. My father was seven years older than she was and was pressured by parents on both sides to marry her. When they met, he was a lousy drunk. By the time I was eight, he'd moved on to other things and brought my mother with him: LSD and ecstasy and huffers and whatnot. When I was twelve, he started on PCPs. And that... Well, let's just say he went from being angry and useless to being violent and insane.

"I was fourteen when he took my mother's eyes out with a corkscrew," Wymack said. Dan recoiled, mouth open on a horrified protest she didn't have the air for. "I beat the ever-living shit out of him and threw him out of the house. Not quite sure how," he mused. "He was a big fucker." He considered the backs of his hands as if looking for his father's blood on his knuckles, then shrugged it off as unimportant.

"I stayed at the hospital with my mother that night. The following morning, when we were talking about what had happened and what we were supposed to do next, she looked at me and said, 'Don't worry. You'll never amount to anything, either.' They were the last words she ever said to me. I moved out that same day and never looked back. I didn't see her again until her funeral."

DID HE EVER CRY

Q: Was there a time where Wymack cried throughout the trilogy?

A: No. If there was a time he could've/should've, it would've been when he got the call about Seth and realized he'd lost another Fox. And maybe he would've felt better if he'd been able to cry. Release probably would've been a little less toxic than that hollow ache eating from his chest to his throat and down to his bones. But Wymack couldn't, because Wymack still had nine Foxes he needed to track down and inform, including four that started breaking apart under the news. Wymack ate his grief and that ugly sense of failure in favor of getting Abby and Bee to them.

Later was too late, was hours spent staring at a glass he'd poured but couldn't drink, of gnawing on grief that still burned bright but now lingered just out of reach, of telling himself that they'd

done everything they could've and given Seth every chance they should've and knowing that sometimes second third fourth fiftieth chances aren't enough.

NEIL JOSTEN

LIFE ON THE TEAM

Q: I'm wondering if you have any stories about Neil's life on the run with his mom? Jean mentions three of his past names (alex, stefan, chris) but I was wondering if there are back stories to go with them?

A: Okay, let's try this again, because I wrote up the original response a couple hours ago and Tumblr did that psycho thing where it turned my Keep Reading into a defunct link. Thanks Tumblr

Years and years ago I mapped out the path Mary & Nathaniel took, from Stuart's house through Arizona. I tried figuring out the easiest path they could take that couldn't be traced but a) still stayed close to Mary's contacts and b) allowed some of the languages to overlap (e.g. the France to Canada move). I was all the way to where I was figuring out the timing of it all, and then the file just.. vanished. Not the first time notes have disappeared off my computer, and won't be the last, but for once I decided not to try and recreate them.

I don't have any stories of those years, no, because I didn't think a short story or scene would properly convey what I wanted it to: the monotony, the desperation, the day-in day-out loneliness. What I settled for and collected were images: snapshot memories that Nathaniel would retain over the years no matter how mundane they might have seemed at the time. Moments that were a kaleidoscopic view of a farce of a childhood.

Hunched into a coat waiting for the ferry to arrive, trying to blend into the bumper-car traffic of a busy airport, learning to drive in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night with Mary's impatient voice at his ear. Mary cleaning her gun at their table while Neil sat on the bed, blood on brick when Mary did a favor for someone in return for some fresh IDs—when blood was easier to come by than money. Learning new languages, focusing on verbs and tone and conjugations, ignorant to the fact that how was your day is also a topic of conversation. Eating leftovers for as many days as they could stretch to minimize trips to the supermarket but trying to be seen enough in public that no neighbors would think them queer and reclusive enough to pay attention to.

Seeing someone who looked familiar. Seeing someone who was familiar. Seeing Mary kill a man as slowly as she could until he'd given up everything on how he'd tracked them this time.

Seeing Nathan.

Blood and fire and sand.

Alone.

FIGHT TRAINING

Q: How do Neil's fighting practices with Matt go? There's only one small mention of them so I wonder if it panned out. If it did, did Neil eventually start sparring with Renee and Andrew? I wanna know just how good at kicking ass my darling Neil is because the boy has GOT to win a fight at some point, right?

A: I nearly spit my wine out imagining Neil taking on Renee. She would beat the ever-living shit out of him in a tenth the time it took her to one-up Andrew. :D Girl is savage af beneath that chapstick smile.

Matt's lessons were how Neil was able to pop Riko in the face without breaking his thumb, but they don't really pay off until Neil's sophomore year, when Neil & Jack start clashing like Seth & Kevin used to. The first time Jack is stupid enough to actually take a swing at Neil, Neil knocks him on his ass before Dan can cross the court to them.

((Matt was so proud, though he had to be diplomatic on the court. He was all over Neil in the dorm later like YEAH THAT'S MY BRO))

((Coach sent everyone on laps because why the fuck did he sign up for these headaches is he a masochist or something like seriously why why why all this bullshit drama year after year goddamn))

NEIL'S BIRTHDAY

Q: Did the Foxes ever actually celebrate Neil's birthday?

A: They did! I keep thinking I wrote about it– not here, but somewhere else– but I can't seem to find the comments on it. But yeah, they had a get-together. Despite Dan's "warning", it wasn't a crazy affair, since Neil's not into wild & crazy get-togethers.

CHRISTMAS/BIRTHDAY PRESENTS FOR THE FOXES

Q: Hello again! You mentioned in a post earlier how Neil starts buying the foxes Christmas/birthday presents, so I was wondering if you have put thoughts into what kind of gifts he'd give to each of them? Thank you!

A: I feel like he'd be a terrible gift giver for a while because he has no practice with it ~~and no worthwhile social skills~~. So for a while he's gonna have to ask the others for advice ((and at least he's smart enough to not ask Nicky for help. Matt's a safer bet in this case.)) He looks for small,

practical things, like lotion to keep Allison's hands soft or tea for Renee or funky shot glasses for Nicky, things like that. By the time all the kids come along he realizes online wishlists are godsend and just uses those.

NEIL THROUGH THE FOXES' EYES

Q: So through the series we see things from Neil's perspective, but how do the foxes see Neil?? In book three Nicky(?) asks who is humanizing who in Neil and Andrew's relationship. Does Neil come across in the same way Andrew does to them? (Only less violent?)

A: I think Nicky was the closest to putting into words the Foxes' opinion of Neil: that he reminded them of a stray tom cat. Not quite sure where he stood with them, but always lurking around just out of reach in case he decided he wanted the company. A ~~little~~ lot bit distrusting at times, maybe a little ragged around the edges from one too many fights, but too stubborn to sit quietly and play nice. That cat that hides under the stoop and stares at you like Can I please come home with you but who turns tail and runs as soon as you try to befriend it.

NEIL THROUGH ICHIROU'S EYES

Q: (Same person who asked how the Foxes see Neil) How does Ichirou see Neil? Does he see a liar, a frightened person, or just someone who needs to be watched??

A: Short answer: Neil is the means to an end.

Ichirou grew up with the main family, so he knows who the Wesninskis are supposed to be to his family—and he knows exactly what Neil has cost his family by his refusal to fall in line. He is willing to assign most of the blame to Mary on account of Neil's age when he vanished and because Neil does bring up some good points – particularly why would I have put myself back in the spotlight if I didn't want to be found? – but that does not mean he is at all willing to forgive Neil. He does not believe for one second that Neil is truly loyal to the Moriyama family like his father was or like a Wesninski should be. Neil is deceitful, but he is clever, and he can still be useful.

The obvious solution is to wipe the slate clean and get rid of Neil. Despite how easily Ichirou suggests it, the timing means it would be difficult and very costly—with Nathan freshly dead and the FBI neck-deep in everything, with Neil's confessions already recorded in triplicate, getting rid of Neil is more about stopping future damage than erasing what's already happened. His people could lose the evidence with enough urging and opportunity, but Nathan is such a big catch that the Moriyamas would be playing clean-up for a while. Ichirou is still willing to consider this option, but he chooses to let Neil live for two reasons.

The first is Ichirou has every reason to believe Neil is a controllable asset. He chose to enroll at Palmetto State and put himself in the public eye. He chose to return to the Foxes when the FBI could have/should have put him in the Witness Protection Program. His willingness to kowtow, sell out Riko's indiscretions, and fork over pretty much his entire future earnings means Neil has made a fatal mistake and found something worth caring about. Ichirou now has a minimum of eight people he can hold against Neil at any given moment if he doesn't like the way Neil's acting.

The second is Ichirou does not consider Neil to be his biggest threat. Ichirou is reshaping his father's empire in his image, exacting control now that Kengo is finally gone. He is young to have inherited the reins, only a couple years older than Neil, and although his empire runs on the power of names, the first weeks of his rule are the most important. He has to establish himself as a force to be reckoned with.

And that means Ichirou's biggest loose end is Riko Moriyama.

Riko was a contingency plan, a second son, a back-up. A cast-off who carved out a different path for himself ((not of his choosing)) with a sport Ichirou couldn't give half a damn about. Riko, who couldn't stay in his own lane, who nosed around where he shouldn't, found his family's contacts, and leaned on them as hard as he could. Riko, who spent his major league & pro team salaries buying influence with doctors and police and lawyers for his own petty gains but who didn't have the experience to know how to buy discretion.

Ichirou is already engaged by the time he meets Neil, though it is a quiet arrangement as of yet. He is halfway to a wife, and therefore halfway to a son of his own. He does not need Riko for anything except his money, but if Riko is spending his money intruding on the main family's business—that is a line Ichirou will not let him cross.

Neil gives him an excuse to execute his own brother and still recoup all future losses, so that is exactly what Ichirou does.

NEIL AND ICHIROU'S INTIMIDATION

Q: Would Ichirou ever threaten Neil and remind him that his life basically belongs to ichirou and come close to doing something drastic? Just to scare him a little or put Neil on track but not actually carry the task out. (In the case he does, what would he do?) 😊

A: No, that'd be a waste of energy on Ichirou's part. Ichirou made his expectations clear, and Neil agreed to the terms. If Neil slips up, Ichirou isn't going to hesitate before retaliating. Neil does hear from the Moriyamas from time to time, but it's just general upkeep – if Neil needs to change where his donations are going, or a heads-up that Stuart is going to get killed, etc.

IF NEIL TOLD THE TRUTH EARLIER

Q: How would the convo have gone if Neil had gotten the chance to tell everyone about his past himself before being kidnapped by his father's people? Would they have reacted any differently to him?

A: The problem with Neil's past is that most of the Foxes can't honestly imagine the reality of it. If he'd told them earlier & confessed his family's crimes, they would've been just words, another scary story lumped into the kind of madness Riko was capable of. A massive riot, a kidnapping, and the FBI's willingness to completely erase Neil from their lives were drastic eye openers. Renee, Andrew, & Kevin would have had a better time appreciating the severity of the truth, but to the rest—they wouldn't fully understand just what they'd gotten themselves into, and they wouldn't have felt the appropriate amount of.. fear? caution? on Neil's behalf. They'd have been a bit more overprotective at all the wrong times, but it would've been pretty ineffectual in the long run.

How they would have reacted to Neil himself would largely depend on how early in the year Neil told them. If he started off with the truth, things could've worked out a little differently in the beginning—largely with Allison and Aaron's unwillingness to tolerate his risk on their court, or Dan & Matt being a little more cautious in how they treated Neil and a little more willing to let Andrew absorb Neil into his group. They wouldn't have asked Neil to breach the gap between the broken halves of the team because they wouldn't have thought it something he was capable of or interested in attempting. They would have let him go and then marveled over Neil's quiet decision to make a working team of them.

If Neil waited at least until mid-to-late November to tell the truth, the Foxes would have taken some time to cycle through shock & doubt & a little bit of fear, but they would have already made a place for Neil that they couldn't/wouldn't extricate him from. They would have chosen to stand by him no matter what, and if the FBI had come for Neil then they would have let him make whatever decision he felt was best.

They wouldn't have fought for him, but they wouldn't have wanted him to go, either, and they would hold tight to him when he chose to stay.

LOOKS POST-BOOK

Q: Does Neil keep his natural hair color after Riko's death?? Does he still see his father in the mirror even with his face scarred now???

A: Neil keeps his natural hair color & eye color going forward, yes. After everything that happened in book 3, there's not a lot of point in hiding— everyone knows who he is, and the FBI & Moriyamas might assume he's up to something should he try to disguise himself again.

He'll always see a bit of his father in his reflection ((though yes, it's harder to see Nathan past the scars and burns on his face)), but he learns to be okay with it. His father is gone, and he is here, and he has everything he could ever want. It's revenge, or peace, or a comforting mix of the two, and for a while Neil learns to smile that vicious Fuck you at his father's face.

But give him enough time and he'll stop subconsciously looking for his father in his reflection. Enough years down the road with the Foxes and Andrew, enough years of living for himself, and he'll start seeing himself.

NEIL AND BEE

Q: I just re read all 3 books and i was wondering, does Neil eventually talk to Bee?

A: The more Neil understands how important Bee is to Andrew, the more he respects her, but he's leery of opening himself up for psychoanalysis. They learn to talk about things besides Exy, and Neil stops spitting out practiced stories for her, but they don't often get down to the nitty gritty reality of Neil's scarred psyche.

The closest he comes to baring himself to her are when he's due to take the witness stand against his father and is feeling a little raw and when Andrew graduates and leaves him alone at Palmetto States University, but the only time Bee gets an honest, painful answer out of him is when it's nearly time for Aaron's trial and all Neil can think about is Andrew seeing Cass again. He asks Bee to be there for Andrew and says Andrew needs a mother right now, and Bee quietly responds with a challenge regarding Neil's mother.

I'm glad she's dead, he says, and he mostly means it, because if she hadn't died then where would he be? If she'd lived, he never would have ended up in Arizona, never would have come to South Carolina, never would have met the Foxes or fallen in love with Andrew. He would have kept running, kept hiding and lying, kept looking over his shoulder until Nathan was freed from jail and could send his people after them again.

He would have died like he always knew he would—nameless and forgotten in the far corner of the world.

"I could have her, or I could have this, and I won't give this up for her."

Betsy set her cocoa to one side and considered Neil for a long moment. "I don't think she would ever ask you to. She ran away because she wanted you to live, didn't she? She ran because she

wanted to keep you safe. Maybe this isn't what she had in mind, but the fact still stands: you made it, Neil. I'm sure she's finally at peace."

It is a closure Neil didn't realize he was waiting for, but he takes her word for it because he needs to believe it and because Andrew trusts Bee within an inch of his life.

NEIL'S MILLIONS

Q: hi, there! i was wondering, what did Neil do with his 5 million dollars? thanks!!

A: Heya! By the time the book starts most of that five million is gone. Some of it went to passports & paperwork, some to living expenses and traveling costs. But most of it Mary spent trying to cover their tracks. The first time Nathan's people got close to her she invested in allies, paying some to stay quiet and others to redirect. Paying someone to lie to the Wesninskis—and, by extension, the Moriyamas, was expensive af.

She laid false tracks with dead ends via her family's contacts and had to buy clean weapons every time she crossed a border. She also planned ahead—if there was a layover or an easy detour to a city she might want to come back to and use later, she'd leave a small stash of money in little hidey holes. Not much, but enough to act as an emergency fund.

When Neil comes to PSU he has about a quarter of a million on him and notes that tell him where those pockets of money are. He spends a good 80-100K replacing Andrew's car and a bit of change on basic necessities like his bedsheets, cigarettes, and hair dye.

Originally Neil gave the remainder to Stuart and told him to bet all of it on the Foxes at finals. He knew they'd win, and he said Stuart could bring the winnings back to Ichirou Moriyama. The odds were so stacked against them he figured it'd replace what he and his mother had stolen from the Moriyamas in the first place. It wouldn't get him clear of this but it'd be a gesture of goodwill and a smart way to clear the slate.

This time 'round it's a bit more .. frivolous? He spends a bit of it on a vacation for the Foxes and a bit of it on his roadtrips with Andrew. ((some of these roadtrips will eventually take them past the hidey holes, and Neil collects what his mother left behind so long ago.)) He starts buying Christmas and birthday presents for the Foxes.

He also has to buy a car his fourth year, because Andrew is going to graduate soon and take the Maserati with him. He intends to get something practical like an electric one or a hybrid that'll give him good mileage and not be overly fussy, but he makes the mistake of bringing the cousins and Robin to the dealership with him. Nicky puts the chances of Andrew riding in a Leaf at a negative percent, so Neil is forced to reevaluate his options.

It's half as expensive as Andrew's car is, but it's the most money Neil's ever dropped on himself, and it takes him a while to get over that. It doesn't matter that the FBI & Moriyamas are pretending they've moved on and haven't bothered him in over a year; it doesn't matter that he's got one year left at PSU and is almost guaranteed to get a pro team immediately upon graduation. There is something dizzying, almost frightening, about owning something so big. Once that anxious gnawing in his stomach fades, the car ends up meaning more to Neil than he ever thought it would.

After he signs the contract for a pro team and knows his first checks will be on their way shortly, Neil donates whatever is left of his blood money to a safehouse for homeless youth in Baltimore. It is not one of Ichirou's "charities".

DOES NEIL EVER CRY?

Q: Does Neil ever cry? Be it alone or in front of Andrew or possibly Wymack?

A: If you mean for a reason other than the torture Lola & Riko put him through, then yes: He cries when they get the call: *he's gone, he's gone, Coach is gone*

FIFTH YEAR

Q: what's it like for neil when he's the last of the original foxes in his last year at the foxhole court? ((sorry if you already answered this but I didn't see it if you did))

A: We mentioned it only in passing, I think. Neil's saving grace is that Robin joined the team Andrew's fifth year *. Robin and Neil are BFFs that year because Neil needs someone else to hang out with. That doesn't mean it's not really disorienting having the cousins gone, though. He finally starts using his phone more, and he even takes Nicky's skype calls from Germany when the timing works out. It helps a bit that Andrew comes back into town from time to time when he's bored of his new teammates.

After Matt's graduation, Neil starts another binder – he puts his Riko & Kevin shrine away for good, and he starts another one. This one will track his Foxes as they go out into the world, and it expands beyond Exy – it has short articles from fashion magazines when Allison's shows are mentioned, or a copy of the text when Dan gets her first job, or handwritten notes about/from the others e.g. *Matt was signed today xx/xx/xxxx*

Robin thinks it's a pretty cool idea, so she goes to the locker room one night and takes down all pictures of the original Foxes. She makes copies of them, puts them all back with no one the wiser, and gives Neil a stack of photos to add to his collection.

* the tl;dr for Robin, because her Ask got seriously out of hand: Robin Cross was handpicked for the Foxes by Andrew, and she started her freshman year during Neil's senior/Andrew's fifth year. She's the only other person to make it into Andrew's circle. She was created to answer to the very problem you presented—what would Neil do once his Foxes had left him behind?

WHEN NEIL'S OVERWHELMED

Q: are there times when neil gets overwhelmed, not like a panic attack but feeling like everything is just too much for him to handle? does he experience this often and if yes, what does andrew do to help him?

A: Neil's sophomore and junior years are a bit rough off & on, because he's dealing with being vice captain and then captain, with the added stresses of the ongoing FBI investigation, Jack & Sheena's antagonism, and the girls' graduation, but Andrew is not the one to walk him through it – Neil gets most of his support from Kevin and Matt. Kevin is a sounding board for on-court issues, and Matt helps keep the Foxes in line. ((His unquestioning deference to Neil on the court helps solidify the idea that Neil calls the shots around here)) Matt's more likely than anyone to ask *You good?* when the little Foxes aren't in earshot. By spring of Neil's junior year he's doing much better.

WHO IS NEIL CLOSEST TO

Q: Who is Neil closest to in the foxes? Other than Andrew

A: Definitely Matt. ~~Eventually Robin~~. Nicky gives Neil crap for being besties with someone outside of Andrew's "family", but Neil's gotten pretty good at tuning Nicky out when he wants to. Nicky's mostly exaggerating the jealousy.

((His least favorite is obviously Aaron, ha.))

FASHION STYLE

Q: What kind of clothes does Neil eventually end up wearing once Nicky has picked out a few things for him and once he actually gets a style of his own?

A: If left to his own devices, Neil would continue to dress how he always has, in plain clothes that don't draw much attention and do nothing to flatter him. Now that he's survived the year and can actually gun for court, Kevin will attempt to tidy him up a bit. He needs to look proper if he's going to be getting lots of press time, right? Between Kevin & Nicky, Neil will end up with

something passable. What counts as passable, IDK, style is so far beyond me I usually don't try to understand it.

I imagine one day Neil will start noticing which outfits are more likely to get a lingering look vs a passing glance from Andrew, though. If he's smart he'll take notes.

CELLPHONE RINGTONE

Q: Hi Nora! I hope I'm not bothering you. Your books were incredible and I enjoyed them very much. So I have a question regarding the scene between Andrew and Neil in the locker room in *The Raven King*, when Andrew gives Neil a cellphone and a song about runaways plays as the ringtone. Is the ringtone based on an actual song? Thank you so much for your time :)

A: Heya! Thank you so much for taking a chance on the Foxes! I'm really glad you liked them.

The song I had in mind when I wrote the scene, love it or hate it, was "Runaway Train" by Soul Asylum. The lyrics don't fit what Neil thought he heard, and it's not really the type of music I think Andrew would willingly listen to, but once it wormed its way into my head I couldn't shake it loose again.

*Call you up in the middle of the night
Like a firefly without a light
You were there like a slow torch burning
I was a key that could use a little turning*

*So tired that I couldn't even sleep
So many secrets I couldn't keep
Promised myself I wouldn't weep
One more promise I couldn't keep*

*It seems no one can help me now
I'm in too deep
There's no way out
This time I have really led myself astray*

*Runaway train never going back
Wrong way on a one way track
Seems like I should be getting somewhere
Somehow I'm neither here nor there*

*Can you help me remember how to smile
Make it somehow all seem worthwhile
How on earth did I get so jaded
Life's mystery seems so faded*

*I can go where no one else can go
I know what no one else knows*

*Here I am just drownin' in the rain
With a ticket for a runaway train*

*Everything is cut and dry
Day and night, earth and sky
Somehow I just don't believe it*

*Runaway train never going back
Wrong way on a one way track
Seems like I should be getting somewhere
Somehow I'm neither here nor there*

*Bought a ticket for a runaway train
Like a madman laughin' at the rain
Little out of touch, little insane
Just easier than dealing with the pain*

*Runaway train never comin' back
Wrong way on a one way track
Seems like I should be getting somewhere
Somehow I'm neither here nor there*

*Runaway train never comin' back
Runaway train tearin' up the track
Runaway train burnin' in my veins
Runaway but it always seems the same*

CRUSHES ON TEAMMATES

Q: Would Neil ever slightly crush on someone on his pro team? By crush I mean simply finding them attractive and take a few glances. And would Andrew notice?

A: Honestly, I can't see Neil getting a crush on anyone else? He might be able to distinguish aesthetically pleasing from not-so-good-to-look-at, but he's on the ace spectrum. Demisexual? Someone around here used this term for him a long while back, but I have had too much rum to remember which one of you lovelies brought it up. It's the perfect term for what I needed for him. Neil will never have a significant enough bond with his teammates to be attracted to them, at least in regards to crushes/sex/physical attraction etc etc etc. He might like them just fine, but they're just people to him.

((Honestly he would've had a better chance of crushing on the original Foxes, considering how tight that group was, but he was so head over heels for Andrew that there was no room to let anyone else in.))

But if it was a possible thing, hell yes Andrew would notice, Andrew watches Neil enough that it would've been glaringly obvious. But by the time they're on a pro team together Andrew would

be so certain of his relationship with Neil that he'd probably just comment on how ugly the crush was, just to rile Neil up and dismiss his interest in one go.

ANDREW MINYARD

SOBER LOOK AT THE FOXES

Q: you can make this as short or long as you want, but I'd really like to read something about what went inside andrew's head after he came off the drugs and saw everyone again (neil's wounds, the reason for them, the new power balance in the team etc) *_*

A: I feel this answer veered far off track into the left field along the way.

Re: the new power balance in the team.. So long as Kevin's safe and Aaron didn't become besties with the Foxes in Andrew's absence, Andrew can work around whatever else the team is becoming. Andrew's disinterest in the Foxes is outweighed only by his interest in watching what Neil does to them—it's illogical and insensible that a mouthy pathological liar can earn everyone's adoration and trust. What's not okay and not funny is the power that he unintentionally gave Neil over him, and that's a rude awakening of its own.

Re: Neil's wounds.. Nicky thinks it's heartlessness when Andrew refuses to acknowledge Neil's injuries, but Andrew doesn't care about the injuries because as far as he's concerned, he and Neil knew months ago that they were going to happen. Neil set himself up as a target when he promised to protect Kevin in Andrew's absence. Why would he be sorry for something that Neil specifically asked for? Andrew doesn't believe in pity or regret, and he's sure as hell not gonna start feeling bad now. So long as Neil agrees that this damage wasn't caused by his father, Andrew can focus on the more important problem of Neil's changed appearance.

((It's an entirely different story when Andrew sees Nathaniel, and let me just say it is a damned good thing Neil got Andrew to revoke his protection at the end of the countdown. If Neil hadn't gotten Andrew to let him go and then Andrew failed to protect him from his father's people, Andrew and Neil's relationship would never have recovered. Andrew wouldn't have been able to get over it.))

Then Neil says Proust and that's a problem, because that's not how this works. Having someone else take the hits for him means Andrew couldn't take them himself. It's a judgment call against who he is and what he can handle and Neil is the last person who should make that mistake as far as Andrew is concerned. Neil, who is so stupid but so smart, who always looks a heartbeat from running but refuses to leave the court, does not have the right to assume that Andrew needs protecting, to judge Andrew as weak and defenseless.

And then *"If it means losing you, then no."*

And that—that was supposed to be a side effect of the drugs.

That wasn't supposed to be real, that deep and endless need that looks past absolutely everything else gone wrong in Neil's life and sees only Andrew. Like Andrew can be the answer to anyone's problems! Andrew is the solution like a pickaxe is the solution. He's a sharp tool to clear a path and warn off wolves and cut whoever is clumsy enough to mishandle him. Andrew is a man surviving on promises, biding his time until death. He's still coming to terms with how bleak the world is without his drugs to keep him entertained—he'd forgotten how boring existence was, how annoying it is to have to breathe and go through the motions day after day. He is here until he is gone and that is how it always will be.

Neil is not supposed to be the answer, this two-faced child who should have broken years ago, who tries to keep everyone at arm's length but hangs on as tight as he can with bruised and bloody knuckles. Neil is not reason enough to wake up, to look back, to try a little harder. One man is not reason enough to live. Andrew knows better than to believe these lies, than to think that look could be anything but a ploy for more favors and protection. He knows better, but—

ANDREW'S MEDICATION

Q: Just curious, is the medication Andrew takes based on a real drug? and is court ordered mania something that happens in real life??

A: Good question!

No, Andrew's medication isn't based on anything I've heard of in real life, and to be honest I'm not sure what powers the court has—or if any court in its right mind would choose to go this route in a case like this. ((Somehow I really doubt they would.))

I'm pretty sure Andrew's entire scenario is the most unrealistic thing in the series, which says a lot considering the books are basically a series of far-fetched, traumatizing events... His situation is what I was most leery of when I decided to self-pub the books—I knew it was a touchy subject and that it'd take a major leap of faith for someone to just go along with it.

WITHDRAWAL

Q: The foxes often mentioned how bad Andrew's withdrawal got once because of his meds and they said they wouldn't let him get like that again. Since the event was not mentioned, could you tell us what happened? Thanks so much!

A: I was supposed to cover that incident in Son Nefes, the story from Renee's POV of the cousins' freshman year, but then it didn't really happen. (Laziness, probably). Andrew basically got really sick, and then really really angry that he was really sick, and he went on a rampage

against his family and the locker room and (nearly) the other team they were playing against. And got violently ill a few times. Wymack had to corral him before it got completely out of hand.

CANON MENTAL STATE

Q: What's Andrew's actual mental state? I finished the series but I'm still a little confused. Is it an actual mental disease?

A: Last I checked*, Andrew is manic depressive, with more deep lows than highs.

Most of Andrew's actual issues stem from his upbringing, but of course the people in power would overlook these things in favor of the "obvious" issue. He tried to beat a few men to death because they hurt his gay cousin, but the court decided this was a consequence of untreated mental issues and nothing deeper.* he's been more than a few things over the years; the original three Andrews had a fatal brain disorder eating away at his neural pathways, and he couldn't retain anything beyond the short-term

CRACKERS

Q: Why does Andrew test the Foxes based on cracker dust and drinks? What is the reason behind taking it willingly or not?

A: The test isn't whether or not they take the drinks & drugs willingly. The whole point of the night is to find out who they are and why they're here, and therefore determine if they're going to be a problem for Andrew's lot. The drinks & cracker dust simply make it easier to get the truth out of them, and the fact that Andrew's group is also partaking is intended to make the guest feel a little.. safer? more included? Besides, how the teammates react to the presence of such things helps Andrew judge them.

WHAT DID ANDREW SAY TO NICKY IN TKM

Q: When Andrew first got off his medication and drove back to the dorms, he tells everyone to leave but Nicky. What did him and Nicky talk about?

A: Oh, Nicky was telling the truth about that—Andrew had Nicky recap what had happened in his absence. He needed to be caught up on current events, and since Nicky likes to ramble, Nicky was the least likely to leave anything out.

DRAKE'S ORIGINAL ARC

Q: What was Drake's arc that got chopped? Or not quite arc I'm assuming, but why was he featured twice as much in previous versions?

A: The way he was introduced happened differently, so he had a longer role to play with more collateral damage. Started by picking up Nicky at Eden's Twilight, since Nicky had no idea who he was, and ended the usual blood & tragedy.

LAUGHING AFTER DRAKE

Q: Why was Andrew laughing when Neil and Aaron found him and Drake? What was going through his head at that point?

A: Medication & trauma don't mix, kids, 0/10 do not recommend

ABBY AND ANDREW'S SCARS

A: Has Abby seen Andrew's scars?

Q: I remember combining this question with another question, because I thought the two worked well together, but really, this answer feels like a walking trigger. (technically all three books needed a trigger warning but it's a little late for that). Second question & the full answer will be below the cut.

Second question: Were Andrew's scars from suicide attempts or self-injury?

Andrew isn't particularly interested in living ~~until he meets Neil~~ but he's not interested in dying, either. The scars are from a period of self injury, where Andrew was trying to stake claim over a body that too many others were trying to take away from him. They were a means of regaining some semblance of control, and cutting let Andrew decide how much pain he wanted to feel. Not all of the cuts left scars, but even those that left a mark weren't overly deep. Andrew couldn't risk damaging his arms permanently—it'd mean he wouldn't be able to fight back the next time someone crawled into his bed.

Andrew didn't cover them up because he regretted them or was ashamed of them; he buried them beneath armbands when he moved to South Carolina because he knew how people would look at them. If someone saw his scars and thought *weak*, thought *depressed*, thought *prey*, there'd be at least one body he'd have to hide and Andrew didn't have time to scope out appropriate grave sites in an unfamiliar area. He had his hands full with Aaron's issues and Nicky's abrupt entry into his life. So he put the bands on, called them a joke, and moved on.

((Neil seeing them in Columbia was the worst possible timing, because Andrew knew Neil would make the connection between rape and scars, and the last thing he wanted or needed was for someone like Neil to pity him. He didn't yet understand that Neil didn't have it in him to pity anyone.))

Abby found out about Andrew's scars because there's no way she would've let him sit through an entire physical with his forearms covered. Andrew was sky-high on his medication then, and at the time it amused him more to see her reaction to the truth than it did to make her work for it. He didn't even hesitate when she told him to pull them off.

She demanded answers, of course, because if Andrew was "unstable" she needed to warn someone (e.g. Wymack and Betsy). Andrew waved aside her "exaggerated attempt to appear concerned", but Abby pressed the matter until Andrew made her take a closer look.

Hey, Abby, me to you, you to me. You've heard what they say about us, yes? You've heard what they say about me, and you believe at least some of it. Oh, it's so boring when you try to lie. I see it in the way you look at me. So tell me something, if you would: do you honestly think that if I wanted to kill someone, whether it was myself or someone else, that I would fail so spectacularly at it so many times? How rude.

Abby eventually took his word for it, accepted his explanation that the scars were years old and wouldn't get company anytime soon, and decided not to talk to Wymack about it yet. She called Betsy as soon as Andrew left.

ANDREW AND MAMA BEE

Q: What is it about Betsy that actually gets Andrew's (and then even Aaron's) respect? Everyone else loves her too. Unless she's drugging that cocoa, I want to know what's up! XD

A: I have no excuses for how long this got **oh my god**

I feel like this is less of an answer and more me just going BEE BEE BEE

Betsy won over the Foxes in part because she's genuine and in part because she is very, very good at what she does. She doesn't analyze the Foxes unless they ask her to; she guides them into analyzing themselves and helps them sort out the results. There isn't a thing you can say to her that she'll judge you for and she honestly believes that everyone is worth saving. Aaron will never be fond of her, but he needs her to get through to Andrew, and by the end of *The King's Men* he at least treats her with respect.

(Betsy cried over Seth—but she had to sit on it for days, because when she got the news she knew she needed to *get to Allison, get to Allison now now now, hold her together before grief tears her apart*. Betsy knew more than anyone how much Seth loved Allison; she knew that he was trying, she knew that he was trying so hard but that it was just too much sometimes to keep an even keel

and can't we try another drug one that makes me better or one that will kill me faster I don't even give a fuck at this point Doc just give me something so I can sleep)

Which leads us to Andrew. (and the longest rant I hope I ever put on tumblr because **WTF Nora**) It's funny, because "respect" isn't the first word that comes to mind when I think of Andrew & Bee, but I don't really have a single word to sum up their relationship. By the end of The Foxhole Court there are two people in the world Andrew cannot afford to lose. Neil is one of them; Bee is the other. I feel like this answer is gonna be split between how things are now and how my headcanon will always remember Betsy, so apologies in advance.

Bee will never be Cass to Andrew, but that's good — Cass was a dream paid for with tragedy and secrets, and the older Andrew gets the more he'll understand the toxicity of the entire situation. Seeing Cass at Aaron's trial kind of helps hammer that home but it'll take time for him to come to terms with it. Bee is the real deal, and although Andrew started as little more than her most interesting patient she quickly grew to adore her favorite problem child.

Mama Bee used to have a larger role in the books, but I had to cut out so many of her scenes and let Renee take on more of her personality & presence. *(probably for the best because the last time she had a major role in book 3 Andrew nearly got annihilated and Bee had to put him back together again piece by jagged piece and it was **bad, bad, bad**)* I even wrote three side stories with Bee and Andrew just because their relationship fascinated me, haha.

I don't remember if this last draft of Foxhole ever touched on Betsy's qualifications? Before she started working with Palmetto State, she spent years working with the justice system. She focused on incarcerated youths that everyone else thought were past the point of rehab, which means she has a lot of experience with addicts, volatile patients, and kids who tried on more than one occasion to do her some serious physical harm. She's kind of seen it all by the time Andrew's file ends up on her desk.

Andrew wasn't expecting much from a dumpy 43yo woman with laugh lines and an unending supply of chocolate, and he definitely didn't expect her to stick with him— he'd already gone through 12 different psychiatrists and more than one had said they weren't going to let him work with women ever again— but he learned early on that nothing he said or did could faze her. He still wasn't interested in opening up to her, but he was content to talk her ear off about anything and everything else that didn't actually matter. Honestly, he didn't have to talk about the important things, because Bee figured them out by the holes they left in his conversations. She noticed Day 1 that Andrew wouldn't talk about Aaron and she definitely noticed when Andrew stopped bringing Neil up in their sessions.

Bee gave Andrew her personal number at their first session, but he didn't start using it until after Kevin started as an assistant coach. Andrew & Kevin got into a fight one day that resulted in Andrew storming off the court and refusing to play for weeks. He called Betsy the same day just

long enough to say “Should have left him to die, Bee!” - an unfriendly sentiment, but an undeniable turning point. Up until then Betsy hadn’t had a name in Andrew’s eyes; she’d been answering to “Hey You”. (*a shortened version of Hey You and the Moo Cows because of the shirt she wore to their first session*)

When Andrew came off his medication he chose to keep seeing Bee. It was a strong suggestion by his legal counsel but the end decision was his, and he chose her knowing that the absence of his medicine was going to make things different. A part of him needed to see if she would look at him any differently without that smile on his face. If she’d misstepped that first session back he would never have returned to her office, and then who knows where Aaron & Andrew would be, but Bee can’t misstep when it comes to Andrew.

Bee also has the dubious honor of being the only person Andrew ever yells at. The year after the events of The Raven King she has what looks like a heart attack at Reddin. Doctors have to give her stints to open up the blockages in her arteries, and Andrew spends the day sitting silent and still at her bedside. This isn’t something he can fight off for her; this isn’t something he can protect her from. It’s a lesson in helplessness he wasn’t expecting and never wanted. When Bee wakes up from the procedure and Neil asks her how she’s doing she dopily says she is fine. Mistake.

“*You are not fine and this is not fine and if you ever eat another fucking piece of chocolate again so long as you live I will fucking kill you.*”

Needless to say he ransacks both her office and her home and confiscates every scrap of junk food he can get his hands on. He also enlists Abby to write out a food and exercise regimen for Bee. Andrew accompanies Bee to the gym now and then, and he lets her sign him up for a 5K fun run with her.

When Andrew graduates and moves on, he and Bee keep in touch, phone calls and messaging and face-chat programs a la Facetime and Skype.

Q: What animal did Andrew buy for Betsy (figurine)? I thought a raccoon would be nice, since he called Neil one, but I don't know if he'd give that to her or what. What do you think?

A: In a previous draft, it was a scorpion that Andrew promptly tested against Nicky’s face. It’s not the first figurine he’s given her, though the little scene surrounding that ‘revelation’ got axed between drafts. There’s no real meaning or thought in what he gets for her—he simply picks out something he knows she doesn’t have. :)

Q: Would you ever share the side story you wrote about Andrew and Bee that you mentioned in the ask about the two of them?

A: There are technically three Andrew & Bee side stories. One would have to be reworked because it was from an era when the relationship was Andrew x Kevin x Neil ((the one where Bee has her medical issues and Andrew loses his shit with her)), one would have to be completely rewritten because it's probably eight years old at this point ((the one about Andrew & Bee's first session)), and the one that means the most is now completely irrelevant – the one behind the “Mama Bee” moniker, the one where Riko almost broke Andrew and Bee had to put him back together again – because that Riko & Andrew arc was erased**.

[[That third side story, by the way, is titled “SHATTER”, because that's pretty much what happens to Andrew.]]

~~[[This final draft is the first draft where Andrew doesn't know how to cry]]~~

So I guess the most I can offer is this bit, which was not part of the side story but was an accompanying flurry of narrative:

“I can't,” he said thickly. “Bee—”

HELP ME

Not words, because he'd never been taught to say such things, because he'd never been able to believe in it. The last time he'd asked anyone for help, he'd been shrugged off and betrayed.

Not words, but a feeling—a rush of desperate, flailing panic, shattering pride that had been pushed too far for too long. It passed between them like lightning, a dark storm in his eyes like she'd never seen before, and she forgot about the danger, forgot her own fear. Her hands, when she held them out, were steady and sure.

TRUST ME

She couldn't say it, not when his knee-jerk reaction to such words was mockery and withdrawal. All she could do was balance there, palms up and waiting. What she was asking of him now was almost worse than everything Riko had done to him tonight, and she knew it. It was the only thing that could help him—and it would be what destroyed him tonight, letting someone hold him up, letting someone in.

She wasn't entirely sure why he reached out. When he slipped his hands into hers, he squeezed hard enough to crush the blood out of them.

“I've got you,” she whispered, and prayed he could hear her over the heartbeat thundering against her palms. “I've got you.”

** In that draft, Proust didn't do anything to Andrew except drug him out of his mind, but he did report back to Riko on everything he found out during Andrew's withdrawal and subsequent therapy. Riko figured out Andrew was the backbone allowing Kevin & Neil to spite him, so he

focused on Andrew. He traded the Foxes' safety through finals for a night with Andrew. Neil tried to prevent it by sending Aaron in Andrew's stead, but Andrew caught on and went after his brother.

He thought he'd be okay, but Riko nearly broke him.

Aaron ((barely)) kept him from falling over that edge, and Bee was the one who put him back together in the aftermath.

.. but to actually answer your question: If I thought I could edit either of the first two side stories between now and New Year's, I'd go for it, but the third story is pretty much off-limits for the time being.

ANDREW AND ROLAND

Q: Twice, at the club, Andrew disappeared for a while. What was he up to? m (o__o) m

A: Definitely making out with Roland in a back room, ha.

The second time they brought Neil to Columbia, Andrew spent at least part of his absence "bickering" with Roland about why Neil was back. Andrew couldn't exactly tell him the truth re: the danger they were all in and the deal he'd made, so Roland fixated on whether or not Andrew was going to make a move on him.

.. It says a lot about their relationship/arrangement that Roland thought Neil was a good topic of conversation with Andrew's hands on him. Guess he approved of the reaction it earned him. *Your mouth says **It's never gonna happen** and your hands say **I want it anyway***

Q: In TKM when Neil is questioning Andrew about Roland's overshare/misinterpretation, what is Andrew thinking about as he stares at Neil's hands?

A: *First*: what brought that conversation up in the first place, *then*: distraction upon seeing those injuries showing, and thinking about the rooftop where Neil said he wasn't going to lose Andrew, but *mostly*: did Roland seriously throw him under the bus like that?

ANDREW AND PROUST

Q: I'm so going to regret this. Proust? Did he, what, uh.

A: Oh, Proust.

Did he—

Did he what?

Did he tape every session and send copies to Riko in case Riko needed extra ammunition down the line?

Did he use drugs on Andrew to ensure his own relative safety, to skew Andrew's take on things should any of this come back to him, to get Andrew so off balance and/or out of his head that he could more easily get the reactions and responses he wanted?

Did he have access to everything Riko's associates could dig up on Andrew's past, all of the rumors about his foster families, all of the secrets they were able to buy or drug out of those failures of parents, all of the transcriptions from Riko's conversations with Drake?

Did he sign off on restraints for Andrew during the worst part of Andrew's rehab, claiming Andrew was a danger to himself and everyone around him while he was going through withdrawal? Did he know to go into that room and put his hands on Andrew when Andrew couldn't fight back, couldn't move except to pull those bindings tighter?

Did he know about the scars on Andrew's wrists, and did he know just how hard to bite them so they would bruise? Did he know how to mark them and ruin them, to taint a symbol of survival and choice with the new memories Andrew would always carry of him?

Did he know that Jesse liked to choke Andrew during sex so Andrew couldn't wake anyone else up? Did he know Samuel used to whisper you fucking like this, you stupid fucking whore I know you wanted this? Did he know Steven made him say Please?

Did he know Andrew was ticklish? Did he know what Drake did with that knowledge and how he used Andrew's own body against him? Did he reenact it whenever Andrew was being difficult and uncooperative?

Did he learn what Andrew looks like on the verge of a panic attack and the ferocity Andrew fights with when he's clawing back from that dangerous edge? Did he see the look in Andrew's eyes when the knife went a little too deep, connecting one psychological scar to another and blurring the lines between them?

Did he violate Andrew? Physically, emotionally, psychologically?

Did he what?

Whichever question you meant to ask, the answer is yes.

Q: What happened to Proust? When Stuart comes to see Neil before the last game, he promises to look into it but I don't think it's been answered. Was he one of the people Ichirou executed?

A: Anyone that Riko used – anyone that Ichirou can prove Riko used – is erased. These people should have known better than to sell their services to the wrong brother. Proust is not the first to die, but he is definitely on the list of people erased.

((Neil expects a little sourness from Andrew, that the Moriyamas executed a man he was planning on killing once things calmed down, but Andrew only says that it saves him the trouble of finding an alibi. Neil doesn't quite believe him, but he knows better than to press the matter.))

CASS' LETTER

Q: How did Andrew react when he got the letter from Cass after Aaron's trial? He never replied, but did it help him to move on?

A: Sorry this took so long to answer! I'm still not entirely sure it's coherent, but.

To be honest, by the time the letter arrives it's too late to be closure.

If Andrew needed closure regarding Cass – which he honestly doesn't believe he does, because Andrew & Cass are a convoluted mess and so much happens in California and so much happens after it that it's a toss-up as to whether or not he's right* – it came at the trial. It came when Cass stepped into a courtroom in South Carolina, when Higgins had to testify, and Aaron had to tell his story, when Andrew had to tell the truth of what had happened ~~of what he hadn't been strong enough to stop of what he'd still failed to prevent of how he still couldn't fight back when it mattered most~~

Closure came when Cass sat there silent and still and red-eyed but dry-cheeked, eyes forward and head down, looking at anyone and anything but the twins that cycled through the witness stand. Closure came when Richard looked at Cass instead of Andrew, making sure she could survive the ugliness and the loss and the betrayal, holding her together so the truth couldn't break her apart in front of so many watching eyes.

After the trial Betsy takes Andrew out for chocolate malt milkshakes, and they sit for a half-hour in the diner without saying a word. At this point, Andrew understands—on some level, at least—that Cass is irrelevant. There is no room for her and her dreams in his life. ((He is filling her space with Bee and Neil, he is filling her space with promises and a tiresome but vaguely interesting team))

So by the time the letter finally arrives, they are just words on page from a name he knows but which no longer holds meaning, and Andrew barely skims it before throwing it away.

*((Andrew is of the opinion he's held onto Cass for so long not out of affection but because she is a warning – the one time he tried to live for himself it was a disaster; Cass is what he almost willingly destroyed himself to keep.

((If not for Aaron he would have stayed))

Cass is a warning, a dream wrapped in venom, and Andrew has kept the memory close so he won't make the same mistake twice. Andrew doesn't live for himself anymore; he simply drifts from day to day, participating in life only because lying down and dying would leave his troublesome family undefended.))

((*And then there's Neil*))

ON EXY

Q: So the fact that I can barely read your ask responses without going into fits and dying every other night is something. But if I can be greedy: How does Andrew **truly** feel about Exy? There were moments in both Aaron and Neil's POV that suggest he's either lying to himself or otherwise gives more of a shit than he wants others to believe? Any details on that?

A: Whoops, so this was supposed to be a paragraph tops. My bad.

The TL;DR response is: Andrew gives more of a shit than he chooses to believe, but it takes him a while to realize it.

The “why is this answer so long jfc” response:::

Andrew's opinion of Exy is a murky back-and-forth mess he still hasn't figured out. For the first couple years he played, it was just something to do, a way to pass time. Life is just so boring, especially without his medicine giving him that sky-high buzz, and at least Exy broke up the monotony of the day-to-day bullshit like breathing and existing.

Kevin was the first to give that viewpoint a shake, because Kevin was so determined to recruit Andrew for the Ravens. He didn't care that Andrew had rejected them; he got the master to sign off on a face-to-face for him and Riko because *we can't let anyone else have him, we can't put him in anyone else's goal*, but then Andrew didn't live up to expectations and Kevin was so, so angry. Kevin reacted like he'd been betrayed, like he'd honestly expected more from Andrew and couldn't believe Andrew would purposefully let him down. And that was a little interesting, someone thinking Andrew could be capable of something that wasn't ruining other people's lives.

Kevin's, Neil's, and Riko's obsession with Exy did not leave Andrew inclined to view the sport favorably, though. The people who wanted Andrew's best had already proven that their relationship with Exy was unhealthy, and they had gotten tangled up in some pretty ugly consequences because of it. Why the hell would Andrew want to give Exy a chance when it had wrecked their lives? He didn't need any help destroying himself, thanks. But that doesn't mean he wasn't curious as to how something like this can drive so many people to obvious madness.

Exy was also what finally broke Kevin's chain & set him free from Evermore, and Exy was why Neil started fighting back against his inevitable death. And that's interesting too, isn't it, that such a thing can put so much spine and spite in these two people. Andrew doesn't intend to fall into their same trap, but he should at least understand what makes these people tick, right? Right.

And Andrew is good at this. He could be better, he knows, he could be brilliant according to Kevin and Neil, if he would just commit to it, but he is still good as he is. He is very smart when it comes to Exy, even though he normally doesn't care enough to share these insights with anyone else on his team. There was a scene in the last draft where Andrew was off the court for a couple weeks ((recovering from his run-in with Riko)) and he was stuck watching matches in the locker room much like Neil had to in this last draft. After practice Wymack asked him for a rundown, and Andrew gave him a flawless analysis from memory that left even Kevin staring at him.

((Have we ever talked about Andrew's grades, because Andrew's grades would be perfect if not for class participation and homework assignments. Boy is smart af and doesn't even care)) Spring is where the changes start to happen, because so much is going on. Andrew's off his medication and back to being completely bored of existing, Andrew's falling for a boy who gets so riled up and passionate about a stupid sport, he's promised Neil he'll protect Neil until the end of the line and somehow Exy got tangled up in that ((he is fairly certain Neil is cheating but he can't prove it)), and— perhaps most importantly— Neil survives Nathan.

Neil survives Nathan, and Neil's sold his future to Ichirou, and that means Neil is not going to die. Neil is going to live, and damn his stupid face but Neil says *always*, and for the first time Andrew has to consider the fact that the future is coming and he's got nothing planned. Wake up, breathe, eat, drink, smoke, sleep. And now Neil? Neil and his *always* and *Choose us*. Neil who has released Andrew from protective detail but who is a walking murder magnet if Andrew's ever seen one, who says *I don't want any of this to end*. Choosing Neil means choosing Exy, because Andrew can't have one without the other.

Committing to this means paying attention, means putting in a little more effort, means actually trying, and even Andrew can't put that much time into something without feeling the aftereffects. His opinion of Exy will still be complicated for a little while, because how stupid, that this sport gets so many people riled up, how ignorant, that a man's talent at a game can get all of his past

crimes and indiscretions so quickly forgiven, how obnoxious, that this is the only thing people are going to care about him when he signs a professional contract.

On the other hand, if this is something people want to get riled up about, and Andrew can piss off thousands of people simply by thwarting a goal, then that is entertaining enough to make up for the rest of it.

It shapes too much of his life in the end, Exy and Neil, Neil and Exy. It is having a place, having a team, a different city every week and cigarettes and drinks in-between. And one day Andrew's going to realize that perhaps even he is having a bit of fun.

ON NEIL'S BINDER

Q: What did Andrew think when he first saw Neil's binder shrine of Kevin and Riko?

A: Andrew had a couple ideas, though he wasn't sure which one to go with. The easiest suspicion was that Neil was one of Riko's associates. It all seemed so convenient, Janie trying to kill herself and then this know-nothing coming to their attention, this boy who went into fight-or-flight whenever Kevin looked his way, who was so stupidly intensely obsessed with Exy just like Kevin and Riko were, who was lying lying *lying* about anything and everything, who just happened to have the entire backstory of Kevin & Riko's public lives hidden away in his room. Andrew didn't know what Neil could be except another pet who'd been pressured to do Riko's dirty work. He definitely wasn't impressed with Neil's meticulous obsession either way.

ON NEIL'S MOTHER

Q: What would Andrew's thoughts on Neil's mother have been if they had somehow magically met??

A: Seeing how Andrew is a borderline misogynist and Neil's mother ran vs just killing Nathan, I don't think he would have liked her very much. Not to mention she laid hands on Neil often enough that he would've had to intervene. Not really keen on abusive parental figures, our Andrew.

ANDREW AND HIS SEXUALITY

Q: Hi Nora, I hope you're doing well. I wanted to ask you when does Andrew come to terms with his sexuality?

A: Andrew had a lot of time on his hands during juvie, so he worked through most of it then. That was the first time in his life he wasn't with a foster family, and although the correctional guards weren't exactly friendly, they weren't abusive, either ((Thanks, Pig Higgins, for finding him a good facility!!). Andrew had the breathing room to face his issues, and to accept what was & wasn't there in the absence of intrusive hands. Juvie was where he kissed someone for the first time by choice, though Roland was where Andrew did most of his one-sided experimenting.

ON NEIL'S SEXUALITY

Q: Nooorraa, so we in the CHEL bookclub have been disusing all the talk abt Neils sexuality in tfc and i was wondering what Andrews thoughts on the topic were.. we know he was hoping the whole thing was from his drugs but was there any part of him that even wondered a little about Neils side of the whole thing/whether he was actually straight.. idk where im going with this but I'm sure you can pick up from here xD

A: Andrew was fairly certain Neil wasn't straight, for the same reason Nicky was certain—the way Neil interact with/looked at the girls was just too... oblivious? disinterested? passive? If he took Neil's word for it, Neil was ace. If he trusted Nicky's big mouth & unrelenting optimism, Neil was possibly in denial over being gay. Andrew was inclined to side with Nicky if only because of the intensity with which Neil reacted to him & Kevin.

HOW FAR HAS ANDREW GONE WILLINGLY

Q: Aside from his trauma, has Andrew ever gone further than giving blow jobs (consensually)?

A: Andrew's never consented to anyone doing anything to him—the few guys he's messed with over the years have all been passive partners and anyone unwilling to respect that need is tossed aside however violently he feels is necessary. Andrew won't fuck his partners, but he'll do just about anything else. He & Neil will get there eventually, it'll just take some time.

ON NEIL'S BIRTHDAY BLOOD

Q: So, I just reread the scene where Neil's dad's people rigged that blood in his locker and I'm wondering about what was going through Andrew's mind? Like, it had to be at least a LITTLE bit interesting for him and then Neil's reactions—not really his reaction to his gear, which is predictable, but Neil's reaction to everything else. Andrew just feels very observant in this scene so I wanted to know what he was thinking about.

A: Honestly, Andrew found the team's reactions a little more interesting—of course the Foxes started gossiping about it as soon as they were out of the room, and Matt told them what he'd seen on the bathroom wall. Andrew watched them worry and wonder and then firmly realign themselves around a man who was very obviously lying to them about something very important. Andrew didn't have a high opinion of them to start with, but it dimmed a little bit more at how willfully naive they were. It was also an interesting heads-up that Wymack knew at least part of the truth; Neil hadn't told Andrew he'd started sharing with anyone else.

But Andrew in regards to Neil... Andrew had seen Neil crack a couple times before, but this was the first time he really saw Neil fracture, saw Neil fall apart & pull himself back together so quickly he should have cut them all on the jagged edges of his *I'm fine*.

His eyes said *I'm dying*, but his mouth said *Let's play*. Because Neil was watching his precious lies & alibis fall apart in front of the people that mattered most to him and Neil knew like Andrew did that things were escalating, but Neil was hellbent on making his stand at the Foxhole Court. Neil still trusted Andrew to protect him from whatever was coming, and he'd lie and he'd fight and he'd fake it for as long as he had to.

((and Andrew would keep the unwanted other half of his promise – to get the team to finals and a rematch against the Ravens. Andrew body-checked a Terrapin because the Foxes were slowing down and Neil needed them to win.))

((I wonder when Neil will realize he's the reason Andrew got so riled so quickly at Aaron when Neil dragged Tilda into the argument afterward. Neil trusted Andrew when his life was on the line, when people were obviously gunning for him and his survival depended on how quick Andrew was on the draw, and Aaron only believed Andrew's promises for all of a day.

"Because I made you a promise. I did not forget it just because you chose not to believe me. I did what I said I would do, and fuck you for expecting anything else."))

ON NEIL EVENTUALLY CHANGING OUT

Q: What does Andrew think about Neil finally starting to change in front of his teammates?

A: Andrew thinks it's a little pathetic that Neil does it as a show of solidarity with a teammate they don't care about. He does understand that it's a big move for Neil, and that it's a sign of healing and acceptance in a sense, but he gives Neil shit for doing it on someone else's account. Neil tells him to stop being an asshole and chooses to ignore Andrew's opinion on the matter.

DECIDING NEIL WAS INTERESTING

Q: was there like an exact moment when andrew decided neil was "interesting enough" for him? and what really does neil feel on his part?

A: Once Neil told his fake!truth after Columbia, Neil became less WARNING and more PROBLEM, and that was almost enough. Andrew decided later that Neil was a bit more problematic than problem. Neil will eventually understand that Andrew means more to him than anything else does.

IF NEIL HAD CHOSEN MATT AND DAN

Q: What WOULD Andrew feel/do if Neil chose Dan and Matt over him?

A: He wouldn't cut Neil loose, but Andrew would relegate Neil to the same sideline he put Aaron on. Technically he only promised Neil a year, so he's free to put on Neil-blinders and go about his business.

Neil gave Andrew an anchor and a focal point for his life, something worth fighting for and waking up for. If you take that away from him, then there's nothing else, and Andrew's learned yet again that it's not worth the effort to want anything. He'd shut down emotionally, and no one would have the key to open him up again.

Once his little group finally graduated & went about their lives & freed him from the responsibility of looking out for them, he'd be done with all of this and them. He'd be adrift, counting down the seconds of existence like he always had.

Chances are he'd end up in Columbia, working with Roland at Eden's Twilight. Surviving, but not living, not really, and going home alone to a house in Columbia with only drinks for company.

DOES ANDREW CALL NEIL BY HIS NAME

Q: Does Andrew ever call Neil by his name after he gets off his meds?

A: Er, "Neil"? ;D

Abram, yes. Not often, but once in a while.

Nathaniel, he didn't learn until he was off his meds, anyway, and the times he said it in TKM are the only times he'll use it.

ON NICKNAMES

Q: A few of the fans have taken to calling Andrew things like "smol son" and "tiny bean." How would Andrew take to nicknames? I've been debating whether he'd just ignore it, tolerate it from certain ppl, or just jump straight to threats and violence.

A: okay so the "beans" thing is hysterical to me because of this woman. I can't hear bean and not think beans & sour beans. maybe this is before your time? IDK tumblr don't let me down, let someone else around here have played Mass Effect??

tbh Andrew doesn't really care about nicknames so long as they aren't.. detracting? like calling him "monster" is fine, because monster implies that he is a problem, is dangerous, etc etc, but if you called him "little child" he'd refuse to respond. He wouldn't fight you over it, because raging against a nickname means you'd gotten to him, means he has an image to uphold, means there is a sore spot you can prod to get a reaction, but he'd simply ignore it and go about his business.

The one exception to the rule is AJ, because AJ is what he went by when he was living with Cass ((AJ for Andrew Joseph)), and AJ is what Drake called him when Drake pushed him down, so if anyone else was stupid enough to call him AJ Andrew would answer with a knife

NEIL'S 'SORRY'

Q: why does Andrew almost punch neil when he says sorry? Is it bc it's a word he hates or?

A: Andrew doesn't have a problem with the word sorry, he has a problem with Neil apologizing like it's going to make anything better, a la "oh hey so I stepped on your foot my bad" not "I lied to your face about who I am and who I'm running from and whether or not I needed your help my bad". Andrew wants to hit him because he knows Neil set him up for this, he knows now Neil has lied to his face for months and that he believed him, that he wanted to believe him, and that Neil thinks a stupid sorry is going to make any of this better, because Neil is apologizing like any of this is his fault, and it is but it isn't but it is????

WANTING

Q: I've noticed there's a shift with Andrew whenever Neil brings up that he's nothing, like in the scene where Neil first gives Andrew his altered version of a backstory and then when they're sitting on the rooftop before their first kiss. Why is that? Thank you!

A: So I've been sitting on this for ages, hoping I'll figure out a good way to explain it, and all this time later I'm still coming up blank. It's hard sometimes to put words into Andrew's thought processes? So I'm sorry that I made you wait so long and still have almost nothing to show for it.

Neil comes the closest, I think, when he says this:

Neil had seen this look on Andrew's face once before, when he and Andrew called a truce in Wymack's living room last summer. Neil fed him half-truths to buy his acceptance, but it wasn't vague descriptions of his parents' crimes and deaths that got through to Andrew. It was his bone-deep jealousy of Kevin, his loneliness and desperation. After everything they'd been through these last few months, Neil finally knew what this look meant. The darkness in Andrew's stare wasn't censure; it was perfect understanding. Andrew had hit this point years ago and broken. Neil was hanging on by a fraying thread and grabbing at anything he could to stay afloat.

This is Andrew seeing Neil, seeing Abram, seeing Nathaniel – this is Andrew seeing *himself*

This is Andrew looking into a black hole and realizing he's already passed the event horizon.

WHEN ANDREW IS SICK

Q: Also, I'm horribly curious how Andrew would respond to being v sick, like with pneumonia or the flu.

A: Andrew is a fucking dumbass who refuses to acknowledge he can have weaknesses, so Andrew would probably act as normal as he could with the pneumonia or flu until he fucking collapsed somewhere

cue the Foxes freaking the fuck out because *MAYBE ANDREW IS DYING*

and Andrew tiredly in the background going *I'm not dead*

and Neil going *shut the fuck up and go to sleep*

~~cue Kevin but we have practice~~

ANDREW AND THE CATS

Q: What is Andrew's relationship with the cats does he feel anything towards them?

A: At the start they are just these things that are occasionally underfoot, as interesting as houseplants. But Sir Fat Cat McCatterson was destined to be a lapcat and he is not at all deterred by Andrew's apathy in him. They do the whole "*I'm in your lap!*" "*I'm putting you back on the ground.*" "*Back up!*" "*Back down.*" routine for a while, and Sir is not at all deterred by Andrew's observation that Sir would be more cooperative if he was tossed out with the trash.

It's made more complicated by the fact that the cats love sleeping in bed with Neil & Andrew. Andrew is used to Neil's weight by the time they bring the cats home, but a sudden weight on the bed in the middle of the night will wake him up every time. So for a while Andrew & Sir have this *fuck-you* fight at night, too, until Sir Fat Cat figures out he needs to get up on Neil's side if he

wants to spend the night curled up next to a human. ((Once Andrew's fallen asleep again, he's free to sneak between their bodies for the extra heat if he so desires))

The cats grow on Andrew so slowly that Neil's half-convinced it'll never happen and Andrew doesn't see it coming, but it's the little things that slowly wear him down– the fact that the cats are generally so low-maintenance that they don't take a lot of energy to keep around, how excited the cats get when Andrew & Neil get home from Away games, the way Neil looks when he's absorbed in their furry roommates, the rumbling purr and quiet ball of heat when it's cold outside ((because *cold* is definitely on the never-ending list of things Andrew is not fond of)), the now-familiar twine of a tail around his calf when Andrew is cutting up meat in the kitchen, and the scratchy rasp of a cat tongue on the back of his hands. These things slowly become normal, until one day Andrew actually moves what he's working on out of the way so Sir Fat Cat can jump up into his lap. ((*"but if you even look at my plate I will skin you and put you out the window"*))

((Neil is smart enough to never comment on this, because drawing attention to Andrew's tolerance is the fast way to get rid of it.))

Andrew still wakes up when the cats get into bed, but in the winter he'll let them under the covers and call it a self-serving bid for extra warmth.

IS ANDREW REALLY AWESOME

Q: Do you think Andrew is awesome? Because he is my favourite character and i wanna know more things about him Thanks

A: I think Andrew would be a difficult person to be friends with but one you'd fight to keep once you got inside that circle. He's a bit of an asshole and a bit misogynistic, though Bee & Renee are working on that last bit. But Andrew's definitely my second favorite character of the Foxes despite (because of?) his flaws. I'm glad you liked him! :)

DOES ANDREW GET GRUMPY

Q: Does Andrew get grumpy a lot? And I mean, normal I-didn't-have-enough-coffee-for-this grumpy? how does Neil and the cats deal with him in that mood?

A: Grumpy? No? To me grumpy is the angrier cousin of sulking, and Andrew would consider it a petty and meaningless waste of energy. ((like guilt, like shame, like regret))

Andrew's more likely to go.. dead? than to get grumpy. To just phase out and stop feeling anything, when it's too much energy or there's too much input or today is just not the day. If we

look at that scenario instead, the cats don't have much of a clue and don't care what his mood is so long as he holds still and acts as a lap, and Neil leaves careful stepping stones back to an even keel for when Andrew wants to take them – whether it's taking on more of the chores, or getting Andrew a drink or cigarette, or finding relevant articles to leave out for Andrew to peruse later. Neil can't always tell when his presence is a hindrance vs a help, but he's never keen on getting too far from Andrew when he sees Andrew clock out.

DOES ANDREW GET LESS DEAD INSIDE

Q: hey, i'm really sorry to bother you as i know you'd like to move on from the foxes, but i'm rereading the series again and i just... i really relate to a lot of andrew's mindset in the apathy and numbness, and it's equally validating and painful to see a character similar to myself in fiction, and i was just wondering if he ever gets better? if he ever becomes more feeling, less dead inside? thank you <3

A: Yes, but it is a learning process that is going to take him years. Feeling anything for Neil was not part of the plan, but once he accepts that and lets Neil in, he can start teaching himself how to let other things matter. He'll never be as.. attached? expressive? as the so-called “normal” characters are, because Andrew does have some issues/chemical imbalances/there is an actual word I am looking for that I am failing to find – that he refuses to fully address or treat. ((not necessarily via medication, but a bit less apathy toward himself would probably help, not to mention more workarounds for the deep lows in his now-untreated depression)).

He slowly learns to trust the things in his life enough to let them in, whether it's Neil or Exy or the cats, and these things are worth giving a shit about. These things are important enough to wake up for and to pay attention to and to care about, and Andrew learns to feel for all of them. Is he ever going to be a bundle of sunshine and feels? Absolutely not. But he stops counting the seconds between waking and sleeping & the breaths that take him closer to an escape in death.

ANDREW'S TRIGGER WORDS

Q: Does andrew have any other words he can't stand? Also, I was reading the bit where the coach meets him for the first time. His strange sandwich got me thinking--what are his eating habits like?? And neil's for that matter.

A: Andrew's last trigger word is “family”, which is why he's so quick to correct Nicky whenever Nicky wants to protest that they're family. “Family” is paperwork, is heavy hands and hot mouths and pain and hunger, is withheld meals and false hopes, is Tilda mistaking Andrew for Aaron and beating him black and blue. “Family” is a toxic excuse for things people put up with, a reason we accept the tragedies and inconveniences forced upon us. please do not ask about Andrew's

eating habits because his are the absolute worst?? like he lives off sugar whenever possible and hoards carbs like he needs them to survive. bread? pasta? pizza?? yeahhh. he didn't eat a lot of vegetables or fruits growing up so he still kind of side-eyes them and refuses to touch them unless it's unavoidable. meat is okay but not really a necessary part of his life, so if there are vegetarian options he'll choose them first ((though he's not technically a vegetarian? he just doesn't care that much for the taste of meat))

~~kid after my own heart I am an absolute slob when it comes to food~~

but spicy foods are also good, because Andrew is nothing if not a pile of contradictions

Andrew is a big fan of things he can eat in small bites, if he cannot eat in small bites he will make things into small bites e.g. the sandwich he shredded up in the Wymack & the Monsters side story. saying "he doesn't like making a mess" seems odd, considering he's taking this thing and making it into a thousand things, but eating manageable bites makes more sense than chomping at a hunk of food

Neil grew up eating a lot of leftovers, because his mother didn't like going out in public much on the run. She made a lot of soups, bought a lot of canned food, gathered ingredients she could use again & again ((e.g. beans and tortillas)). It's part of the reason Neil prefers fruits to vegetables – fruits were more accessible growing up, so Neil had more of them, whereas vegetables were a rare afterthought he never acquired a taste for.

ANDREW'S FATAL DISEASE IN THE COMICS

Q: Could you talk more about the terminal brain disorder that Andrew had in earlier drafts? Was that only back when the books were Neil/Kevin and Andrew wasn't as big of a character?

A: so way back when, when the foxhole court was this horrendously drawn over-dramatic comic ((e.g. not that diff from the books)), Andrew had this undefined brain disorder for OVERDRAMATIC!! ANIME!! REASONS!!!. back then both the twins lived with their parents, and so long as they were in their parents' custody the clinic would provide funding for Andrew's clinical trial medication??

((look I was like 13 or 14 it didn't have to make a lot of sense back then))

one of the side effects of Andrew's illness & medication was that his memory kept short circuiting, he couldn't retain much for very long. now and then he'd try and come off his pills for a while so he could create a significant memory ((e.g. the days surrounding Neil's arrival)) but most everything in between you could just distract him and he'd completely lose it

stop it, he'd cry, as you overloaded his circuits to the point of breaking, because he knew you were forcing him to forget something important, ***stop it stop it stop— oh hiiii when did you get here***

in those drafts Aaron was the abused one, he took on the role willingly because if it happened to Andrew, Andrew would forget all about it. So Aaron made it like he wanted to be abused to keep the focus on himself, because Andrew forgetting such things was intolerable. The more abuse Aaron took, the quieter he became, until Aaron stopped talking completely ((and Andrew forgot Aaron had ever talked at all))

and then Aaron was sitting in the park one day and Dan walked by with her aunt's twin babies, and Aaron just started crying, and that's how Dan met Aaron, and how Dan brought the twins to the Foxes

tl;dr Andrew was still a major character, but way back then the series was Kevin/Neil with a side of Riko/Kevin

TILDA'S ABUSE

Q: I'm a little confused how Andrew didn't know Tilda was hitting Aaron that whole time? Didn't they live in kind of a small house? Or did she stop somewhat while he was there?

A: Sorry for any confusion caused by drunk answering, but Andrew knew before he came "home" that something abusive was happening between Tilda and Aaron.

Andrew suspected, but he needed proof. Tilda was a little more careful with Andrew underfoot, because she'd heard the rumors same as Aaron had and had heard from her brother about Andrew's time in juvie, but nerves couldn't change her core behavior. It didn't take Andrew long to figure out he was right – it just took him a while to act on that, because he needed a perfect alibi for her murder.

ANDREW AND PROMISES

Q: what's with andrew and promises?

A: no one ever kept a promise to Andrew, so the least Andrew can do is break the cycle and actually keep his word

ANDREW'S ARREST

Q: What has Andrew been arrested for?

A: Confession: *I do not know*

!!!!!!???????????

Mostly because it's been about a half-dozen things over the last two decades, and this last time through I was like IT WAS PROBABLY BREAKING AND ENTERING?? but I never really fleshed out the details. For a while it was arson, but that led to an argument/debate about appropriate time for the crime, and I just gave up on figuring out the specifics.

((I did warn you that I'm lazy, right? But I also figured only 5 people would read Foxhole Court and therefore the details weren't overly important))

EYE COLOR

Q: Hi, i've just finished reading the king's men. And now i've a doubt because when i've searched andrew minyard on Wiki somebody'd written that his eyes are blue but in the king's men neil says that andrew has hazel eyes. Can you answer me? Thanks

A: I think I saw this answered on someone else's dash while I was at work, so I'm probably answering this twice, but just in case: the twins have hazel eyes, and Neil's eyes are blue. Sorry for any confusion :)

NEIL AND ANDREW

THE OTHER 10%

Q: What about the other ten or whatever percent of the time?

A: The other 10% of the time, Neil is still important enough to keep around, and Andrew will deal with his idiocy as long as he has to.

9% of the time he thinks killing Neil might be the one thing he can't come back from, the one thing it might hurt to lose.

7~8% of the time it feels like falling, and to a man afraid of heights it is a terrible and frightening sensation.

The more he falls for Neil the more he hates Neil, because Neil is the one thing in the world that could destroy him, and Andrew isn't ready for that.

He just doesn't realize yet he's too late to stop it.

WHICH TEAMMATE CAUGHT ON FIRST

Q: Hi! Can you settle a small debate for me? Which teammate clued into Andrew and Neil's "thing" first: Renee or Kevin? We both agree that Kevin's lightbulb went off at Eden's but is that true?

A: The short answer is: Kevin.

Renee figured out Andrew's attraction first, Kevin picked up on Neil's attraction not much later, and Kevin was the first to realize that it was mutual attraction with feels involved.

Renee had the advantage of knowing for sure that Andrew was gay, so once Andrew stopped seeing Neil as a mole and absorbed him into his makeshift family, she wondered if there was more going on. She asked him about it once, but Andrew of course brushed it off. Renee knew better than to push matters and decided to just keep an eye on things.

*((I keep thinking I posted that snippet of theirs, the **til death do us part** accusation, but I can't remember right now which Ask it would've been associated with.))*

Neil, on the other hand, was a much harder read for her, because Neil avoided being alone with her unless he really needed something or had no choice. Most of what Renee saw of Neil & knew about Neil was Neil as he related to Kevin. She hoped, for Andrew's sake, that it was an actual Thing with them, but she couldn't pin it down with any certainty.

((When spring came and the upperclassmen started kicking around the idea that there might be something there, Renee was prohibited from betting on Andrew & Neil as an item. She could bet on Neil's sexuality, but not his chances with Andrew, in part because her association with Andrew meant she might have insider details and in part because her betting would have influenced the substantial Andrew & Renee pool.))

Kevin, on the other hand, was too obsessed with Andrew and Neil to not notice how much time they spent looking for each other. Honestly, he was in the best position to assume they were going to work out their tension in the bedroom, considering he hailed from the Ravens. The Ravens were a violent hive mind and they were exceptionally isolationist. They weren't allowed to associate with anyone who wasn't on the team or part of school faculty, which meant the Ravens were possibly the most inbred team in the nation. Lot of sex going on in the Nest, fueled by anger & hate & tension & triumph. Almost didn't matter who fucked who or what gender the other person was because in the end it was just sex and they were all Ravens. Most of the Ravens still identify as straight.

((Kevin & Thea were a secret not because they were sleeping together but because they wanted more than what everyone else had. They wanted something real, something ongoing and equal, and that kind of dedication would have been destroyed by the master before it could distract them from their purpose as athletes))

Everything from Neil's reaction to Drake onward made it a little obvious that there might be more to it than could be cured by a rough tumble or two, but the ***gdi it's a real thing*** moment happened when Neil went so completely out of character and sacrificed himself to Riko for Christmas.

If Kevin thought Neil had any chances of surviving the year, he might've sat both Andrew & Neil down in January and warned them about discretion and the lingering prejudices of the professional world, but he knew Neil was going to die in a couple months. For once in his life he decided not to put salt in an open wound.

ROLAND'S OPINION

Q: Did Roland know Andrew was attracted to Neil from the first time he met him (when they drugged Neil)?

A: Yeah, he figured it out pretty quick! :) Roland commented on Neil's looks the first time Andrew brought Neil to the club. Andrew agreed but dismissed Neil as a threat not worth pursuing. The second time Andrew dragged Neil to Columbia, Roland gave Andrew a hard time for it. Andrew still brushed it aside as something that would never happen, but Roland had his doubts.

WHEN DID ANDREW CLUE IN

Q: So I'm pretty sure I would give my right arm if you were willing to shed some light on when exactly Andrew came to the conclusion that Neil actually meant something to him. (any chance of that?)

A: The first time Andrew saw Neil without his medication blurring his judgment, he thought, *This could be a problem*, but he did not take it seriously then.

For the longest time, Andrew thought this was something he could back out of. He'd had "relationships" with people since juvie, a necessary step in exploring his sexuality in the wake of everything that had been done to him. Neil was just another notch on the belt, so to speak, another handsome face that would be interesting for a while. And yeah, maybe Andrew looked a little longer at Neil than he did at anyone else, but Roland had lasted, right? And besides, Neil was bound to be different, because Neil was family, and so Andrew had to take the extra steps to protect and provide. *Right?*

But Neil was—problematic. Neil kept looking at him like that, even when Andrew told him to stop. Neil said things he wasn't supposed to, things he wasn't allowed to say, kept blurring the line between here and there and digging his way in where he wasn't allowed.

If Andrew knew what was good for him, he'd just call it off and move on. He stayed because he had a promise to keep, or so he told himself. He stayed because although Neil felt like falling, Andrew was sure he could keep his balance this time.

90%. 91, 92, 93.

And then there was Binghamton, and that dead look in Neil's face, that tension in his smile when he said I'm sorry and You were amazing

And then Neil was—*gone*

And Andrew wanted to—wanted to burn the world, wanted to shove aside everyone standing in his way, wanted to tear the stadium down bench by bench and bolt by bolt, until he figured out where Neil was, and was this fear, *was this fear*, because he hadn't felt this since—

He searched the crowd, lapped the stadium once, twice, looking for any sign, looking for anything besides a bag and a battered racquet, looking at a cell phone with a call from a number not saved into Neil's phone and a text message from a different number that just said 0

And he remembered telling Neil he'd stand down and let Neil solve his own problems and *don't come crying to me when someone breaks your face*

((but then someone did break his face, with a knife and a lighter and fists and a cleaver))

and kneeling on the floor of a dingy hotel room in Baltimore, MD, staring at the wrecked remains of what Neil used to be, Andrew knew there was no going back from this, he was lost, he was lost, *he was found*

EXITES SELF-CENSURE

Q: Hi again. I also had a question about a specific moment in The Raven King(?) when Andrew and Neil were in the Exy store looking at heavy rackets. Right before Andrew left there was a moment that felt very...“substantial”. I surmised that part of it had to do with Andrew revealing too much and trying to keep Neil (or himself?) from saying something troublesome but if you could explain it in more detail I’d be 5ever grateful.

Q: What was Andrew worried he’d say at Excites? When Neil protested that he isn’t a lost cause? Why did this make him react?

A: But that’s what makes you interesting. It’s also what makes you dangerous. I should know better by now. Maybe I’m not as smart as I thought I was.

As Neil later guesses, Andrew’s censoring himself before his mouth gets away from him. It’s not his sexuality that Andrew’s avoiding, but that attraction to Neil that’s starting to feel a little less like (ill-advised) lust and a little bit more like poison crawling under his skin. Shutting Neil up keeps Neil from pressing a conversation Andrew refuses to have yet. They sort of finish it in King’s Men, when Neil realizes Andrew is willing to let Aaron go if it means keeping Neil:

“Last I checked you hated me,” Neil said against Andrew’s mouth.

“Everything about you,” Andrew said.

Neil pushed himself up a bit. “I’m not as stupid as you think I am.”

“And I’m not as smart as I thought I was,” Andrew said. “I know better than to do this again. Perhaps it’s the self-destructive streak in me?”

Neil would’ve had an easier time of it if he’d realized only one of them was talking about Exy:

Neil tried to stamp out his frustration but couldn’t stop all of a sigh. “Would it kill you to let something in?”

“It almost did last time,” Andrew said.

He said it matter-of-factly, but Neil still winced when he realized his misstep. He reached out but stopped his hand a careful distance from Andrew’s arm. Andrew’s long sleeves and bands hid his scars but Neil remembered how they felt under his fingers.

“This is different,” Neil said. “The only one in your way now is you. You really could be Court one day, but you can’t get there if you won’t try.”

((I know better than to let you in; I know better than to let you be the death of me))

BEE AND AARON'S REACTIONS

Q: What was Betsy's reaction to hearing about Andrew and Neil? Also, when did Aaron and Nicky start to believe the thing between Andrew and Neil was more than what they had originally thought?

A: Oh, Bee. Bee was so happy for them, because Neil was proof that Andrew was healing enough to let other people in. Her immediate reaction had to be tempered, though, because she found out before she was supposed to know – until Aaron threw the relationship in Andrew's face during a joint session ((the day he made Andrew choose between him and Neil)), she had no clue they were seeing each other.

((She knew something was going on, because Andrew had gone from bringing Neil up at nearly every session—usually in throwaway comments and insubstantial insults—to refusing to talk about him at all. She just didn't know what. Bee had quietly wondered about Andrew's sexuality off and on, mostly because she knew from Andrew that the upperclassmen were betting on his & Renee's chances. Andrew didn't tell Bee what he told Renee**, but he sounded so disinterested in the entire thing that she marked it in her notes. She never asked, though, because she knew it wasn't time.))

Bee knew Andrew would've brought it up with her if he wanted to talk about it, and she knew Aaron crossed a line by telling her about it. But once it was in the open she did have to react so that Andrew would understand where she stood. That shared session was the wrong time, so she messaged Andrew later, a simple "I'm happy for you" to test the waters. It was a while before she managed to get Andrew to actually talk about it, but eventually they were able to address the underlying issues. Bee had as much fun with that "I hate him" conversation as Neil did, and tbh Andrew was a hundred times more likely to listen to Bee's reasoning on the matter.

((Go Mama Bee! \o.o/))

Nicky & Aaron didn't have a clue the two were together until Maryland, when Allison basically outed Andrew & Neil to the team. After Aaron realized there was something there, he took approximately one day to figure out where he stood on it, and one second to realize he could profit from it.

Aaron & Andrew might've had a complicated relationship, but they were still twins in the end. They were too much alike; they could read each other in the tiniest gestures. Bias tried to argue, but Aaron knew the moment Andrew walked back into their room in Neil's clothes that this was something important. He went to Katelyn and the upperclassmen, demanding every insight they could give him, and put it all together with a selfish intensity.

Nicky, who thinks he's so smart and observant but who can be quite oblivious sometimes, didn't realize there were two-way Feels involved until Aaron switched rooms with Neil. He was as surprised as Neil was that Andrew would take Neil over Aaron. He thought Neil had more invested in the entire thing than Andrew ever would, and that night proved him wrong.

**

"I wanted you to hear this from me," Renee said as she slipped her knife back into its sheath. "The others are starting to talk, and while I haven't been able to catch the entire conversation, it seems they are betting on our chances of ending up together. As a couple, I mean."

Andrew laughed. "Are they really? Oh, but they really will bet on anything. What a waste of time and money. Know this before you give any weight to their suspicions, Natalie Renee Shields Walker: I don't fuck women."

It took a moment for it to sink in, the words first and the meaning behind them. Renee was too startled by the confession to react immediately, and her pause gave Andrew time to get to his feet and start for the door. She wondered for a second if he was walking away from her potential reaction or if he was just leaving because this conversation didn't interest him any longer. It was likely the latter, but if it wasn't—

"And I don't kiss heathens," she said, in as cheeky a tone as she could manage, and Andrew wheeled back to look at her. She smiled and said, "So it's not going to be a problem for either of us, right? We'll have to settle for being friends."

THE BREAKING POINT

Q: So you mentioned briefly in another ask that Neil and Andrew's relationship couldn't have recovered if the protection thing had still been in effect when Neil got taken by his father's parents/Andrew failed to protect him. Are there any other circumstances in which the damage to their relationship would have been irreparable? Or if there's too many to list, what would have been the easiest ways for their relationship to get damaged beyond repair?

A: Yeah— if Neil hadn't revoked Andrew's protection and then he'd let that countdown happen, there'd be no going back or repairing that broken trust. Andrew still wouldn't have let the FBI keep Neil, but he'd have relegated Neil to the same icy distant role Aaron landed in. ((Aaron, see, made the same mistake—exactng a promise from Andrew and then refusing to see it through.))

TBH, once Andrew & Neil lock into their relationship there's very little that could pry them apart. There were missteps they could have taken along the way regarding Andrew's medication, the aftermath of the mess that was Drake, Neil not respecting Andrew's boundaries, Andrew warned off Neil more emphatically by Kevin, Nicky successfully hooking Neil up with someone else along the way, etc etc etc— little things that, if done early enough in the school year, would have slowly set them a little apart.

But once Nathaniel is laid to rest that's pretty much it, there's no going back. The only things that could break them up are things neither of them would ever consider doing—Neil spilling Andrew's secrets & belittling them, or Andrew killing one of the original Foxes—so they're guaranteed to make it work the rest of their lives.

They deserve that much, at least, considering what it took them to get to this point.

Til death do us part

NEIL GETTING ANDREW OFF

Q: When does Neil get Andrew off for the first time? How does Andrew take it?

A: Neil's sophomore year/Andrew's junior. They build up to it bit by bit, Neil mapping out a little more of Andrew's body as Andrew allows it, but it is still a major step for them. They kiss for a long time afterward—maybe to make sure they're okay, maybe so Andrew doesn't have to look at Neil while he processes this, while he wonders if that gnawing hole in his stomach is hunger or outrage and if that faint tremble in his hands is restrained murder or relief.

((Neil pretends he doesn't feel it.))

Q: when does neil see andrew naked for the first time?

A: Same time Neil gets Andrew off for the first time, Neil's sophomore year/Andrew's junior.

NEIL AND THE SEX HOW-TO

Q: when Neil wants to learn about the proper/healthy way to have sex, would he ask Nicky or google it and figure it out for himself?

A: Oh, god, he'll definitely do the research on his own. Nicky is the last person Neil would willingly open that conversation with, no matter how experienced Nicky is. Nicky's just so.. loud? unsubtle? enthusiastic? Besides, it's Nicky's cousin they're talking about.

In a previous draft Nicky found out that Neil & Andrew weren't actually having sex yet, and he put together a how-to guide in a binder for Neil. Andrew was not at all amused by this interference.

THEIR FIRST TIME

Q: What was it like the first time Andrew and Neil did the full dirty diddle

A: It was a long time coming & a little bit stressful, considering one had never fucked anyone by choice and the other was a virgin, but they figured it out.

Q: Where do Andrew and Neil have sex for the first time? Is at Andrew's home, the dorm suite or neither of those?

A: The house in Columbia. They make a detour during one of their weekend road trips so Andrew can grab a couple things from his closet, and the break ends up being longer than they expected.

((It'd be too hard a thing to finagle at the dorm room, at least that first time—scheduling is pretty tight across the team because of practices & tutoring sessions, and Kevin is usually loathe to leave his computer & Exy resources.))

WHO TOPS

Q: If A/N ever get to the point of going the whole way, who would top, or would they switch?

A: Haha, they'll get there eventually, no worries. <33

For a while Andrew's going to have to top, because his issues are borders Neil doesn't yet have permission to cross. Neil is pretty good at working with what he's got, and he spends the time productively. He learns Andrew's body bit by bit, biding his time for when he can put it all together and take Andrew apart. Fucking Andrew isn't the solution, of course— it's not like one round of sex is going to heal every trigger— but it's a start. By the time Neil steps onto the court as captain for the first time they've pretty much found their footing with each other and are good either way.

((It was easier when Kevin was involved, because Kevin and Riko were a thing that used to have its good moments sprinkled throughout the psychotic violence. Kevin taught Neil everything he knew, and Neil taught Andrew everything he'd learned. With Kevin out of the picture, I needed a new way to give one of them the experience they needed to do something more than stare mindlessly at each other. Thus: Roland. I don't even remember if he had a name in the last drafts. If he did it was fleeting and unimportant.))

ON TYING PEOPLE UP

I think the question was “I’m thinking about writing something about them, so was tying him up a common occurrence?”

Luckily this is the one question of the night I wrote in Notepad instead of in Tumblr, because it got so long that I wanted more room to work on it.

Before I answer this (because I know this is gonna get long—hey, this is me we’re talking about), I want to start with two things:

1. This is my take on the situation, but it doesn’t change anything. Everyone’s free to interpret the characters how they like and do with them as they wish!
2. It is not my intention to offend anyone with anything that’s said in here. People like what they like, and need what they need, and experiment with things that interest them, so on and so forth. That’s healthy and normal and fantastic! But the men we’re about to talk about are not at all healthy, and the attitudes I’m trying to explain in this (never-ending) ramble are theirs.

Here’s the two-sentence version of my answer:

I never considered it to be an ongoing thing with them—I just saw it as the final evolution of their trust.

And the ~~essay~~ longer answer ya’ll knew was coming:

It’s not something I would say is a common occurrence, no. But because my answer is no I want to explain why it even made an appearance in another Ask and why my answer is what it is.

Eventually Andrew will understand that it’s okay to tie Neil’s hands out of the way once in a while, but I can’t see him doing it with any real frequency. Neil is the first person in Andrew’s life who is allowed to touch Andrew, so tying him up cheats Andrew out of something he has never before been able to have and enjoy. Getting from where they are in King’s Men to where they are after Nicky’s wedding takes a lot of work and many years.

Let me see if I can make this make sense.

Roland makes good on his joke and gives them a pair of padded cuffs. He waits until the end of the summer, because the first half of the summer the Foxes are struggling with Aaron’s trial and six new faces on the court. But in August he gives Neil a box and tells Neil to open it when he’s alone at Fox Tower. I forgive him—he means well, he is just so happy that Andrew finally found someone who will stick with him, and he knows firsthand how much Andrew loathes being touched.

So yeah, they’re partially a joke, but they’re partially a “Go get ‘im, friend!” show of support. He doesn’t know any better, and luckily for him Neil and Andrew are too bruised by the gift to ever

tell him what they honestly think of it. ((Andrew tries to throw the cuffs out the closed window of their dorm room. Luckily they're not heavy enough to break the glass, just crack it. Matt replaces the window when Neil asks him to but never gets an explanation as to what happened.))

Here's the thing ((that ya'll already know)): Andrew is an untrustworthy ball of issues and he & Neil still have a lot to work on when King's Men ends. But Andrew trusts Neil to stop if he says stop, and he trusts Neil to keep his hands to himself if Andrew's not comfortable with Neil reaching out for him. Neil knows and understands and respects the fact that a *Yes* today is not a *Yes* tomorrow when it comes to Andrew—today Andrew might let Neil put his hands on his back, and tomorrow he might push Neil's hands away, and Neil knows it has nothing to do with him in the end. It is about a comfort zone that has been breached too many times and Andrew learning what he is and isn't okay with.

Andrew tells Neil at the end of King's Men that he knows Neil can respect that about him, so turning around and tying Neil's hands feels like a "Just kidding, I don't fucking trust you" as far as Andrew's concerned. It turns Neil's "I trust you" into "I trust you, Andrew, but it's okay if you don't trust me enough in return." It turns Andrew into the men who pushed him down and wouldn't let him fight back. Andrew won't—*can't*—become that person.

And honestly? At this point in his life it's not much easier for Neil to consider such a thing. Until Andrew came into the picture, Neil always ran, because he knew what would happen to him if he was caught. Well—he was caught, twice, and as he always expected and feared he was brutalized to the point that he almost shattered. The last two people to cuff him were Riko and Lola, and they hurt him so badly that his wrists scarred from how fiercely he fought to get free. Maybe the loops around his wrists aren't as impressive as what Lola left on his knuckles and arms and face, but those lines are there. So really—neither of them is in any position to just tie the other down anytime soon.

But Neil keeps the cuffs, because he's getting pretty good at figuring out what Andrew's issues are and he knows this is something they're going to have to address at some point considering how angrily Andrew reacted. He tells Andrew that Nathan's trial is going to happen sooner or later and that he's rusty on his lockpicking when it comes to getting out of handcuffs. It's the thinnest excuse in the entire world but Andrew lets him have them, and Neil locks them away in his safe where Andrew doesn't have to see them again. They stay there for a long time, shuffled aside anytime Neil needs to get money out of his binder and never lingered over.

They don't make a real appearance again until Kevin's fifth year. It's Kevin's last season with the Foxes and this is where Neil really has to face the fact that he's going to be losing them. The upperclassmen left, and now Matt and Kevin are heading towards graduation, and that means the cousins will only be a year behind them. So Neil is a little on edge all this year—doesn't help that he and his vice captain don't particularly get along.

((Jack is very, very good, and very smart, but Neil and Jack had serious issues for all of Neil's sophomore year. They're better this year, but better is always relative when it comes to these two. Granted, Andrew doesn't help things by calling Jack "John" instead of Jack))

((In America, "Jack" is a legitimate nickname for "John", so Andrew's not wrong by calling him by his birth name—he's just an asshole for refusing to respect Jack's choice to not go by John. Childish spite, thy name is Andrew))

Late that fall the Foxes head to Eden's Twilight to celebrate a win against USC. For clarification—there are two USCs in the United States. 90% of the time everyone's referring to the one you all read about in the books—the University of Southern California where the Trojans play. For years I insisted that USC was an imposter, because there is also a University of South Carolina. In this instance, we are definitely talking about the one in South Carolina—which happens to have its main campus in Columbia.

The Foxes show up at the club to have a good time, but halfway through the night they bump into some players from USC's team. It's a pretty heated interaction because both sides (save Neil & Andrew) are wasted. Kevin says something really rude, Neil's feeling salty enough to back him up, and the argument becomes an all-out bar fight in a heartbeat.

Security breaks up the fight, but someone's already called the cops, so the lot of them are cuffed and hauled away and tossed in the drunk tank to cool off overnight. Andrew, being Andrew, picks free of his cuffs before the police have a chance to do it for him. Neil remembers the pair he locked away that he swore he'd practice with but didn't. The next week he finally digs them out and starts slow, locking one wrist at a time. It annoys him having the second cuff dangling free, though, so he cuffs himself to one of the beds. Andrew finds him working on it later.

They argue for a while, Andrew poking holes in Neil's methods and then tolerating Neil's frustrated rant over the day's Exy practice. Neil keeps working while they're talking and eventually thinks he can tackle two wrists. This is more of a pain than he honestly expected it to be, because his hands don't want to move the way he wants them to, and after a couple botched attempts Neil gives up and just talks so Andrew won't notice and comment on how useless he is. Andrew notices, but he waits until it's time to eat before saying he's not letting Neil out. Neil got himself into this mess, so he can stay here and starve while the rest of them get dinner.

Neil manages to get free while Andrew's away, but he gives up on his practice for the night. The next day Neil cuffs himself to Andrew so Andrew can't leave him behind again. Andrew is pretty sure that defeats the entire purpose of the experiment, but he doesn't break free.

Neil does figure it out after enough practice. And this matters, even if they don't yet fully recognize the significance. *Neil can get free if he wants to be free.* It is not a green light, but it is important.

The green light, if it can be called that, is when Stuart Hatford is murdered, traded out for a younger, more ambitious successor. And Neil didn't really know him but Stuart was family, was the only relative he had left in the world, was his mother's brother. He hears the news long before any of the Foxes do; one of the Moriyama thugs gives him a heads-up before it happens because they need to know if his reaction is going to be a problem. Neil doesn't agree and doesn't want this but he's not in any position to do anything about it considering he's already signed away his life to Ichirou.

And Neil does what Andrew told him not to do—he starts something when he knows his head's out of sorts. At least he's smart enough to warn Andrew ahead of time, as he presses the handcuffs into Andrew's uncooperative hands and kisses his words into the line of Andrew's jaw. *I'm not in the right place to know where the lines are with you, but I need you right now.*

A few years ago Andrew never would have let Neil get away with this, but that was then and this is now, and Andrew's coming to terms with the idea that *Yes is always yes unless I say no*. So he takes the handcuffs Neil gives him and pushes Neil down. His questions can wait until tomorrow; what matters right now is that sick gleam in Neil's eyes that looks a little too much like Nathaniel.

It will be a while before they do this again, and next time it won't be tainted by emotional duress, but one day they're going to be okay. One day they'll have come far enough that Nicky can hand Neil a garter as a joke, and Neil will show it to a not-amused Andrew at their hotel room and ask *Was I supposed to throw it back at him on his own wedding day?*, and Neil will pretend like he's going to put it on Andrew and Andrew responds by tying Neil to the headboard with it. And neither of them will think too much of it, because they have evolved past the point where this could have been a problem.

I won't say it's the last time they do such a thing, but I've never wanted to consider it past this point. I'm interested in their milestones and how they get to each one. This milestone didn't exist until I cut out some pretty ugly events for the final rewrite. I wanted to know if taking those pieces out changed certain things, like whether or not they could be okay with little games like these, so I mapped a path to this point. I learned what I wanted to learn about them and I'm happy leaving it there.

But refer back to #1 at the top! My take on things does not have to be your take on things. I want you to have fun, whatever you do! Go forth and write with my blessings. :)

NEIL PUSHING ANDREW DOWN

Q: can you elaborate on the first time Andrew lets Neil push him down???? what were Neil's feelings about it??? Andrews???? I need to know about the trust between my fox children

A: It is a long time coming, with a lot of false starts, with a lot of patience on Neil's part and hand-waving on Andrew's in regards to the ongoing delays. This last line to cross is inevitable, but it's not one that can be rushed, and considering how long it took Andrew to adjust to letting Neil get him off? Yeah, it keeps getting put off for good reason.

But Neil has had time to learn Andrew as best he can, and to learn what he himself likes, and to scrounge together advice and tips from the campus computers. So he lacks experience, but he has a lot of ideas about where to start, at least.

It is slow, partly because Neil is afraid of crossing a line, because Neil is still learning what he's supposed to be doing on this side of things, because Andrew is saying *Fuck you* and *this is okay* in the same breath with every kiss and bite of his fingers, because Neil knows better than to say *Are you sure* after Andrew says *Yes*.

It is slow, partly because Neil needs it to be slow. Neil understands what he's being given, and he understands what he's being trusted with, and it is as empowering as it is humbling, and the last thing he wants to do is screw this up. So he drags it out, forcing them both to face every step together along the way, giving Andrew time to work through everything and ignoring Andrew's unsubtle attempts to just get on with it.

Slow is the best? worst? thing they could do to each other, because slow means unraveling in slow motion, means they can't hide from each other, means they are laid bare in ways they hadn't thought possible before. It is the closest to an *I love you* they can come, eyes locked and breaths catching and fingers slipping helplessly on slick skin. Trying to look away from each other, from the newfound vulnerabilities, but unable to get far when they're so tangled up in each other.

It feels a bit like sabotage to Andrew? Like he's had enough time with Neil by then to know that Neil isn't lying about what he likes, and he's figured out that sex can be enjoyed by both sides, that it isn't a take-and-take-and-take that leaves the other raw and broken. He knows it is good for Neil. But he still "knows" it will be different for himself? He knows Neil is not like the others but this is sex and Andrew still has this bone-deep memory of what sex is.

But it's not, it's not, it's *not*, this is not something he signed up for, this is not okay because this is too raw and too real and Neil can see right through him and his too-fierce *don't look at me like that* is only answered by a too-calm too-measured too-pointed *I see you*

This isn't being taken apart, it is being unfolded, unwrapped, unraveled, and Andrew signed up for this but he didn't sign up for *this* and it's going to take a lot of cigarettes and drinks and time alone to figure things out.

DATES

Q: Do Neil and Andrew go on dates

A: Candlelit dinners & movies, not so much, not really their thing. Table for two once in a while and long walks on the beach? Sure. Long drives to nowhere, just the two of them? Even better.

HOLDING HANDS

Q: Helloo, I wanna start off with how much I enjoyed the foxhole series! I thought it was brilliant and I absolutely adore the characters and the way you executed Neil and Andrew's relationship. So in light of that, I need to know, in egregious detail, how and when Andrew and Neil held hands for the first time. This information is crucial to my well-being and that of my friend's. Please and thank youu

A: Thank you so much for taking a chance on the stories! I'm really glad you liked them :) As for when Neil & Andrew held hands:

The first time they hold hands is a Saturday morning the fall of Neil's sophomore year. They're only a couple weeks into the semester and the Foxes are off to their traditional rough start on account of the tension between old & new and – more importantly – the friction between Neil and two of the freshmen. Neil is past ready for the weekend, but he gets an unwanted early start because Andrew gets up for a sparring session with Renee.

By the time Andrew gets back Neil has already moved from their room to the rooftop of Fox Tower, never mind that it's overcast and already starting to drizzle. They don't say anything for a while, content to sit side by side with their cigarettes. Neil's burns down first since he didn't wait for Andrew before lighting up, and he's feeling jagged enough that he attempts to steal Andrew's. Andrew, being Andrew, simply moves it to his far hand where Neil can't reach it.

Neil lets himself get distracted instead by the shadows on Andrew's hands, the forming bruises and the split skin along his knuckles. He takes Andrew's hand to inspect the damage, wondering at how something so strong can be so fragile—*or is it the other way around?*. If he turns their hands over he can see the wreckage Lola left behind on his own skin, the distorted scars that will always stand out more than he wants them to.

He thinks about the grief and strife that's brought them to this point, that's let them grow to where Neil no longer has to ask permission to put his hands on Andrew. He knows it doesn't matter how rough the week was or how frustrating the freshmen are. They've been through hell and back together; these kids are nothing but a passing annoyance in the end.

It's a hand, Andrew says, not a question, but not quite mockery, when Neil's gaze lingers a little too long.

It's **your** hand, Neil says, and doesn't bother to explain. Instead he slips his fingers through Andrew's and digs in like he can leave his fingerprints on Andrew's pale skin. Andrew doesn't pull away, and they don't go in until the storm breaks.

the unasked-for addendum: for a while Andrew & Neil are careful about how they touch when the situation is emotionally charged, e.g. when Cass comes into town for the trial that summer. Neil can only guess at what's going on in Andrew's head, and he knows better than to put his hands on Andrew first while everything is hitting the fan. Other couples might find lingering touches and supportive hands comforting at such a rough time, but they're still working on their balance and comfort zones, and this is not the time to create new lines between them.

FIRST HUG

Q: when did Andrew and Neil first share a hug?

A: They're uhh not exactly the hugging type? But if you accept hugs that are hugs on a technicality, then when the US Court wins Olympics and Neil grabs hold of Andrew hard enough to knock the breath out of him.

"ACCIDENTALLY" SITTING IN LAPS

Q: First of all, let me start with the fact you are so sweet and amazing and I just have the need to tell you that, you are probably one of the nicest people ever to live + amazing writer. As for the questions, how frequently Andrew or Neil end up on the other's lap by accident/the other making it look like an accident? That question sits in my head since the beanbag making out scene.

A: Oh, wow, my act is working! My RL peeps are probably rolling over in their graves at this sentiment, but I appreciate it ;D <3 <3 <3

For the first while, neither one of them is likely to play the *Oops my mistake* game, because Andrew and Neil are straightforward with each other as they work through their boundaries. When one of them sits on the other/climbs into the other's lap there's definite intent and invitation.

The years make them more casual, though. I know I keep going back to their cats for examples and excuses ~~but I am trying to get my sister/roommate to bring us home a box of ten kittens so cats are on the brain~~ but I'mma do it again: cat sleeping on the couch, taking up most of a cushion, and Neil ending up half-draped across Andrew because there's no room, Andrew like *do you mind* and Neil like *oh, I was trying not to disturb King Fluffkins, were you here first?*

((ya'll pet people, I know you have stories where you gave up priority seating/sleeping space to accommodate a pet. if my sister's cat is passed out in the middle of my bed when I'm ready to sleep I'm like "I guess I'm sleeping clinging to the edge of the mattress tonight whatev"))

ON THEIR DOMESTIC LIFE

Specifically: cats, cooking, and cleaning.

It's Neil's job to name their cats. If Andrew had the final say in it, they'd answer to things like "Cat 1"/"Cat 2" or "Stupid". Besides, as Andrew points out, Neil has more experience coming up with names on the spot. Neil argues that he has experience coming up with names for himself, not names that other creatures will be stuck with their entire nine lives. In the end he solicits help from the Foxes.

((Nicky takes it seriously for exactly one suggestion and then submits things like SIr Meower the Ruthless, The Great Mouseketeer, and Sir Fat Cat McCatterson. Neil expected this kind of unhelpful response from him. He didn't expect his teammates to abandon all other reasonable names and start voting on Nicky's suggestions, but they needed to believe that in some universe Andrew Joseph Minyard would own a tortoiseshell named Sir Fat Cat McCatterson.

Neil wonders for a minute how this is his life, then decides *what the hell, okay*.

They name their first two cats King Fluffkins and Sir Fat Cat McCatterson. Andrew stares at Neil for a solid two minutes after Neil solemnly delivers the final verdict.))

Andrew does most of the cooking in the beginning. He learned how to cook while working at Eden's Twilight. Neil understands the basics, but that's about it—his mother handled the cooking when she was alive, and when she died he was squatting in a house that had no electricity. Neil picks things up along the way, but he's usually content to leave it to Andrew.

They share the cleaning, but most of what they have to do is upkeep, dishes and cat maintenance, things like that. They're not overly messy people, they don't own much that can get strewn about the place, and they're on the road a lot with their team.

COMFORT

Q: How would Andrew comfort Neil if he was upset?

A: Nine times out of ten, he won't even try.

It's almost safer to say "ten times out of ten". Comfort isn't in Andrew's vocabulary and as far as he's considered it's a waste of time and energy. He's more likely to walk away or tell Neil to get

over it or look right past whatever existential/psychological crisis Neil is having. Neil's grumpiness after a loss are brushed aside unimportant, and his aggravation over uncooperative teammates is nothing to pity him for.

But once in a long while Neil will hit a ledge he has to be pulled back from, and that's what Andrew does. Like in Baltimore, when Neil is trying to say *Do you want me to go*, and Andrew catches hold and tells him *Stay*. This is how Andrew comforts: by being a stabilizing force, an anchor to keep Neil at home, a place to rest his weight and his secrets. Honestly, that's what Neil needs.

But if you would really like a moment of genuine "comfort", Andrew-style, then it would be the day Neil gets the call that Wymack is dead. It is the first time Andrew sees Neil cry, and he does not know what to do with this heartbroken grief. So he sits with Neil instead, back-to-back, with a cigarette burning in his hand ((because he has lived with Neil's cigarette-smoke obsession for far too many years)). He says nothing, but he is a weight and a presence to keep Neil upright.

Q: Does Andrew ever take comfort in Neil? Or cry in front of him?

A: Andrew isn't built for tears. It's a toxic way to be but Andrew's not exactly healthy on a psychological level. "Grief" is an idea, a word he knows and can use disparagingly regarding other people if he is pressed to come up with a description, but something he dismisses as readily as he does "regret" and "shame". So no, Neil will never see Andrew cry even when the funerals start.

But yes, in his own way, Andrew takes comfort in Neil's presence. I don't think he'd appreciate the word choice, because needing comfort means something is wrong, means there is a crack, there is a flaw, there is a weakness that can be exploited at any moment, and Andrew cannot be weak.

But Andrew understands that Neil is a good thing, that Neil is an important thing, that Neil is a buffer, that Neil can dissipate the angry poison before Andrew has to swallow it whole again and again. Neil knows when to talk and when to shut up, when to go away and when to settle down beside him, when a drink is needed more than a fuck and when a cigarette is the only weight Andrew needs in his hand. Calming is a safer word than comforting, and Neil knows the truth even if Andrew refuses to see it.

NEIL AND AFFECTION

Q: Since Neil has been so deprived of affection in his years, wouldn't he want some to experience with Andrew? Or is what he has with Andrew more than enough to fill that missing hole?

A: Neil doesn't understand affection enough to miss or crave it, but he and Andrew aren't cold with each other. They might not bury each other with *I love you* and hand-holding, but they don't doubt what they mean to each other. Their affection is quieter, in the comfort of each other's presence and the knowledge they aren't going anywhere the other can't follow. It's letting Andrew check his bruises after an on-court brawl or standing shoulder-to-shoulder to watch the ball drop in NYC, or slow kisses on the hood of the car when they've taken a midnight drive to nowhere and Neil needs to forget the taste of blood in his mouth. It's Andrew trying to trust Neil with himself in halting see-through attempts, or Neil's quiet quest to figure out the best brand of hot chocolate to bring home.

TALKING TO EACH OTHER

Q: I am going to regret this but.. What is an example of vicious things they have said to one another? How would either really be okay with the other saying things like that? I'm rather confused

A: "Vicious" was a strong word to use, but they are not afraid of jabbing each other's painful places – e.g. when Neil tossed Proust back in Andrew's face ((when Andrew said revenge was a waste of time)). Neil had already had it confirmed that Proust had hurt Andrew and that Andrew did not want to talk about it, but he called Andrew out on his supposed hypocrisy instead of biting his tongue.

The reason they can get away with it is because they understand the intent behind such conversations & accusations. Andrew and Neil are not out to hurt each other because it is fun or because they want to hurt the other; they jab at these sore spots because they need to be addressed. Andrew & Neil are very open with each other, and they're very good about communicating, which is a little bit funny considering Neil used to lie to Andrew with every other breath.

FONDEST MEMORIES

Q: What's Neil's fondest memory of Andrew?

A: That's a difficult one, because Neil has a lot of memories of Andrew that he likes. A hand on his collar and key in his palm and *Stay*, or Andrew's hands on his face in a hotel room in Baltimore, or Andrew carefully wrapping him up at Fox Tower so his bandages will stay dry, or

Andrew shoving matching arm bands at him like they're an afterthought, or Andrew letting Neil declare that Andrew likes him and leaning into a kiss at Evermore.

Or maybe it's seeing Andrew take initiative and let Robin into their group, proving that he's outgrowing his shell enough to take in another refugee, or him making her move into their room and then having to share Neil's bunk so she has a place to sleep.

Or maybe it's Andrew telling Neil they're going to be living together by telling Neil the decorating is *his* problem if he wants more than two chairs and a bed, or the first time Neil gets home from a run and finds the cats curled up in bed with Andrew, or the first time Andrew lets a teammate have it when they're not pulling their weight on the court, or Andrew's hand on the back of his neck when they take home gold at Olympics.

Or maybe it's the moment Andrew looks at Neil and says *It's just yes* so Neil can stop asking him if what they have is okay.

Q: What is Andrew's fondest memory of Neil?

A: Probably one of the times Neil's mouth got him into a world of trouble, because Andrew is an instigator at heart and Neil is really good at picking fights.

HAPPIEST MOMENTS

Q: when is the happiest Neil has ever been, and when is the happiest Andrew has ever been?

A: You've seen Neil's happiest moment so far—when Riko is dead, and Tetsuji is going to step down, and Ichirou has waved Neil off to his team. When Neil can go back downstairs and see the Foxes, his family and the NCAA champions sitting tired but together in the locker room. When Andrew doesn't argue when Neil points out that this thing of theirs means something. This is a good moment for Neil, the best moment of his life. There will be more to come, of course, like the first night he and Andrew sleep in an apartment that's just theirs and their cats', or when he's signed to Court, or when the Court takes home medals in the Olympics, but right now this is everything he's wanted.

Andrew's happiest moment.. Andrew.. happy. Andrew happy. Happy Andrew? Hm. Ya'll love these trick questions. ;D <3

Andrew's "happiest" moment is the day he gets a letter from Cass and he doesn't care enough to hold onto it. It's been a while since he let go of her memory and what she once stood for, but this

is still a quiet turning point of its own, that what he has is more than enough to start undoing everything he's been through.

ROAD TRIPS

Q: if Neil and Andrew traveled for a getaway together, where would they go?

A: Anywhere, honestly, they're not exactly picky. They're going for the sake of going, for the calming silence of the road and the world unfurling around them. Watertown towns or beach fronts, mountain bridges or hectic cities, it's all the same. Neil just wants to observe life, and Andrew goes where Neil goes. Most of the time they just pick places off the map that are certain distances from wherever they are currently.

Years down the road they'll slowly retrace Neil's path across the United States, although Neil didn't think he ever would have the strength for it. They collect his mother's money, and Neil collects his memories. He's told Andrew about the places he's been but here in the cities and towns he can tell Andrew about his mother, about the little idiosyncrasies of each place he'd almost forgotten, about the oddball neighbors around the corner or the dog that always barked at him when he walked past the fence.

((He gets a call from the FBI later, because he gave them his list of cities. They want to know why he's going back to these places so much time later. It's an unwelcome reminder that they are still watching him, no matter how long it's been since he gave them all the answers he thought they wanted. Neil is tense for a week afterward.))

ANDREW'S REAL SMILE

Q: What was it like the first time Neil saw Andrew genuinely smile? How about laugh?? Was anyone else around or was it just for Neil?

A: I'm honestly trying to figure out when Andrew would smile or laugh without any sort of malice in it. ((his medicated glee doesn't count, as that good humor was all induced)) It feels so..... out of character? For the most part Andrew's emotions are a flat line—it's just how he is, for better or worse, consequence of his upbringing & his mental state. But if it ever happened it'd have to be with Neil only; there's no way Andrew would relax that much in front of anyone else.

ANDREW'S REAL LAUGH

Q: Does Neil ever make Andrew laugh? (I'm a huge fan of your books I love them. I really, REALLY love them)

A: Thank you!! <3

And wow, that question kind of broke my brain, because I just can't see it. Put a snarky jerk with no sense of humor together with the most joyless boy in the world and there aren't a whole lot of opportunities for laughs, y'know?

This feels like such a cop-out answer but I've been staring at it and I still can't come up with any single instance where Neil could startle Andrew into laughing.

ANDREW SHOWING NEIL APPRECIATION

Q: how does Andrew show how he appreciates Neil

A: ~~He lets him live.~~

Andrew's.. appreciation? ((there was another word I was going to use here, but I forgot it as soon as I hit reply)) is always going to be in the small things, whether it's getting out of bed in the middle of the night for an impromptu drive because Neil's wound up about the investigation & Moriyama's, or in letting Neil get away with naming their cats the stupidest possible names on earth, or buying the cigarettes Neil likes best because to him a smoke's a smoke and to Neil the scent honestly matters. It's working to build a comfort zone that includes Neil, day by day, year by year.

I LOVE YOU

Q: when was the first time neil or andrew told the other they loved them

A: I was a little leery of answering this question because someone already wrote a ficlet about this, but.

The answer no one wanted:

they don't

"I love you" is a foreign phrase to them, a sentiment they've heard expressed by those around them but which has never been used on them or by them. Not by Neil's mother, not by Cass. Neil's mother wasn't that type and Cass thought she was respecting her unruly foster child's needs by steering clear of a line that demanded a response.

I love you is background noise in their lives: a failed attempt to translate too many emotions into a spoken phrase, a Valentine's gimmick, a Hallmark card.

Not to say that they don't love each other—because they do, and they know this eventually, and they will have problems now and again but they will never ever leave each other because they are nothing without each other.

Their *I love you* is in their kisses, in Andrew's trust the first time he lets Neil push him down, in Andrew & Neil playing together until they're old enough to retire and then staying together because Exy isn't the glue between them after all. It's in the keys to their apartment in Colorado, the car with both names on it, the cats they get from the shelter.

((I've had more than one person picture them as dog people, and while dogs seem an interesting match with their loyalty and excitement and unconditional love, cats have always seemed more appropriate—Neil and Andrew are in and out all the time with their teams, so they'd be constantly having someone else check on a dog. Cats are more independent, capable of surviving alone with enough food and clean litter but willing to curl up in a lap the second an owner gets comfortable. But that's just me, because I am admittedly a cat person, and I can see it working either way. Maybe when they retire and have more time at home they can have a dog, and Andrew will take it on long walks and smoke early in the morning, and they'll both walk it at night and look at the shops around their home, learning their city alley by alley inside and out))

((I need an I DIGRESS emoji))

There are moments when Neil could have said it, but these moments would have destroyed the intention behind such words — Aaron's trial, when Andrew has to tell a courtroom what Drake did to him and look Cass in the face for the first time in years; the hospital waiting room when Betsy had her "heart attack" and Andrew learned what helplessness feels like; the long-awaited and drawn-out trial for Nathan Wesninski's circle; the first time they realize the apartment they're standing in is theirs and theirs alone; the time their team beats Kevin Day's; the time the US Court wins the gold medal and they are all world champions.

I love you could have been appropriate to anyone else here, but would have read as a throwaway line to them, an insincere but obligatory response to an emotional moment.

Their *I love you* is in their *Stay*, in their *Don't Go*, in their *Welcome Home*, in fingers hooked in belt loops and lingering looks across a room, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

WAKING ANDREW UP

Q: Ok, so half of chel bookclub is rereading TFC and now I'm wondering: will Neil learn a way to wake Andrew up without risking a punch in the face? (aka will Andrew ever find a way to wake up with at least one person without his subconscious trying to erase the threat?) Does Neil develop similar problems after Riko and his father?

A: One of the reasons the Foxes had so much trouble waking Andrew was because he was always dicking with what times he was supposed to take his medication. Once he comes off it, it's significantly easier—such as when Kevin's drunken return to Fox Tower at TKM was enough noise to rouse him—but if you touch him when he's sleeping you kind of deserve the retaliation. Neil learns he can wake Andrew up just by saying his name. Neil wouldn't wake Andrew up for no reason, so that's all it takes.

Neil's sleeping habits will be a mess for a while to come, between the late-night practices and the new stresses of being vice captain and the lingering sour taste that Jack & Sheena leave behind, but it'll get better. The nightmares come and go for a while, but so much good came out of so much horror, so his issues are inconsistent.

It's harder for a little while once Andrew and Neil start sharing a bed, because any small move the other makes is going to sound an alarm for the other, but they get used to each other's weight and heat.

ANDREW AND THE BED ISSUE

Q: So, does it not matter to Andrew that there is someone in his bed when he shares with Neil? Like, I would figure that he'd have times when he'd wake up and just feel the weight of another person behind him and lose it before remembering it was Neil. How many times does Neil accidentally get hit from Andrew waking up/being woken up?

A: Andrew reacted violently to waking because people were stupid enough to wake him up by touching him—not that they had a choice when his medication cycle had him crashing so deep. So unless Neil rolls over in the middle of the night and flops onto him ((unlikely, because Neil tends to be a still sleeper—spent too long sharing a bed with his mother)), Andrew's not likely to break his nose unintentionally.

Getting used to Neil's weight does take some getting used to, but they've got a couple workarounds. It helps if Neil goes to bed first, or if they go to bed at the same time, so Andrew is conscious to judge the weight on the mattress. If Neil comes to bed later or has to get up for any reason, then that's definitely going to wake Andrew up.

The more useful tactic is how they sleep. Andrew puts his back to a wall and sleeps on his side, so technically Neil's not behind him—Andrew falls asleep facing Neil ((and, by extension, their bedroom)). If anything happens to jar Andrew awake, all he has to do is open his eyes to see that everything is okay.

NIGHTMARES

Q: Has Andrew or Neil ever woken up screaming from a nightmare? And if so, was the other ever a witness to it?

A: Neil only screams when other people make him ~~((Rike))~~, and Andrew forgot how to scream when he was a child, so... not really. That's not to say that they don't have nightmares. Neil tends to wake a little more violently than Andrew does, but Andrew's more likely to wake any time something goes bump in the night. Where one wakes up, the other's bound to follow, so they start stocking decaf coffee in the house for midnight cigarette breaks.

BLAMING NEIL FOR DRAKE

Q: Okay, so I'm a little bit confused about something Andrew said. After Drake's attack and Wymack brings Andrew and Neil back to their house, Andrew basically lays it out to Neil that he blames him for what happened but I thought Andrew wasn't in the business of blaming other people for things? So was that just Andrew's attempt to get a rise out of Neil or was that a slip up in Andrew's usual philosophy because he was so upset?

A: Andrew understands the difference between assigning blame & blaming someone. He can tell Neil *You had a hand in this* without meaning *You did this to me*. He isn't holding Neil personally accountable for what happened to him, but that doesn't mean Neil didn't play some part in the tragedy.

Does that make sense? I had a better wording for this answer when I first saw the Ask pop up on my phone, but for the life of me I can't remember it now that I'm back at a computer.

"I WON'T LET YOU BE ME"

Q: Nora can I ask you something? What mean this phrase: "I won't let you let me be"? I've read another time the king's men but i haven't understood it. Can you help me?

A: This was actually harder to answer than I thought it would be, because I couldn't figure out the right words for what I was trying to say. If this doesn't make sense, please let me know. The first time Andrew says "I won't let you let me be" it is because Neil's indecision over Andrew's kiss is forcing Andrew to make a choice: take that lack of a rejection as a yes, or back the hell off until Neil makes up his mind. If Andrew takes what he wants simply because Neil hasn't outright rejected him, he's no better than those who wronged him before. *I won't let you let me be like them; I won't let you turn me into the bad guy with your passive response.*

Neil uses it on Andrew later mostly because Andrew & Neil have this thing about using each other's words to win arguments. Andrew putting Neil's hands on him and pretending it's okay is not a yes, it's the fakest *I'm okay with this* he could have managed. It puts him in the same role

Andrew was once in: pretend he doesn't see that this is a problem and proceed, or retreat until later.

Neil chooses to back down, and by throwing Andrew's words back at him he reminds him that they are better than this, that they deserve better than this from each other, that he is not going to be like everyone who hurt Andrew before just because Andrew's making it easy for him to fall into that role.

Does that help at all?

DOES ANDREW GET POSSESSIVE/PROTECTIVE

Q: As Andrew's and Neil's relationship starts getting stronger and they have been together more time as a couple, does Andrew get more protective/possessive over Neil or does he start trusting Neil more when it comes to not do stupid things?

A: For the most part he trusts Neil not to up & die on him, because having the Moriyamas and the FBI watching out for your well-being seems like kind of an airtight survival program. Besides, Neil's got too much to live for now – he's not likely to take stupid risks without running it past Andrew first.

That doesn't stop Neil from getting into fights on the court now and again, though, because Neil and his mouth aren't retiring anytime soon. Andrew lets Neil stick up for himself, in part because it's too far from the goal to wherever Neil's just pissed his latest opponent off, but if they swing a little too hard he will retaliate by rebounding every ball he gets for the rest of the game at their head & feet.

If Neil were to get in a fight off the court, though, Andrew would definitely intervene and settle things for him. ((Jack was a different story, because Jack was a dominance fight that had to happen)) Neil comments on it the first time, but Andrew ignores him in favor of checking Neil's split lip, and Neil opts to find it endearing rather than a slight against his questionable fighting skills.

NEIL'S PANIC ATTACKS

Q: How would Andrew soothe Neil during a bad panic attack?

A: Impatience kind of worked in Baltimore, but I guess it's not a one-size-fits-all kind of ordeal. Forced eye contact and *Look at me* and a ruder *calm down right now*. ((Thanks Andrew, really sympathetic of you)) Andrew gives Neil the weight to connect him to the real world: a hand on the back of his neck or fingers hooked in the collar of his shirt to drag Neil home to him.

MEDIA REACTIONS

Q: How does the media view Neil and Andrew? Do they have rabid fans of their own? Like I'm laughing trying to imagine Neil trying to buy a coffee and suddenly getting hounded for his autograph by this group of small students or something

A: I feel like Neil's and Andrew's fans would be really interesting people, fanatical but skittish as hell—because they are basically obsessed with people who *can and might definitely kill them?! Like, one is the son of a crime lord, who's got all kinds of wicked scars and was kidnapped holy shit is this real life*, and then one has been to juvie and on court trials and maybe killed his own mother *oh my god*.

So you get a crowd of people who love them because they're so perfect together on the court, and who love Andrew's "I don't care" attitude and Neil's sassy determination, and yet who have to kind of dare each other to approach them if they're spotted in public.

I think Andrew's manager would have to write "Must give out autographs" into his contract because if someone approached him otherwise Andrew would just stare them down until they sneaked away upset and unnerved.

Either way, kudos to the first person brave enough to pop the question! I would love to see Neil's flabbergasted reaction.

((In the same vein, I pity whichever obsessive dumb fuck asks Neil to sign *Nathaniel Wesninski* on the proffered fan material.))

The media, of course, thinks they are an amazing source of material. Neil can't talk about Riko anymore, but he can definitely open his mouth about players who give him grief about his background or teams that have dirty playing styles. Instigator for life.

Q: If Neil's and Andrew's relationships will go public (accident or not) after they made it to the leagues, how would they react? how would their fans react to it?

A: Neil & Andrew are annoyed only because it means there's now a reaction they have to deal with. Neil gets a little bit rude at one point ((surprise surprise)) when a reporter crosses a line and

asks if they're embarrassed by the public outing. He points out that it's not something to be embarrassed by, and that he doesn't care what people think about him and Andrew, and that the only reason they don't talk about it is because it's no one else's business. They refuse to talk about it beyond a simple confirmation; the details have always been theirs.

Mixed reactions from the fans; there's the small faction intent on shipping them anyway because they're always together, the larger group that doesn't care so long as it doesn't change anything, and a minor chunk of more close-minded fans that are more than a little disgruntled/disgusted by this news.

Their team publicly rallies around them. ((Team has known pretty much since day 1, because they can't spend that much time with Neil and Andrew and not know there's something else there.)) The coach, when asked if it's going to be a problem for the team, only says "Come back when you're not going to ask stupid questions" and walks away.

IF EITHER ONE DIED

Q: I am already filling with regret but... What would Neil do in the case Andrew died?

A: Honestly it kind of depends on when it happens and who causes it.

e.g. let's just say Andrew dies. Like, no one caused it, it's just a tragedy kind of thing, etc etc, like a car crash or heart attack or he drank his body into complete failure etc etc. In this case, Neil would actually fare better than Andrew would, because Neil has a support network he can rely on. He'd be devastated, for sure, but he'd let the Foxes help him through this, and in time he'd put the pieces back together and learn to keep moving forward. The Foxes can't replace Andrew, but that black hole in his chest would pull them deeper, until Neil has no room for anyone else.

He'd still captain the Foxes and would still move on to a professional team. He'd talk to the Foxes more, would see them more often, and would take one-man roadtrips to tiny towns to smoke and think what-ifs. He'd have a home, but it'd take him years to stop hating it for its emptiness.

On the other hand, if Andrew was killed – say, as a message from Ichirou to Neil, an "I know what is important to you and I meant it when I said I could take it from you, so toe the line", oh my god. Neil Josten would cease to exist for good, because there's no coming back from where Nathaniel needs to go in response. He'd hang on for a little while, pretending he was cowed, bowing his head and playing the part, but he'd be a seething pit of poison just waiting for a moment to strike.

In this situation, Andrew would be killed before finals, so the Foxes would finally be disqualified based on team size. Wymack would cut practices way back now that the season was officially over, and Neil would fill that time with Renee's knife lessons. She would teach him every terrible thing she'd ever learned, knowing he intended to use it, and when pressed would admit it would be years before she could honestly go to Confession for such things. ((*It would be lip service*, she says, because she does not regret her part in this yet))

He would also up his lessons with Matt, and Matt would allow it because he knows Neil has a lot of anger and grief to work through and he just wants to help. In May, Neil Josten would finally vanish, and Nathaniel Wesninski would go straight for Proust. He wouldn't have told Stuart Hatford about Proust yet, so he'd snatch the doctor out from under everyone's noses. And he'd get the information he needed and the confessions he needed however he needed, and learn the how and why and when and how-much of everything he'd done for Riko. This information would go straight to both the press and the FBI, and in the chaos that followed Nathaniel Wesninski would vanish overseas.

He'd start with the Hatfords, but only for a moment, because the Hatfords belong to Ichirou now. Instead he'd lean on his mother's contacts for anything he could use against the Moriyamas. Most of them would keep their mouths shut, because they're resourceful but not interested in engaging a family like the Moriyamas, but eventually he'd find his way to Russia – and then finally to Japan, to the family that forced the Moriyamas out of Japan in the first place. The Moriyamas & Matsumotos might hate each other, but Nathaniel doesn't have the pull or the money to tilt the balance and buy their cooperation.

So Nathaniel becomes what he always wished he wouldn't, and he buys his revenge in blood. The Matsumotos take his money, his contacts, and his violent services, and Nathaniel never leaves Japan again. He watches the Moriyamas fall apart from overseas, watches Japanese & American courts fight over who has jurisdiction over what, and tolerates the occasional interrogations & incarcerations by the Japanese police force.

Five years down the road, enough dust has settled that Dan & Matt creep into Japan to check on him under the guise of an anniversary vacation. The man they meet is more Wesninski than Josten– there is almost nothing left of the boy they knew aside from his looks – but his affection for them is as pained as it is muted. It is a step toward healing and salt in the wound at the same time, and while Nathaniel is not sorry for the path he took and the sacrifices he made for revenge, he finally grieves for everything he's lost.

Q: Ahh I love your books so much, they've basically taken over my life, lol. Anyway, I was wondering, how would have Andrew reacted if Neil actually was killed by his father when he was kidnapped in The King's Men?

A: Oh *hello*, I love this question, because the timing would be **perfect**. It isn't until Neil is kidnapped and returned that Andrew truly understands there's no going back from this thing with Neil, but even before then he can feel that pit in his stomach that means he's too close to a slippery edge. And on the tail-end of Neil saying *Don't protect me* ((**the same day** Andrew agreed to let him protect himself!)), on the tail-end of that bus ride where Neil talked for hours about his life and looked at Andrew like Andrew was the answer to everything, Neil vanishing? Neil getting killed before the Hatfords showed up to annihilate Nathan's people?

Do you even know—?!

There's not a lot Andrew believes in, but what little light he has would have gone out that day. Put a lone tealight in a dark room and it doesn't look like much, but once you blow it out that darkness is infinite and unyielding. It is noticeable and extreme. Everyone would have seen that light go out in Andrew, because that's not an emotional sucker punch Andrew was bracing for. Cue the internal argument:: Andrew promised to protect him; Neil made him retract it. Andrew promised to kill the men who were coming for Neil; Neil knew he was walking away from them for good and didn't even ask for Andrew's help or interference. Neil was taken right out from underneath his nose and Andrew had known something was wrong when Neil came out of the locker room. He'd known. *He'd known, but he hadn't been fast enough.*

Andrew would never let anyone or anything else in ever again, you know? Because Neil isn't something he can take back or recover from. Neil was a chance Andrew shouldn't have taken, was a mistake Andrew knew better than to make, was wanting something for himself when Andrew knew better than to want anything. Andrew would refuse to feel this ever again, so he would shut everyone out instead. Survival mode.

It would destroy Andrew's relationship with nearly everyone in his life, up to including Bee – he would refuse to talk about Neil's death and he'd dismiss her careful attempts at sympathy, because he'd refuse to accept that *this hurts* and refusal to acknowledge or heal means that ache becomes poison over time. Bee wouldn't be able to save him from himself.

The only thing that would keep Andrew putting one foot in front of the other would be his promise to Kevin – he still had to protect Kevin. So he'd still go to practices, but he'd alternate between furious bursts of energy on the court *get them to finals* and absolute hatred for the sport because everything at the Foxhole Court reminded him of Neil, and then escalating hatred toward himself for being so stupid as to get hurt like this. And then just ice in long stretches, because *feel nothing, nothing matters, nothing is important.*

((I honestly believe the only person who could mean anything to Andrew in the wake of this would be Wymack. It's hard to explain their relationship or exactly why they work the way they do, but Wymack could watch Andrew implode and still be a steady hand.))

Without Neil alive to pledge allegiance to Ichirou, Jean would go back to the Ravens as soon as he was done healing and Andrew would be stuck watching Kevin's back the rest of their lives. Andrew would still play Exy after graduation, but it wouldn't be the same. He'd be out there because he needed to keep Kevin in his line of sight at all times, not because he was learning to enjoy it for himself.

Joyless, Kevin called Andrew once, and that's what Andrew would be—from Neil's death until his own.

GETTING HIT ON BY OTHERS

Q: How do Andrew and Neil deal with getting hit on?

A: Neil is dense as a brick and wouldn't even recognize the subtle attempts/smooth pickup lines for what they were, and Andrew would either ignore it outright or just be dismissive & rude because Andrew doesn't have time or give-a-shit to be polite or tactful.

ANNIVERSARIES

Q: Do Neil and Andrew celebrate an anniversary or anything?? I can't really see them doing that

A: Neither one of them really sees a point? Andrew's not big on celebrations anyway, and Neil chooses not to make a deal of it. Celebrating anniversaries is like "Oh, yay, we made it another year!" when of course they made it, neither one had any doubt. Why celebrate the inevitable? Why break forever into measurable increments?

THE FOXES

WHERE THEIR NAMES CAME FROM

If I remember the question correctly, it asked how I came up with the Foxes' names, and their last names in particular.

Dan & Neil have always been Dan & Neil, for as long as I can remember. I wanted a boyish name for Dan and I liked the Danielle-Dan match-up. Fun fact: Dan, Neil, and Riko are the only three in the entire book who have been here since day 1 and still have their original name.

((The "who have been here since day 1" is a necessary disclaimer, because the Foxes were a six-man team in the very first draft. I started the comic over again to move its setting from Japan to America, and in that second draft I expanded the team to the 10 we started with in the books.))

Andrew & Aaron were the first twins I ever remember meeting, and the Minyards were a family who lived on military housing with us.

Seth was one of my friend's ex-boyfriends. I thought he was pretty much a waste of oxygen, so I didn't feel bad about stealing his name for an uncouth character. ((Hopefully RL Seth has grown up since then.))

Most of the other first names were chosen by chance—names I liked that I didn't think were completely overused.

Last names were either borrowed from classmates or were taken from news articles. I skim through them until I find names I want, that sound different enough to interest me but not so uncommon you know there is probably only 1 of them in the entire US. I use this method a lot when I'm writing about people from overseas, and I just hope the foreign names I seize on aren't outdated or really peculiar to native speakers.

Q: Are any of the foxes based on real life people? Or people you may know?

A: No, none of the Foxes were based off anyone I knew in real life. I borrowed names I liked, but that's pretty much it.

HEIGHTS

Q: What are the Foxes' heights by the end of the series?

A: I only have exact heights for a couple of the Foxes.. The rest of 'em I usually just stick to ranges. Matt is... 6'4"? Thereabouts? Kevin & Seth were between 6 & 6'2", Nicky was 5'8" or

5'10", I can't remember what I settled on for him. The girls were in the 5'4" - 5'7" range (unless Allison was in her 6-inch heels, in which case she was about six feet tall and eye to eye with Seth). Neil was 5'3", and the twins of course are 5 feet flat.

Q: hello! i don't mean to be offensive, but why did you decide to make the twins and neil so short? what i mean to say is, in our times men are considered to be short when they're about 175 cm/5' 9"... like, you could still get your point across even if the twins were about 165cm/5' 5" and neil was 170cm/5' 7"... sorry, i don't mean to be rude!!!

A: Haha, don't worry, it's not a rude question. I've seen more than a few baffled comments on the decision to make them so small. Unfortunately I don't have a legitimate answer for you, unless "They just are" is ever accepted as an excuse...

Are they short? Yep. Is there a logical reason behind it? Nope! They've just always been tiny and I've never wanted to change it. But perception comes in to play here, too, because I don't consider 5'5" or 5'7" to be short. To me, "short" is anything 5'4" and under. Neil at 5'7" would feel like a giant to me!

APPEARANCES

Q: What do the foxes look like? I mean, not like eye or hair colour, but are they attractive? also, how does Neil's face go in the long-run? In my mind, the damage to his face was pretty catastrophic; do the scars fade over time?

A: Allison is beautiful, and Kevin is handsome through careful grooming (needs to look good for the press and his raging fans!). Neil is? was? cute enough to catch both Nicky's & Andrew's eye from the get-go. The rest are.. average? normal human beings. Not the sort you stop and gawk at in the airport ((Allison)) but who grow more attractive the more you get to know them.

Does that make sense? It probably doesn't. I don't understand attraction, so I'm asking myself this question Are they attractive? and my mind keeps going blank, hahaha.. I don't know, so we're stuck with this cop-out answer!

I should probably have had coffee before checking Asks.

The cuts on Neil's right cheek will heal to trace lines. The three? four? burns along his left cheek will never recover fully but will make a nice warped mess along his cheekbone and down onto his cheek. The only reason Neil would consider doing something about his face is if the scarred skin started to tweak with his eyesight, and then he'd let Matt's father work whatever magic he could.

COLLEGE MAJORS

Q: I have a nice, innocent, fluffy question that can't possibly backfire in the most painful way possible. What did each of the Foxes study in college?

A: Way to spoil my fun ;D

Several of their degrees have changed over time, usually due to changes/updates in their future plans or characterizations. The last time I made a list, though, it was along these lines:

Dan majored in Athletic Training with a minor in Coaching

Matt majored in Business Administration *

Allison majored in Fashion Design with a minor in Marketing

Renee majored in Religious Studies

~~Seth majored in Parks, Recreation, & Tourism Management~~

Kevin majored in History

Nicky majored in Marketing

Aaron majored in Biochemistry

Andrew majored in Criminal Justice **

Neil majored in Spanish his first year, then switched to Mathematical Sciences his sophomore year ***

* Business was Matt's major for the longest time. I keep having a nagging feeling I changed it last-minute for no real reason, but I can't remember for sure. Too many drafts rattling around up there! Matt had absolutely no interest in business, but it was a very generic major and then he stuck with it for simplicity's sake. He figured it wouldn't matter in the long run because he had plans to go pro.

** because Andrew's a troll

*** Neil originally chose Spanish only because it'd be useful on the run; by changing majors he was embracing his new life & choosing to learn something that honestly interested him.

((Personal headcanon [[aka I liked thinking about it but never bothered to write it into any official futures]] is that Neil and Andrew started studying Russian the following year. They wanted access to a language Aaron and Nicky wouldn't understand, especially since Neil's new responsibilities as vice captain and then captain meant it was harder and harder for him to slip away from the rest of the team))

HOGWARTS HOUSES

Q: V important. What are each of the Foxes Hogwarts houses?

A: Er, I, uh, never really considered it?

Feel free to debate these hasty decisions:

Gryffindor – Dan Wilds, Matt Boyd, Allison Reynolds, Neil Josten**

Hufflepuff – Nicky Hemmick & Renee Walker

Ravenclaw – Aaron Minyard

Slytherin – Andrew Minyard, Kevin Day, ~~Seth Gordon~~

Kevin was the hardest one to place.. He's smart, with his technical playing style & his fierce love of history, and he's unafraid to tell people when they're wrong, so I could see him going into Ravenclaw? Because he takes the time to teach people how to do things correctly and/or better, so it's not as.. self-serving? as a stereotypical Slytherin is portrayed.

But Kevin with the Ravens and Kevin after the series leans closer to Slytherin's ambition & resourcefulness, so that's where he gets to stay, still under Andrew's watchful eye.

Cheated using this handy dandy chart

** I feel like Neil would've had a Harry Potter moment, where the Hat offered to put him in Slytherin and Neil rejected it because he didn't want to be like his parents. Neil at the start of the books would've been more comfortable in Slytherin; Neil by the end of the books would've lived up to Gryffindor ideals.

Unrelated – does the Sorting Hat not believe in character development? Seriously, how do you sort a kid into a House and expect them to still exhibit all the same traits once they get through puberty and 7 years of schooling? Is it brainwashing because you stuff them into a House with everyone else who's just like them and say "*These are the Ideals You Must Live Up To, Uphold Your House's Honor!*"?? I mean, hell, the House I'd've gotten at 11 and the House I'd've gotten at 14 are totally different. Suppose anyone ever had to transfer Houses? Suppose it was allowed? *I have questions*

FOX SKI TRIP

Q: ok by now I know I have to fear your every answer because you love making everything tragic, but here's a potentially fluffy question: does kevin go skiing at least once? with the team? or alone? or with thea? or with daddy wymack? and if it's a yes, there's no avalanche or tragic snowstorm right? right?? and if it's a no he isn't sad because of it, right? *sweating* *regretting her decisions and choices in life* at least put a "eternal pain tw" at the beginning so I can prepare myself T_T

A: Do you know how tempted I was to give a fake answer to this? Like "Kevin finally agrees to go on a skiing trip, but he is terrible at it and he crashes into a tree and breaks something and is

grounded from playing for an entire season” or “Kevin breaks his neck and is in a wheelchair for the rest of his life)). But no, I won’t give in to such childish desires. Yet.,

((remind me to tell you some time about the AU scenario where Neil & Andrew had to react to the news of Kevin’s sudden death))

((It was pretty fucking harsh *I love it*))

They do go skiing, yes—the following winter, when the veteran Foxes are looking for something to do over their winter break. Something to do as a team that gives them time to reconnect without their six newest recruits underfoot, that is, which is why Thea/Wymack/etc don’t go with them. Later vacations will include significant others & relevant family members, but not this first trip.

Neil helps fund it from his stash although Allison doesn’t need his money—he covers Andrew’s group whereas she covers the upperclassmen. Matt’s the only one who’s been to a ski slope before, but one person can’t teach eight others, so they end up taking classes at the lodge.

Nicky is that asshole who decides to put ice-cold hands on everyone within arm’s reach. Allison spends the week judging the resort rather harshly out loud and privately contemplating the benefits of having her parents buy it out. Aaron messages Katelyn everyday to check on her. Neil is the least willing to get on the slopes because he doesn’t know what he’s doing and if he injures himself he’s going to be off the courts. Kevin is right beside him, despite the fact that this was his idea—he’s clung to the story of a skiing injury for so long that he knows how many things could go wrong.

((Andrew is entirely unsympathetic and shoves them both off the lift before they’re ready))

((Andrew is the last off the lift because Andrew hates heights and why the fuck is he on a lift with rods on his feet anyway, fuck both of these strikers for tricking him into this))

((he remembers what it was like the first time he fell. he remembers what it was like to be bedridden with a broken leg and broken arm [[he still feels the ache in the winter every year no matter how many years pass]] and *go away, go away, go away get off of me stop stop stop please*))*

Dan & Matt take a lot of time for themselves, stealing hours where they can to make it a romantic winter getaway. Lots of cuddling in quilts by the fire and drinking cocoa with giant marshmallows and warming cold feet against each other’s legs. This is where they have their first serious talk about the future – about careers, about marriage, about a family. It adds a sense of—calm?—to their relationship that carries over to the rest of their years at Palmetto State.

Having their feelings put into words, validated, shared, confirmed, creates an understanding that carries them through the roughest times. Matt's known since he laid eyes on Dan that she was The One. Having it agreed upon, having that I do kissed into every inch of fire-lit bare skin—it is something else, something final, something pure and everlasting.

TL;DR they go skiing and they have a marvelous time!

*In case there were too many warm fuzzies for you

Andrew has a legit reason for being afraid of heights, and it's not being off the ground

It's the consequence of falling

NEIL AND RENEE FRIENDSHIP

Q: Do Neil and Renee ever become closer friends?

A: Neil & Renee do get a little closer, but Renee will always be closer to Andrew than she is to Neil. An important friend that isn't quite a best friend herself, if that makes sense? Renee's really good for Neil throughout Nathan's trial since she's gone through this kind of thing before. She hasn't experienced anything on quite this level, but she's unwavering moral support and a little pool of calm against Neil's nerves and Andrew's apathy.

AARON AND KATELYN

Q: When did Aaron and Katelyn fall for each other?

A: Fall their freshman year, though Aaron was pretty uncooperative for a while. He and Andrew had just agreed to renew their deal through college graduation, so encouraging Katelyn's not subtle attempts to flirt was breaking more than a few rules. But Andrew & Renee were suddenly friends, and the Foxes were starting to make bets on Andrew & Renee hooking up, and Andrew didn't punch anyone when the Foxes started noticing Katelyn watching Aaron at the games, so Aaron figured he was justified in being sneaky within reason.

Aaron & Katelyn didn't have a real conversation about it until after Christmas break, though, when they saw each other again after a few weeks apart and Aaron understood just how much he'd missed her and how happy he was just to be near her again. That was the first time he was honestly afraid for her, because she was important and he knew what Andrew would do to her if Aaron slipped up. That was when Katelyn promised she was okay keeping it a secret and when she promised she would wait for him as long as it took.

((They had a lot of ninja sex that semester. Katelyn had three roommates her freshman year but she & Aaron memorized all the times those girls would be all out of the room at the same time. Ha.))

DAN AND MATT

Q: How does Dan feel to have Matt in her life? When did she fall for him and realize she really loved him?

A: If you'd told Dan a couple years ago she'd end up madly in love with someone ((a teammate, no less!)) she probably would have put a fist in your face and told you to shove it. Falling in love with Matt was not in the books anywhere, but Dan couldn't really help herself.

The girls latched on to Matt pretty early on after his arrival— in part because he was eye candy ((according to Allison)) and mostly because he was so different from the rest of their male teammates. They'd had a shitty first year dealing with uncooperative men and had barely survived a season of mutiny, insults, and lazy sexism. Then there was Matt, with hesitant smiles and respectful interactions and a gaze that tried not to wander below eye level ((and mostly succeeded)). Matt who was bruised all the way through but who would defend his stance regarding the women and who tried to help control the unruly men. Matt who looked at Dan like she was the first hint of sunlight after a decade of rain.

Dan never intended to give him a chance, never intended to give him a date, because she didn't need a man in her life and didn't need to start blurring the line between teammates and lovers. But Matt was patient and sweet and so very obviously afraid to actually ask her out ((Allison & Renee had no qualms with telling Dan he'd asked them for advice on how to approach her)), and then Matt finally did ask and Dan meant to say no but instead said *I'm not putting out*, and Matt just looked so-relieved. And Dan thought *This poor dumb kid*, but she didn't know if she was thinking about herself or Matt.

Dan & Matt had only been dating for four months when the cousins took Matt to Columbia. Until then Dan wasn't entirely sure what this thing of theirs was; she knew Matt was sweet and devoted and patient, and she knew he was fun and funny when he wasn't being smothered by his roommates, but she was straddling that line of *Is this wise, do I need this in my life*. And then Matt was a broken mess and Dan thought someone had put a knife in her chest, and in his wreckage she started to understand that this wasn't something she could choose to lose anymore.

When Matt finally came back to Fox Tower, Dan told him **I love you** for the first time, and the way Matt smiled—

Dan came to understand: she didn't need a man in her life; she didn't need anything but her dreams and ambitions. But she wanted Matt in her life, because she and Matt made each other stronger and better. She could live with being the sun in someone else's sky and having a few more stars in hers.

Q: What was Matt and Dan's first kiss like?

A: Matt was hella nervous! Talking Dan into a date was hard enough, and although Matt planned out what all they could do with their evening if she decided to say yes, the reality was a little unexpected and Matt kind of panicked. ((to be fair he wasn't in the best place when they started dating, since he and his roommates were still having issues and the cousins hadn't stepped in to "fix" him yet.))

So the first kiss was a little awkward, because Matt was scared shitless & Dan was a little defensive/borderline combative at that point, but at least the startled giggles and Matt's flailing apologies helped ease some of the tension. The next few were better and much sweeter.

MATT AFTER COLUMBIA

Q: How did Matt cope after what Andrew did to "fix" him at Columbia? Why did he still stick around?

A: It took Matt some time to pull himself together, but it wasn't his first time in that hole and he was better prepared for what he had to go through. It wasn't any easier, but at least that nightmare was familiar. It helped that his mother came to town for his recovery and that he had Dan in his life. Renee & Betsy were also really important sounding boards—one because she'd been there & back again and made it out all right, and one because she was good at walking him through the rebroken edges of his psyche.

Knowing his mother okayed the experiment was more than a little hurtful, but Matt loves & trusts his mother within an inch of his life, and he remembers telling Andrew Yes, please, when Andrew offered him the drugs.

((There we go again with Matt's shady *YES*, hm? He's far more keen on Dan's consent than he ever was with his own.))

Matt stayed because Palmetto State was a dream, and he wasn't going to give it up on anyone else's account. It'd cost him too much to get there, and it'd cost him so much to stay, but he wasn't going to let anyone chase him out of there. ((Chase him out of his own room, sure, so he had to spend most of an academic year sleeping on a couch, but not off the team.))

And the further out from that night he got, the stronger he became, and the closer he grew to the teammates who'd once mocked him for his weaknesses, the more he knew he'd made the right choice. Look at him now, on his way to marrying the love of his life and playing for the pros!

MATT ROOMING WITH THE MONSTERS

Q: Matt seems content with Neil as a roommate, so how does he take it when he suddenly has to live with Aaron and then even Nicky instead?

A: It takes some getting used to! It helps that the cousins have been getting a tiny bit better since Christmas & their mountain vacation, and it definitely helps that Andrew is distracted by Neil and Aaron has unrestrained access to Katelyn. Aaron doesn't spend much time at Fox Tower anymore, so Matt mostly has to contend with Nicky. He and Nicky get into loud nonsense arguments about music and movies, because they have so few overlapping tastes, but it's all in good fun. ((He does wish Nicky would keep the bathroom a little bit cleaner, though.))

The nice thing about Nicky & Matt living together is that Matt can be a calming influence on Nicky—Neil wondered once if Nicky exaggerated his boisterous nature to make up for his prickly cousins, and while Nicky is outgoing by nature Matt does help temper that a bit. Matt's closer to Nicky's age & has finally got his ducks in a row, and that helps Nicky a lot. They talk a lot about life & the future when Aaron's not around to interfere.

DAN/MATT/NEIL

Q: If you could have another OT3 pairing other than A/K/N, who would it be?

A: If I put any other three together? Probably Dan x Matt x Neil. It'd be an entirely different dynamic, and that would be really interesting to work with, I think.

ALLISON AND RENEE

Q: Do Allison and Renee ever kiss a little? Or get touchy feely with the other? I love their duo!

A: Oh, no. They're not attracted to each other. Fond of each other for the most part and occasionally exasperated with each other, but not interested in each other that way. :)

SETH'S URN

Q: What did Allison ever do with Seth's urn?

A: Allison kept it at Fox Tower the rest of her time at PSU. She originally planned to let him go after graduation, either by scattering his ashes somewhere she thought he'd like or finding a nice spot to bury the urn.

Once she figured out what she wanted to do with her life, though, she decided to hang onto him a little longer. His urn went with her while she was living in an apartment and slowly working her way back into her parents' good graces. Once she had access to their money and could buy herself a nice ((big)) house, she hired a groundskeeper to reshape the sprawling backyard into a garden/patio.

Seth's urn was built into the fountain that acted as the centerpiece. Whenever she and her husband fought she'd take a drink out and sit on the edge of the fountain to think or rant aloud. Her marriage helped give her a little bit of closure she didn't realize she was still waiting for—it showed her how she & Seth would've fared, because Seth and her husband were so much alike.

We wouldn't have worked, would we? We were no good for each other. But I loved you.

AARON AND THE FOXES

Q: Why doesn't Aaron let the Foxes into his life?

A: The short of it: Aaron doesn't let them in because Aaron despises everything about them.

The long of it.. well, let me see if I can make this coherent. My first attempt at answering this just went 'round and 'round in circles trying to explain his thought process. Chances are I'll still get lost along the way. ((SORRY?))

Aaron had plans, see? Aaron was going to be a doctor. He was going to stick with Andrew until graduation & then go his own way. He'd pick up more shifts at Eden's Twilight, scratch together as much federal assistance as he could, and take classes around his job. He had no desire to play Exy after high school – he'd only learned it because the rigorous practice schedule kept him out of Tilda's reach.

Aaron was insulted when Wymack approached them in Columbia, because Aaron knew all about the Foxes' reputation and he was not at all fond of the concept. He meant what he said that day: the Foxes are a team of rejects going nowhere. They are the bottoms of the barrel, a publicity stunt gone wrong, kids offered more than they deserve who are now embarrassing themselves with these supposed second chances. Aaron didn't want to get lumped in with them – in part because he was sure he wasn't like them, and in part because he was sure he was. Aaron wasn't willing to be a public failure. Saying "I play for Palmetto State" meant always having to tack on a quick "But I'm nothing like the other Foxes!" on the end.

If Andrew hadn't had the final say on the matter, Aaron would have spit on Wymack's scholarship and gone his own path. An uphill climb to his future had to be better than becoming a public spectacle. But then Andrew said "Are you in it for five more?" and Aaron hadn't been expecting that, hadn't thought Andrew would be at all interested in or willing to extend their promise to stick with each other. Aaron made sure "The same rules apply?" before agreeing, because if Andrew gave him an excuse to stay away from the Foxes, he could maybe avoid their stain through disassociation.

The reality of the team up close was pretty much what Aaron was expecting, full of in-fighting and hateful comments and every manner of prejudice possible, with the women holding the team together by the skins of their teeth and the men dabbling in drugs Aaron had just gotten over and a haunted ache in Matt's stare that said he was too close to an edge Aaron could still feel under his skin. Fixing Matt only fixed part of the problem, and although Andrew got that out of the way as quickly as he could, the damage was done.

Once Aaron decided the Foxes really were as terrible and useless as he'd expected, there was no quick way back to his good graces. ((Is it really that easy for any of us to change our negative opinion of a person?)) It was easy to keep them at arm's length, with Andrew & Andrew's promise as a buffer in-between. He gave the team a minimal effort and put the rest of his energy into his classwork. ((Fact: Aaron has the second-best grades on the team after Kevin))

The trauma of his sophomore year will help put a little chink in that armor, because the team can't go through so much and not pull a little closer, but it'll be years before Aaron can admit he might be fond of these reckless jerks he calls teammates.

NICKY'S EVOLUTION OVER THE DRAFTS

Q: I read in one of your posts (I think it was on your blog) that Nicky used to be a much darker character in previous drafts. I absolutely love Nicky as he is now, but I was wondering if you could talk about dark!Nicky and how he became the current Nicky? xx

A: Nicky's story used to be darker. Until this very last draft, Erik came over to the US with Nicky to help watch over the twins. He and Nicky bought the house in Columbia together and took Aaron and Andrew in so Luther & Maria wouldn't have to. They worked at Eden's Twilight to put Andrew & Aaron through high school. Nicky referred to Erik as his husband, and they wore rings, but since they couldn't get married in the States they planned on marrying as soon as they returned to Germany.

In the final draft, Nicky and Neil talk about how Andrew ended up on his medication, about a fight outside Eden's Twilight where Andrew nearly beat four men to death. The original version of the fight is this:

When Nicky got an offer to go to PSU, Erik encouraged him to take it and decided to stay in the US as long as he needed to. He came to Fox practices whenever Wymack let him, though he was careful to stay away from Nicky's teammates, and he went to all of their games as their loudest cheerleader. The bar fight occurred the day before the Foxes went to Christmas banquet the cousins' freshman year. They went down to Columbia to have a couple drinks and celebrate the end of the semester.

Nicky and Erik ducked out the back, drunk and happy and horny, and were making out behind the club when those four men went by. That's why Nicky was targeted in the first place; that's what triggered the attack. Nicky and Erik ended up in the hospital, and only one of them checked out again.

Nicky was devastated.

Andrew stopped by to see him at the hospital exactly once, then vanished. Didn't go to the funeral. Wasn't there when Abby was keeping Nicky at her house and trying to hold him together. He was busy looking for the men who'd hurt his cousin, and he only came back to Nicky when he could bring a newspaper with him. One of the articles discussed the "tragedy" of four men losing their lives in a fatal car accident. Nicky broke down when he saw it.

At that point Andrew realized who else Abby was sheltering at her house, and he made her send the injured and morose Kevin Day over to Wymack's place. She put her foot down, refusing to dump Kevin off on Wymack when he was injured, and Andrew said he'd leave again if she didn't do it. Nicky was desperate to keep Andrew, so he begged Abby to just do it. Abby gave in and drove Kevin over to Wymack's place.

Nicky spent the rest of the semester depressed and mourning. Andrew's savage retribution helped a little, and having Kevin around helped—Kevin wasn't dying, but he was injured, and Nicky clung to his recovery because he wanted to think he could help save someone when he couldn't save Erik. Neil was another interesting distraction from his grief when Neil moved in, but Nicky's depression and grief would slip through sometimes in his conversations with Neil.

Nicky wore Erik's wedding band on a necklace all through college.

((Several years after graduation, Nicky finally got serious with someone else he met in Germany. They had a couple tense months when Nicky struggled with guilt over loving someone else after having loved Erik so long. Nicky broke up with him for a few months, but being apart didn't make him feel any better. They got back together, and at their one year anniversary Nicky's gift was that he took the necklace off. He would always love Erik, but he could finally lay their memories to rest.))

Nicky's redemption was simple: I just let Erik live this time. ;)

NICKY AND HIS PARENTS

Q: Did Nicky ever talk to either of his parents after the whole Drake thing, or was that pretty much the end of their relationship entirely?

A: Nicky's relationship with his parents is pretty much over. He could deal with their constant betrayals and ignorance regarding himself & his sexuality, and he could keep getting his hopes up and watching them get dashed. But what happened to Andrew is a crime he can't come back from — especially after sitting through Aaron's trial and having to listen to every ugly awful detail.

Nicky doesn't even send his parents a wedding invitation or a heads-up that he's finally getting married, and while a part of him grieves the family he'll never have, he learns to cope with their absence in his life.

NICKY AND NEIL FRIENDSHIP

Q: It was like that one word punched all the joy out of Nicky, but the look that crossed Nicky's face next was too fast for Neil to decipher. Nicky's smile was back a second later, but it didn't reach his eyes. ← I'd love to know what Nicky is thinking!

A: *"Are we?" he asked, because hadn't Betsy said it just a few days ago? He hadn't understood it then and hadn't even tried, too angry and upset over everything else that was happening. Tonight it almost meant something, though what, Neil didn't know. Realizing Nicky couldn't follow his twisting train of thought, Neil forced himself to say, "Friends?"*

It was like that one word punched all the joy out of Nicky, but the look that crossed Nicky's face next was too fast for Neil to decipher. Nicky's smile was back a second later, but it didn't reach his eyes. Neil might have apologized, except Nicky reached out and scrubbed a gloved hand through Neil's hair.

"You are going to be the absolute death of me," Nicky said. "Yeah, kid. We're friends. You're stuck with us, like it or not."

There's definitely a bit of hurt in there, because Nicky holds his friends in such high regard and loves them so dearly, and he's just found out that Neil doesn't feel the same for him. So it's primarily startled hurt, with an afterthought of pity. Nicky has to remember who he's talking to before he can understand that it's not an intentional slight. Then he just feels bad for his poor bruised friend who doesn't understand such necessary & basic concepts.

ANDREW ON NICKY KISSING NEIL

Q: also, clarkequeengriffin and I were discussing about the first trip to Columbia a bunch of days ago, because she wondered how come Andrew had been okay with what went down with Nicky and Neil, considering that he had almost stabbed him after the rape joke. is it because he had a goal in mind so it was okay to bend his morals? was he too drugged to care? had he not seen what happened at all? questions.

A: Luckily for Nicky, Andrew didn't see what Nicky did. Nicky's role was simple: get Neil where the crowd was thickest and don't let him leave, so Andrew could come and go between clearing evidence from their table and grabbing a few moments with Roland in the back office. There'd've been hell to pay if Andrew caught Nicky at it, for sure.

MISTLETOE

Q: Do Andrew and Neil happen to walk under a mistletoe and kiss this Christmas? Or y'know. (cough) Kevin and Neil? Or idk (cough) any of the other foxes with one another?

A: Andrew would refuse to kiss under mistletoe out of sheer principle; he's not going to let superstitions and culture dictate when he does what he does, even if it's Neil he's caught with. The Foxes aren't likely to put mistletoe up anywhere someone can accidentally stumble under it. Imagine if Nicky had to kiss Allison, or Dan had to kiss Andrew. There'd be mutiny for sure. ;D

THANKSGIVING

Q: What do the foxes do for Thanksgiving? (during their college years)

A: The girls only have one year left, so Allison will go home to Renee's foster mother, and Dan will spend it with Matt & his mother. Dan & Matt are going to get married soon and they both know it, and although Dan's met Matt's mother Randy several times before and is fiercely fond of her, it seems a nice start to spend a family holiday with her future mother-in-law. Her stage sisters miss her, but they are also crazy happy that she's happy, so. ((Good friends, those Starlets :D))

The monsters will continue doing what they did in Raven King, and spend Thanksgiving Day with Wymack & Abby. After Andrew's lot graduates and it's down to just Neil & Robin, Neil leaves campus for the first time and goes to Robin's house. Andrew is also invited, and although it is a pain in the ass to travel at Thanksgiving he actually shows up. Robin's told her parents enough about Neil & Andrew that her parents sort of know what to expect, and they attempt not to take Andrew's lack of social graces personally. On the bright side, Andrew doesn't go out of his way to be rude to them, so that helps.

FAVORITE ICE CREAM FLAVORS

Q: On a completely unrelated note to my other message: what flavors of ice cream do Andrew and his groups like? Kevin seems like a strawberry kinda guy (in lieu of there not being a pineapple flavor) and Neil feels decidedly vanilla but I can't be sure.

A: I'm anti-strawberry ((anti-berry in general, tbh)) ((anti-erry, I tell people, because ya gotta include cherries in that hatred)) ((I digress already)) so it's hard for me to assign that as anyone's favorite flavor. *((I was super proud of myself for making Kevin like pineapples because I am not a fan of them and I was like YES NORA THINK OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE))*

The sad thing is I actually had some of their ice cream flavors listed in the last draft, and then I cut it out at the last minute when I went through snipping unnecessary text. I was like no one is gonna give a fuck what ice cream they're buying, move it along nora, so it got trashed. so heyyy I actually have the answer to this question in a file somewhere. :D

When Nicky picked up pints for everyone, he got Andrew whichever one looked like it had the highest sugar content ((like this walking cavity)), cookie dough for himself, mint chocolate chip for Aaron, vanilla bean for Kevin, and espresso for Neil. I can see Neil liking vanilla too ~~because Neil likes boring plain things~~. ((jk Neil. vanilla ice cream > chocolate ice cream))

((peanut butter anything > EVERYTHING))

MUSIC TASTES

Q: I have to ask something you can't possible make painful. What kind of music does each fox listen to?

A: Nicky likes EDM, Renee prefers epic orchestral pieces a la Two Steps From Hell. Matt likes loud rock e.g. Three Days Grace. Seth favors NIN & Disturbed, but he and Matt overlapped on a couple bands.

I can see the girls having an impromptu singalong to Bad Blood while chillin' in their room, but pop is more Dan & Allison's thing. Dan also loves Nickelback ((bc idc what people say about 'em, Nickelback is fun)). Kevin likes classical. Andrew will listen to anything that's too loud to think to.

Aaron & Neil?? Who knows. :D

Music is one of the last things I ever sort out for characters, and nine times out of ten I don't even bother. I have more fun assigning songs to characters than deciding a character's musical preferences, tbh. If I could get away with making them all country fans ya'll know I would. :P

ALLISON'S THREE BETS

Q: You've probably answered this already but what 3 bets did Neil close that Allison was talking about? I'm guessing one was his sexuality but what about the others?

A: Neil & Andrew being an item, Andrew & Renee not being an item, and Neil's sexuality.

PREVIOUS BETS

Q: What are some of the craziest things the foxes have bet on? What were the turnouts?

A: They will bet on nearly anything, from whether or not Allison wears underwear ((she does, tyvm)), if Matt is boxers or briefs ((boxers)), who will take the first swing at who during an argument, how tragic their point-gap will be when they lose, various sexual orientations, etc etc. Longest standing bet is of course whether or not Wymack and Abby will ever hook up, since Allison started that her first day at Palmetto State University.

The rudest bet they ever had was how much it would cost to make Dan take her top off, after the then-sophomores found out their freshman captain used to be a stripper. Dan wanted to beat the shit out of them, but Renee cautioned her against a violent approach – violence was likely warranted, but it would prove they'd gotten to her and the harassment would only escalate.

Allison countered with a bet on Renee vs the sophomores. Seth refused to get lumped into that, because he won't hit women unless they're on a court. The others were dumb enough to take it. Renee disapproved of being used like this, and Dan was annoyed that Renee was fighting her battles for her, but Allison blew them off and egged the boys on until one of them took a swing at Renee without warning.

Spoiler: Renee won.

"JOAN OF EXY"

Q: In The Raven King, who did Andrew call "Joan of Exy"? Neil or Kevin?

A: This?

"I'm leaving." Andrew pointed past Wymack in the direction of the exit. "Didn't I say I'll see you tomorrow? Maybe I mumbled."

"We've got practice," Dan said. "We have a game on Friday."

"You have Joan of Exy over there. Make do without me."

He was referring to Renee, who could cover the goal for him after he left.

CAN THEY SING

Q: Can any of the foxes sing?

A: Seth could. He was a tenor.

Dan tries to carry a tune, and Allison is marginally better at it. Nicky would be fine if he'd stop trying to hit notes out of his range.

REACTION TO THE KIDNAPPING

Q: Could you give a bit of insight to what it was like from the Foxes POV when Neil was kidnapped during the riot (how they reacted, how they found out, etc.)? (Thanks for answering my previous asks btw! c:)

A: Before you read any of this, [aionwatha](#) actually wrote a little ficlet about the aftermath a few weeks ago! :D

It took the Foxes forever to catch on, but I don't blame 'em. It was pure pandemonium there. A lot of people ((86)) were taken to the local hospitals; a lot more were treated onsite. ((because of the size of the riot, the injured were split up between several different hospitals)) Three of the Foxes were admitted even though Abby was right there with her travel kit. Wymack wasn't going to risk anything, and he wanted official paperwork regarding the extent of their injuries for liabilities and school records.

So for a while they thought they just hadn't figured out where Neil was taken– which made sense in a way, because they knew Neil didn't respond well to authority figures. He'd refused to speak to the police at Luther's house, unwilling to even give up his name, so they assumed he was treating the doctors with the same tight-lipped attitude. They were nervous with him out of sight for so long, but they weren't ready to worry yet.

Andrew knew better, because in no universe would Neil have left his game things behind. He looked high and low for any other sign of Neil and came up empty, and this did not make him feel any better.

Wymack knew better, in part because Neil was too pigheaded to accept medical treatment for Riko, so he was definitely not getting hauled off in an ambulance over something like this, and partly because of the clues Neil had been dropping since New Year's Eve.

((Abby wasn't sure what to think, because Neil had told her he & doctors didn't get along, but she was faster to assume Neil had perhaps been knocked unconscious in the fight and therefore couldn't argue when he'd been carried away.))

Except Andrew reached out to every hospital in the area, and Neil wasn't in any of them. And it didn't matter to him that the hospitals were crowded; it didn't matter how many times the others suggested that maybe Neil just hadn't been checked in yet. Something wasn't right. Andrew went through Neil's phone, found the 0, found the unfamiliar number who'd called Neil earlier tonight, and called both. Both were disconnected.

The more Andrew refused to stop looking, the uneasier the Foxes became. And then some four hours or so after the riot first broke out, when the Foxes were starting to really understand We can't find him anywhere, when the last of the Foxes was finally treated and released from an overworked hospital and Andrew called the hospitals again to hear their updated intake list, Wymack's phone rang with an unfamiliar number, and someone on the other end said, *This is Special Agent Browning with the FBI.*

That was when the panic really set in for most of them, *because what the fuck, what was Neil doing in Maryland when he'd been here in New York just a few hours ago, and the **FBI**—??*

It took Matt, Wymack, and Renee to pry Andrew off Kevin's throat, but at least the Foxes had time to react to the truth before hearing the story from the suits. It was not a happy three-hour ride south—the Foxes took a sharp ride through disbelief, outrage, betrayal, and grief before settling on desperate love and loyalty.

((When Andrew brought Neil's gear back to the Foxes' bus, which was serving as a rallying point in the chaos of the stadium grounds, Kevin worried, because Kevin knew like Andrew knew that Neil would never let his things out of his sight. But he listened to the Foxes' theories on Neil's whereabouts because he needed to believe in something good. But beneath that stubborn denial was fear, because Kevin knew Neil was living on borrowed time.

He kept thinking, *Is this it? Has it finally happened?* and he wavered between fury that the Moriyamas/Wesninskis had taken Neil before Neil could finish the year on his terms like he'd wanted, and a wild and gnawing grief he wasn't expecting. While the Foxes were waiting to be treated he obsessed over Neil's racquet, trying as hard as he could to fix the strings and straighten the head and clear the smudges from its paint. By prepping Neil's things for Neil's return, he was delaying the ugly reality of Neil's disappearance.

He couldn't voice these fears because he'd told Neil he wouldn't tell Andrew. He considered telling Wymack instead, then made himself a promise: if they hadn't heard from Neil by such-and-such a time, he'd tell Wymack and Andrew the truth. He'd tell them Neil was gone,

gone, gone, that Neil had never existed, that there was no saving him now because in no universe would the Moriyamas let a loose string like Nathaniel live.

Browning beat him to his deadline by four minutes.))

THOUGHTS IN BALTIMORE

Q: what are the fox's thoughts during the scene at the hotel with Andrew and Neil? I know that that scene was like the final proof for Allison but what about everybody else?

A: The Foxes are thinking that Neil was maybe-dead but Neil is alive, Neil is okay, Neil is not okay, Neil is a charred disaster, Neil is Nathaniel??, Neil has the FBI all over his ass in this place, Neil is being taken away from them, Neil is holding onto them for dear life and they are never going to let him go

REACTIONS TO DRAKE

Q: Hiii. I love these books!!! SO MUCH!!! I was wondering how the rest of the team reacted to the news about Drake and the twins? Did any of them try to reach out to Aaron or Andrew afterward, or go to Aaron's trial? How did Andrew feel (when he could process it) about everyone suddenly knowing about the horrible things that had happened to him?

A: First: Yay!! Thank you! I'm really glad you liked them!!

Second: *YIKES*

That's not really an appropriate summary for the Foxes reaction, but YIKES is the most coherent thing right now, because imagine being Matt, imagine being Dan, imagining getting a call from Wymack saying *I'm on the way to Columbia*, saying *There's been a problem*, saying *No practice on Monday, there are police involved*, saying *Andrew has been hurt and **he is not okay***.

Imagine the edge in Wymack's voice, the *do I say or don't I say*, the *how much is too much*, the *what will the press tell them before I do*

Imagine finding out that this so-called impenetrable monster has been attacked, *has been raped?? by family??*

There is nothing in the world that could've braced the Foxes for this

Renee knows as soon as she hears it that it's true, she knows that it is not the first time, because she can't have been Andrew's friend for this long without realizing this is the impossible missing piece of the mystery that is Andrew Minyard and his incalculable issues

but for Dan & Matt & Allison this is a world of *what the fuck* and *no way* and *stop fucking lying Coach*

And honestly it's a really good thing they have a day or so to recover from the initial shock, to bounce this horrific truth amongst themselves before they have to receive Andrew's broken group and be emotional and psychological support

They waited until the monsters returned from Columbia before trying to offer a helping hand, and in the aftermath they decided to leave Aaron to Katelyn's care ((and asked Katelyn to tell them if Aaron needed additional support)). They did not do anything extra for Andrew when he finally returned because they decided as a collective not to intervene

The Foxes did not attend the trial because Aaron flat out told them they were not allowed to go – this was Aaron's call, but made on Andrew's behalf, because at some point Andrew was going to end up in the witness stand and two lawyers were going to cross examine him about Drake and abuse and rape and all these horrible things, and Aaron did not want the Foxes to be a part of this. Neil and Nicky were the only ones in attendance

((even Kevin was banned, because Andrew was supposed to be an anchor for Kevin, and how could Andrew be an anchor if he had been so thoroughly unmoored))

((tbh Andrew didn't want Nicky there either but Aaron didn't tell him to stay away so Nicky showed up and cried his eyes out in the first row))

This is the absolute last thing Andrew wanted, was for other people to know this about him, to know that he was "weak", to know that he'd "been bested", to share these "rotten" details of himself with strangers & friendlies alike. He hates that this became public; he would have gone to the grave with these tragedies if he could have

(((((a PSA for all of this is that if you are hurt, if you are being hurt, if you have been abused, I do not want to say YOU HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO YOURSELF TO SPEAK UP because DO WHAT IS RIGHT BY YOU AND YOUR SITUATIONS but do not be afraid to tell people, do not be ashamed, do not hold yourself back with that fucking useless *it will be so embarrassing if people know about this* excuse, because you deserve better, you deserve closure, you deserve the chance to air these wounds so they can heal)))))

(((((I digress but *goddamn*)))))

TL;DR the Foxes are completely blindsided and Andrew is as pissed off as an emotionally defunct major depressive can be

((imagine being Andrew and looking Roland in the face for the first time after this, after years of very cautious make-out sessions, imagine trying to be **STRONG AND UNBREAKABLE** and Roland going *babe are you okay*))

fml why do you let me drink and Ask this probably makes no sense whatsoever

THE TWINS AND TILDA

Q: How long were Andrew & Aaron living with Tilda? And could you talk a little about that time? Like did Andrew pick up immediately on the fact that Tilda was abusive/Aaron was an addict, or was it a gradual realization? Did him and Tilda get along at any point? Or for that matter, did he and Aaron? I can see Andrew being pretty guarded but maybe a little hopeful it'd work out (hopeful isn't quite the right word, but maybe a little less pessimistic about the whole thing than I imagine he was).

A: I feel like I only have vague answers for this, sorryyyy

Aaron grew up with Tilda ((poor bastard)), but Andrew was only with her for
um ... X number of months

I know there's a conversation somewhere, unless I deleted it in the final rewrites. where Aaron points out that Andrew made the promise to him in X month but didn't kill Tilda until Z month. Alas, vodka, thy power destroys my ability to properly search things. Sorry anonymous D: I have no specific numbers for you right now. But it was less than a year, if that helps at all. It probably doesn't.

The first time Aaron met Andrew was when Aaron was brought to Andrew's juvie facility, and Andrew knew then that something was off – he'd seen enough abuse in other foster kids & juvie inmates and had suffered enough himself that something about Aaron seemed wrong. Aaron wrote his bruises off as Exy related, but Andrew played Exy at juvie, and no one he played with could get injured like that, not if they were wearing proper armor.

Aaron was not okay, so Andrew did everything in his power to get released to Tilda's care. Andrew hated Tilda from the get-go, in part because of suspicion and in part because Tilda had dropped him off like a used shirt at the goodwill donation center. Those first couple months he was in South Carolina, though, he and Aaron had a wary but chatty relationship – Andrew was trying to dig information of Aaron without giving away anything of himself, and Aaron was doing the same. Tilda's murder was what broke their fledgling relationship.

((Andrew spent that time heckling both Aaron & Tilda for the truth, but neither one would give an inch))

Andrew found out about the drugs after juvie & before Tilda's death, and he was pretty fucking displeased. Aaron let him in on that secret thinking it'd be something they could bond over.

But you're right – "hopeful" does seem like a strong word, but Andrew definitely felt some vein of that. He thought he could keep Aaron. He'd protected him from Drake, and he could save him from Cass – they'd be okay in the end, right? But then Aaron chose Tilda over Andrew, and that kind of screwed everything up. Andrew was more than a little bitter over this, and more than a little spiteful, and that irritation colored a lot of their interactions in the books.

Q: Does Aaron ever reconcile with Andrew over Tilda in the future? Like maybe say something like how he understands why Andrew did it (cause as Neil points out they did actually have something similar what with Andrew enduring Drake for Cass, and Aaron putting up with Tilda's abuse to hold onto this idea of a mother...unless I'm misinterpreting that).

A: Aaron and Andrew will address the issue ((against Andrew's will)) in more than one of their joint sessions with Betsy – Aaron will bring it up again and again until Andrew finally has to respond to it. So yes, they will address it in time, whether or not Andrew wants to talk about it. ((as far as he is concerned he already talked about it when he promised to protect Aaron, never mind that he never explicitly said he'd murder Tilda if she laid a hand on Aaron))

Once Aaron understands the reasoning behind Tilda's death, it's a little easier for him to find closure – he'll never be 100% okay with her death, but he'll understand her murder was an act of .. love?, and he can work with that as much as he needs to

But yes, they'll fight over Tilda v Cass, though that is a bitter and short-lived fight the first half-dozen times through. Cass never hurt Andrew & only wanted the best for him, whereas Tilda was an abusive wreck, so Andrew is loathe to see the comparison between their situations.

Aaron's trial is probably the biggest eye opener, because the lawyer takes that conversation the absolute last place Andrew wanted it to go, to a conversation he intended to only have with Neil – that the unforgivable line with Drake was Aaron's involvement – and that is the moment Aaron fully realizes & accepts that Andrew would burn the world for him

Aaron might never fully forgive Andrew for Tilda's death, but there's no going back from that kind of love

RENEE'S NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

Q: In Son Nefes 3, Renee confirmed to Andrew she fears death because she's been close to it enough times, what is one time she had a near death experience?

A: She was in a violent gang that constantly warred for territory and supremacy; she's been in a lot of fights she's lucky to have survived. Luckier, perhaps, to have outlived & outfought her main tormentor, because if she'd lost that fight he'd have killed her slowly.

IF KEVIN DIED

Q: A while ago you told us what Neil would have done if Andrew was killed by Ichirou. I was wondering what would have happened if Kevin was killed instead?? Would there be any war path that Neil and/or Andrew would walk?

A: tbh it's hard to consider this scenario because Kevin isn't as.. expendable? If Ichirou shook the board clean and started over, Kevin is the last one he would drop in the trash. There was too much money riding on Kevin's unexpected recovery & too much power in his name. Neil was a maybe-pro, and Riko was a definitely-pro, and Andrew was a who-knows pro, but Kevin could still make money on or off the court no problem. Not to mention Kevin was someone Ichirou could have broken under the weight of the Moriyama threat, so Kevin was controllable.

Neil's warpath aka complete self-destruction & loss of everything that ever mattered to him was made possible only because Andrew was no longer in the picture — losing Andrew meant that nothing else was important enough to keep. If Kevin was murdered and Andrew was still alive, then going after Ichirou in Kevin's name would put a target on Andrew's back. Avenging Kevin would mean killing Andrew.

Same for Andrew with Neil – and Neil would lean on that loophole as hard as he needed to keep Andrew safe ((Andrew promised Kevin he could stay at PSU, and that he'd stand between Riko & Kevin. He never promised to protect him from the main family. Andrew didn't break any promises by not being fast enough to stop Ichirou))

That doesn't mean they'd just duck their heads and do what they were told, but their mutiny would be so subtle and so careful that it'd be insignificant in the long run. It'd be easier for Neil to live up to his fullest & to honor Kevin's memory & expectations that way.

JANIE SMALLS

Q: Can you tell me a bit about Janie? She's only mentioned once but I'm hella curious about her, I guess she wasn't close with the rest of the team? Since they never mentioned her?

A: There's not much to say about Janie, tbh, since she was more a plot device than anything else. The Foxes didn't know her—she was supposed to be their freshman until Neil stole her spot. Beyond that, I just shrugged at her and moved on with my life. ;D

FOXES POST-TKM

So this got a lot longer than it was supposed to. I think this pretty much answers all the questions I've gotten so far? I might've missed something. If so let me know! Also, if you'd rather leave post-King's Men stuff to your imagination, I don't recommend clicking through the link.

First, regarding book four: I think only one or two of you alluded to this, but I'm sorry, there is no book four. I know I could scrounge together enough plot for it, from Aaron's long-awaited trial to the complications of the new recruits to whatever, but honestly? I don't think it's worth it. Neil's life continues but his story is done, and I am happy to just put the pen down and leave him where he is. He can take it from here, and I need to let him go.

On side stories: Most of the extra scenes and side stories that you all haven't seen are stories that are no longer relevant. A lot of them were written about three drafts ago, when relationships and plot points were a little different. Everything current is up, so sadly we're done as far as the side stories go.

But while there won't be a continuation on the series, I can at least answer some questions about the Foxes' futures!

Riko's death: The Foxes are of course thrilled to find out what's happened and more than happy to pretend it's a suicide. Considering who's involved they are smart about what they say in public or where anyone might overhear them. There's some ugly backlash against the Foxes for breaking Riko's arm, but it's scattered at best considering the circumstances.

It'll take Kevin a couple years to get out of Riko's shadow--for years the comparisons and questions and sympathy will continue, and Kevin will have to play the part as best he can. Riko's "suicide" and Moriyama's resignation help cement Edgar Allan's decision to shut down the Ravens' Nest. There's the usual public argument about the cost of perfection and obsession, and dismay over such a senseless loss of life, but eventually it all dies down.

The Ravens: The original replacement coach for the team was Mikaela Dawson, a former Raven who'd gone on to coaching New Jersey's professional team. Considering all the controversy going on at Edgar Allan and their need to change their image, though, she wouldn't be a suitable replacement this time 'round. Instead the Ravens get an outsider, a well-qualified coach eager to take on a bigger and better team (who doesn't realize what he's getting into).

Even with Moriyama gone, they're a toxic and scheming lot. The upperclassmen have been around too long to be redeemed under a new coach, and the freshmen get pulled to panicked pieces between the upperclassmen's rot and their coach's saner approach. It takes them years to work that poison out of their ranks. In the meantime the USC Trojans become the dominating team in NCAA.

Collateral damage: Proust is researched and executed when Neil's story checks out. Clearing out Oakland takes a little more time considering there's a trial pending and a lot of people digging around in Drake's past, but with enough forged evidence it looks like the lawyers were targeted by past clients.

Aaron's trial happens early in the summer. Cass Spear comes to the trial, but she can't look Aaron or Andrew in the eye because they're identical and Aaron is the man who killed her only biological son. She can hate what sort of person her son was and hate the things he did, but he was still her son and she mourns him. She isn't ready to forgive Aaron and shunts some of that blame off on Andrew for never telling her and for letting it get to this point. It will be years before she can write Andrew a letter. Andrew will never respond to it, and she will never try again.

The Foxes: Adding six recruits to the line-up is a necessary mistake. The Foxes have gone through hell this past year, and it's finally brought them together. Now there are six strangers in the mix who only saw a fraction of the real story in the news, and it's bound to cause problems. The upperclassmen are of course more willing to reach out, but Andrew's lot predictably steers clear. Neil is supposed to be the bridge between them, but even he's tempted to close ranks considering how many problems he has with two of the new players. They'll get to where they need to be eventually, and Neil grows into his new position as vice captain. He takes over as captain when Dan graduates, though ordering Kevin around on the court is never a pleasant experience.

Post-graduation: Jean finishes school with the Trojans and goes pro when he graduates. He never aims for Court and never makes the cut, but he has a solid career and a lot of counseling along the way. Only four of the Foxes continue playing after college--Matt, Kevin, Neil, and Andrew. They are signed to the pros upon graduation, though none of them end up on the same team at first. Neil eventually makes his way onto Andrew's team.

Kevin is the first to be signed to Court. Andrew gets the second offer but turns it down initially. Neil is the last to get called on, though Court has been keeping an eye on him since they saw the Foxes' finals game against the Ravens Neil's freshman year. Kevin leans on Coach Kinzie as soon as he finds out Neil's being recruited, and Andrew gets a second chance. This time Andrew takes the offer.

A couple drafts ago Renee went into the Peace Corps post-graduation, where she met a fellow volunteer named Emilio. They were together for a few years before getting married, and somehow they managed to raise a couple children around their work. Of course, this final version of the series is the first one in years where Jean has survived King's Men, so I guess it's up in the air. Whatever Renee does with her life, I know she'll be happy, and she'll make the people around her happy.

Wymack and Abby never get married, but they do move in together during Neil's senior year.

Andrew and Neil (and Aaron): Aaron was smart enough to make his move on a Wednesday, at one of his and Andrew's shared sessions with Betsy Dobson. He'd figured out by that point that Andrew hadn't told her about Neil yet, and he hoped outing Andrew to her would give him an edge in the argument. Needless to say Andrew was still pissed off the next day when he had to drag Neil to the library and face Katelyn.

Andrew and Neil's relationship isn't without its problems, but it is lasting. They understand each other and are learning to talk to each other without keeping score. They aren't afraid to point out each other's flaws or call each other on the stupid things they do. Their openness and trust make them stable. Their relationship isn't a secret on the team, but it is private--they aren't the sort to share things about each other with anyone else (save Renee, from time to time, since Andrew's trust in her and her keen understanding of Andrew make her a good candidate for a confidante).

Finally(?): A playlist I think I forgot to post a long time ago and a partial playlist for Andrew & Neil. Hearts & stars to everyone who understands why #8 is on their playlist. ♥

The Upperclassmen

1. Meant to Live (Switchfoot) 2. The Fighter (Gym Class Heroes ft Ryan Tedder) 3. Face down (The Red Jump Suit Apparatus) 4. Sober (Kelly Clarkson) 5. How to Save a Life (The Fray) 6. Castle Walls (TI ft Christina Aguilera) 7. Changed My Mind (E-Dubble) 8. Fix Me (10 Years)

Andrew and Neil

1. 4AM Forever (Lostprophets) 2. Up in the Air (Thirty Seconds to Mars) 3. The Mighty Fall (Fall Out Boy) 4. Flaws (Bastille) 5. Bang (Armchair Cynics) 6. Hello Lover (The Empires) 7. It's Time (Imagine Dragons) 8. Those Who Slay Together, Stay Together in the End (Chiodos)

THE PRO TEAMS

Q: You wrote in a blog post that Matt, Kevin, Neil, and Andrew ended up on different pros team at first - could you expand on that? Specifically, how Andrew's team is dealing with, well, Andrew. (I say this with utter love)

A: Kevin had his pick of teams when he graduated, but he eventually went to the team Thea played on. Matt was approached by a couple teams and chose the one closest to the state where Dan was working as an assistant coach.

Andrew's first team respected him for his skills, but they were never quite comfortable around him, and the manager wasn't overly sorry to let him go because Andrew wouldn't cooperate on the things the mgr wanted him to (e.g. participating in publicity events and playing nice with the

press). He traded Andrew to another team in exchange for future draft picks and a dealer he liked.

New team happened to have a former Raven as a coach and a few Raven graduates on the lineup, so Andrew was a much better fit personality wise. Neil was secured a year later when the coach realized how much effort Neil & Andrew made to see each other around their conflicting schedules. Pretty quickly the coach & manager realized Neil and Andrew were a matched set, that you couldn't have one without the other, a la Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews of the Chicago Blackhawks. All contract renewals going forward were approached with that in mind, and they made any and all necessary trades to keep under the salary cap.

Neil and Andrew saw Matt and Kevin from time to time on the court when their teams faced off. Neil & Theodora struck up a complicated not-quite rivalry, partly due to their importance to Kevin and partly because they had a hell of a time with each other in matches. (Thea had Matt's aggressiveness and Kevin's single-minded obsession, and Neil was the fastest, shortest striker Thea ever had to guard against, so they got on each other's last nerve in games.)

The "at first" was because Neil, Kevin, and Andrew technically ended up on the same team when they qualified for Court—they still had their pro teams, but the national team was an addition to their resume where they could finally play together again. I'd like to think Matt made the cut, too, but I don't think he'd mind if he just tried it out for a while and then went on his way—two teams to juggle would mean less time at home with Dan and his kids.

THE WEDDINGS

Q: Would Andrew and Neil or Nicky and Erik have a wedding? If so, who would do what? (I.e. be late, plan it, be the most nervous, cry, etc.)

A: Andrew and Neil will never marry, but Nicky & Erik will definitely have a wedding ceremony down the road! It's years after anyone expected it to happen—Nicky's been waiting to marry Erik since high school, pretty much, so the Foxes assume he's going to pop the question as soon as he makes it back to Germany. But Nicky takes time to readjust to life with Erik, to the home they're making together, and to his new career. They get engaged after a few months together, but it's a long engagement.

Renee has the hardest time making it to his wedding due to Patrick's medical issues. Nicky and Erik plan it out together, with Nicky taking on the more intricate details, but honestly there's not a lot left for them to sort out at this point. Nicky's seen his teammates' weddings and he's taken notes and done his research. He knows what he wants and Erik wants whatever makes Nicky happy

Nicky jokes that the theme is going to be orange and white, but it's a classy white & black affair with green highlights, because green is Erik's favorite color. ((Nicky wears white, because he says it complements his darker skin better. Aaron calls Nicky the wife exactly once and gets a thump for it))

((Dan *did* have an orange and white ceremony, by the way. Everyone who participated wore white, including the groom & his men, and all of the highlights—roses, corsages, ties, place settings, etc—were Fox orange. Matt approved 1000%.))

The Foxes fully expect Nicky to be the emotional one when the big day comes, but he's too busy being a nervous wreck that all these years of planning will have a hiccup at the last second and it won't be the perfect affair he wants it to be. It's Erik who tears up on the altar when they finally exchange vows. Nicky doesn't cry until much later. He'll never admit that part of that release is fueled by grief, that his parents refuse to be a part of this moment of his life, because he knows none of the Foxes will want to talk about Luther.

They spend a day in town with all of their guests, and then embark on a two-week cruise as a honeymoon. Before he leaves Nicky gives Neil a garter "just in case" Neil needs an extra push to do what must be done and propose to Andrew.

((Neil decides not to ask why Nicky bought a garter because Andrew uses it to tie Neil's wrists to the headboard at their hotel that night))

Q: Is Neil the best man on Matt's wedding day? :D

A: heck yeah :D

KEVIN AFTER TKM

Q: what happens to kevin after atkm?to his relationship with the team,jean and thea? how does he react to riko's death?

A: ***Riko & the Foxes***

Kevin does not react well to Riko's death at all, and this is a problem for a while considering what Riko's done to the Foxes. But Kevin & Riko have a long and complicated history that will be covered in another Ask—I started working on it, but it's kind of a mess right now, so it was easier to just turn to this one first. Sorry!

The news of Riko's "suicide" gets out before the Foxes get on the road south, and Wymack has to send the rest of the team back to South Carolina with Abby. Kevin is too numb to be moved yet.

Wymack stays with him in West Virginia, and they end up staying through the funeral and the announcement that Tetsuji will be retiring from Exy for good. ((Wymacks rents a car afterward to get him and Kevin home))

It's a problem for a while because the Foxes' knee-jerk reaction to his devastated reaction is **ugly**. It'll take time for them to try and understand where he's coming from. Even Aaron has an awful opinion on the matter since he knows Riko was behind Drake. Renee attempts to play peacekeeper, but Wymack is the one who has to break his rule to stay out of their personal lives so he can try and fix things. He, Abby, and Betsy bring the Foxes to Abby's place two & three at a time to let them react and tirade in private. It's not enough, but it's a start.

((It helps that Andrew doesn't give a shit—not about Kevin's conflicted grief, not about the Foxes' outrage. Maybe Riko brought Drake to South Carolina, but Luther arranged the meet when he should have known better, Drake did what Andrew knew he would do, and Proust wouldn't have done what he did if it wasn't already in his nature to do such terrible things. With Riko dead, everything was squared away. Kevin's two-faced issues were a problem Andrew was used to working around.))

Luckily they were coming up on summer vacation, and although the Foxes had a shortened break because of summer practices, they were guaranteed a few weeks apart to try and calm down.

By the time they meet up again in the fall, the Foxes have attempted to forgive him his issues, because they understand from a logical standpoint that it's conditioned devotion.

Jean

After Jean transferred to USC, Jean & Kevin had nothing more to say to each other for the better part of a year. They had too much to recover from, and their newfound freedom was too unexpected and bewildering to heal those cracks. As Kevin warned Neil—Jean always bore the worst of things, because Jean was property whereas Kevin was inner circle. Kevin had been a friend to Jean in some respects, but he'd never stood between Riko's cruelty and Jean. He simply didn't know how to defy Riko on another person's behalf.

They spoke for the first time when both USC & the Foxes met for championships the following year. USC & PSU drew straws again, and the Trojans met the Foxes on their same terms, matching subs for subs across the board. This time the Trojans won, disqualifying the Foxes in the second death match. Kevin & Jean had a few moments to speak while exchanging handshakes after the game, but their real conversation came after—when Kevin called Jean and they finally talked about Riko's death.

Their friendship never fully recovered, in part because too much had been broken, but at least they parted on neutral terms.

Thea

Kevin & Thea started seeing each other more often after Riko's death & Tetsuji's resignation. It didn't take the press long to catch on, and finally they were an official thing. The manager for Thea's professional team thought that meant he could offer Kevin a discount rate to sign with them, assuming emotional attachment would make up the difference in dollars. Kevin refused to go for less than what he was worth, though, and Thea supported his decision 100%.

Thea & Kevin ended up on different professional teams, but they kept three apartments: one in West Virginia, since the US Court used Castle Evermore as a home court, and one in the home cities for their pro teams. They traveled between the three as necessary, and although they didn't go out of their way to see each other like Neil & Andrew would, it didn't mean they cared less for each other.

They married and had one child together, Amalia, who they raised from the get-go to play. Amalia in her teenage years was an emotional nightmare for them, because she rebelled against being forced into this life, but she'd live up to their dreams. She had her mother's temperament, which made her a critical addition to anyone's defense team, and she and Grandpa Wymack got on famously.

Onward

Kevin Day goes on to be hailed the best player in the sport, the striker all future generations are compared to. The Jackie Robinson, the Wayne Gretsky, the bend it like Beckham. When the ERC constructs a Hall of Fame, Kevin Day is the first player to be honored.

((Riko is second))

((*Riko will always be second*))

Q: what happens to kevin's and wymack's relationship over the years and wymack being a grandfather and all

A: While Kevin is at PSU they will continue to aggravate the ever-living hell out of each other, and they'll fuss and throw tantrums and Kevin will continue being a high-handed snot when he thinks Wymack is wrong, but having the truth out means they are now kind of stuck with each other and they know it.

It's easier after graduation, when Wymack is no longer so entrenched in Kevin's day-to-day life, because they'll have less time to fight and less time in each other's space. Wymack's absence during Kevin's formative years & Kevin's time at Castle Evermore means they'll never have a ..

normal? affectionate? relationship, but they do make really awkward attempts to stay in touch as their lives start taking different directions.

It's easier after Amalia is born, because being a father is so far out of Kevin's comfort zone. She is something Kevin & Wymack can bond around, a tiny human who doesn't ((yet)) have anything to do with Exy.

((Kevin doesn't think he has the right to miss his mother, because she's been gone for pretty much his entire life and he barely remembers her, but when Amalia is born there are days when that awful grief puts a hole in his chest so deep he can't breathe. It is something Thea doesn't understand, as she still has both parents, but a loss Neil & Wymack know by name.

Wymack gives Kevin memories of Kayleigh to share with Amalia one day, and while it isn't enough to right the wrongness of her absence, it is at least enough to hold Kevin together while his heart heals.))

Wymack likes being a grandfather more than he expected to. After all these years of working with damaged and distrustful kids, it is a wondrous new experience to have a tiny creature who does not yet know— who hopefully will never learn— how cruel the world can be. She is a second chance at having a family, which he'd decided years ago was impossible.

He grouses about her losing her toys under his couch, and the older he gets the more his hip aches when he has to crawl around with her in search of the missing pieces of her intricate playsets, but he loves the way she can pass out at the drop of a hat and how she runs for him with arms wide any time she sees him. He loves that she asks questions, that she gives her parents as good as she gets, that she puts gray in narcissistic Kevin's hair with her attitude and her first batch of PMS.

She is the glue that stitches this unlikely family together, and the older she gets the more Kevin & Wymack can learn to appreciate each other as people.

RENEE AFTER TKM

An initial response for her post-book life was posted [over here](#), but it was a little vague. I've since made a ruling on a critical detail**, so here it is:

Renee keeps in touch with Jean, and although they do the long-distance courting thing for a while, it doesn't work out in the long run. It ends with them still friends, though, and Renee is just as important to Jean's recovery as the Trojans and Jean's shrink are.

After graduation and after Dan and Matt's wedding, Renee goes into the Peace Corps. She falls in love with a fellow volunteer named Emilio. They can't take time off to leave for a wedding,

and the area they're in isn't friendly for visitors, so Renee is the only one to marry without the Foxes in attendance. ((She has a second ceremony on US soil years later, a renewal of their vows, that everyone attends))

Somehow they manage to raise a couple children around their work. Her career choice means it's hard for her to keep in touch with the Foxes, but she makes it to Aaron's wedding at the last possible second and she cashes in everything she has to be there for the birth of Dan's first child.

((Nicky claims Renee's arrival is what put Dan in labor—Renee showed up the week Dan was due, and Dan's water broke two hours after Matt picked Renee up from the airport.))

She writes the Foxes letters with pen and paper, in part because not all the places she goes have good connections, in part because it's the only way to convey her sincerity with so many miles between them. She tells all of the Foxes different stories so they can share updates with each other on her behalf. It makes her feel closer to them when she feels far away. She loves her work, but she misses her Fox family.

She eventually comes back to the states because her youngest child Patrick needs near-constant medical attention. Her husband stays overseas a few years longer before coming home to her in Georgia. Emilio ends up working for Habitat for Humanity, and Renee gets a position at a local church's outreach program. They don't have a lot of money, but they have a lot of love, and they have family dinners every night and church every Sunday.

Allison pays off Patrick's medical bills without warning and foots the ongoing cost of his treatment. It is the first time Allison sees Renee cry.

****This is the only draft of Foxes where Jean survived; he's killed himself in every other draft to draw attention to the Ravens' abuse and to show his support for Kevin. ((In one draft he killed himself while on the phone with Kevin, because he wants Kevin to sit with him while it happened)) Saving his life was a nice bonus of this final version, but I can't rewrite Renee's future to account for his unexpected presence.**

NICKY AFTER TKM

Q: wait wait wait wait are we all forgetting about nicky?? will he go back to germany? and second but very important question: will neil start betting too along with the team?

A: The other question is short enough to include here: Neil places exactly one bet in his entire time at Palmetto State. I think he likes being the uncooperative tiebreaker.

As for Nicky...

Erik's cousin pulls through—when Nicky graduates, he's got an interview lined up with a PR firm in Stuttgart. It's a bit of awkward timing around Aaron and Katelyn's wedding, and he spends a couple weeks going back and forth to make it to every ceremony and meeting, but he makes it work by the skin of his teeth. Afterward he moves to Germany and moves in with Erik. He spends a week quietly integrating orange decorations into the house.

The first couple months are strange, because he's not used to not being responsible for his cousins and he's now half the world away from all of the Foxes, but eventually he realizes he's allowed to live for himself now. He and Erik take a ridiculous amount of vacations, capitalizing on their substantial income and their easy access to all of Europe. He spams his teammates' emails with pictures and long rants about his life and all the neat things he sees. The Foxes visit him when they can, claiming they're just using him as a launchpad to the rest of Europe. Eventually Nicky convinces even Wymack and Abby to drop by, which he considers to be nothing short of a miracle.

((What he doesn't understand is that it's a greater miracle that Neil and Andrew stop by, because a cross-Atlantic flight is one of the last things Andrew ever wanted to experience))

He gets into football/soccer because it's Erik's game of choice, and gets Erik into Exy, and they take time off work to watch the US Court play in the Olympics. He's there when the Court brings home the gold, edging out Canada in a last-second goal by Kevin Day.

They kick around the idea of adopting, but Nicky eventually realizes it's just baby fever caused by the rest of the Foxes' new families. He puts up pictures of their kids as if they're his own, though, and covers the front of the fridge with artwork sent to "Uncle Nicky".

He never talks to his parents again, but Erik's parents treat him like their own son, and after a few years it doesn't hurt as much as it used to.

He keeps the house in Columbia, but he leaves a spare key with a freshman goalkeeper— Robin, the only other Fox, the only female, to make it into Andrew's inner circle, who will captain the Foxes one day and leave the keys with her successor, so on and so forth, Robin, who becomes Neil's best friend when the cousins graduate and leave him behind at PSU.

((Robin is the only thing Neil bets on))

((I digress as usual))

TL;DR :: Nicky gets the happy ending he always wanted.

AARON AFTER TKM

Once Aaron's trial is over and Aaron has the freedom to date Katelyn openly, things start improving. He and Andrew aren't okay, but they're getting better (so slowly that only Neil and Renee remain optimistic), and eventually they learn to acknowledge each other outside of Betsy's office. Progress there means progress with the Foxes in general, and over the next couple years Aaron has a stronger presence in the team. Aaron proposes to Katelyn before starting his fifth year, and they marry shortly after graduation.

((Neil makes Andrew go to the ceremony. It takes two favors to pull off: one to show up, and one to not threaten Katelyn in front of the entire assembly about how if she hurts Aaron he will kill her no questions asked no regrets whatsoever))

A summer wedding in the south isn't ideal, but they see the timing as necessary – after graduation Aaron and Katelyn move to Charleston and enroll at MUSC (Medical University of South Carolina). They live together off-campus in a tiny apartment they call home and study surgery (Aaron neuro, Katelyn pediatric). They move to Chicago after graduation.

They choose not to have children – mostly because they're just not interested and partly because their careers mean they'd never have sufficient time to spend with a child. They do get an obscenely large aquarium and a pug named Popo, though. Katelyn fills her Facebook / instagram with pictures of Popo and the people they've met at the dog park, and the Foxes are smart enough (for once) not to comment on the fact that Aaron is learning how to make friends.

Aaron and Katelyn are stupidly happy together, like all the Foxes knew they would be.

ALLISON AFTER TKM

Allison builds a career as a fashion designer and does fairly well for herself. Being back in the stratosphere of the rich & beautiful makes it easy for her to reconnect with her parents, and she's strategic about getting back in their good graces. It takes a couple years before they really trust her, but finally she has full access to her inheritance and her parents' contacts again. She puts that money into charities and events, and she raises awareness for troubled youth in America at any available opportunity.

She sets up secret trust funds for the Foxes' children – since none of her friends will raise children that can be Foxes, there's no guarantee they'll get to college on sports scholarships, so she wants to be prepared. She's the aunt that sends birthday & Christmas presents every year without missing a beat (helps that she has a personal assistant who can keep track of her calendar but that's beside the point).

She also turns out to be the aunt the children love calling the most, because Allison is borderline rude, but she's also very honest and loyal, so whether they want advice on life or need a voice against their parents' "unfair decisions" or just want to talk about school, she's there to be a

caustic but wholehearted supporter. She's also quite willing to put them on a plane to her place at the drop of a hat if they just need to get out of town for a weekend.

Allison marries briefly, but it doesn't work out, because her taste in men hasn't improved and her husband is as unwilling as Seth ever was to seek help. They spend a couple years getting together and breaking up again, and then Allison makes the smart choice for herself and her children and she walks away for good. She doesn't regret leaving, and she doesn't marry again, though she'll take dinner dates to events if she feels like it.

She has two children: a son and a son who's actually a daughter. She has several long phone calls with Dan and Renee when the latter comes to light, and then she throws herself into full support mode. She shouts down all naysayers who think she just wants a daughter to doll up in fancy clothes and funds the transition as soon as it's safe. Her son develops a ridiculous crush on Kevin's daughter. Allison pretends this is the worst thing to ever happen to her, but Tobias sees through her dramatic protests. (Her daughter is Ashleigh, born Ashton Reynolds)

The day will come when she's not young & beautiful anymore, but she'll be the successful mother of two amazing children, and Allison learns fast that door 2 is just as good as door 1 ever was.

DAN AND MATT AFTER TKM

Dan's angling to be a coach—she wants to take over the Foxhole Court when Wymack retires—so she starts off down that road. She spends a couple years as an assistant coach before she's able to move up in the ranks. Matt has an offer from a pro team before he graduates from Palmetto State. The morning of his graduation ceremony he proposes to Dan. Allison takes over most of the wedding planning because Dan is hopeless at such things, and Renee pretends she's policing Allison so it's not a ridiculously extravagant affair. (it's ridiculously extravagant) Allison & Renee serve as maids of honor, and Wymack gives Dan away.

((they go on to have three children, none of whom qualify for the Foxes.))

Q: How come Dan doesn't go to Court?

A: Dan doesn't go because she doesn't want to go. Even if they came to her and offered her a spot, conditional or guaranteed, she would turn it down.

Dan got into Exy because it was a means to an end—her aunt had no motivation to get out of a dead-end life and Dan was the breadwinner for their family for the majority of her high school

years. There was no money for anything fun, and definitely no money for college. Dan's grades were weak because she was always tired and had no real time to study around her job.

Sports were her solution—she figured if she could pick up a sport and get really good at it, she could aim for college with a sports scholarship. She grew up in a smallish town surrounded by small towns, so she figured it'd be easy to stand out.

The only reason Dan stays with Exy at all after graduation is because of Wymack. He inspires her at their first meeting, and she knows as soon as he's left that she wants to be him one day. She wants to be a coach, she wants to give kids the chance he gave her, she wants to take over the Foxes when Wymack is ready to retire, etc etc. Her stage sisters at Snowy Starlets think it's kind of cute but puzzling that she'd pass up the riches & fame of a professional career, but Dan doesn't care enough about Exy to devote herself like that.

She's good at it not because she loves it but because she chooses to work her ass off and give it her best day after day, because she is tired of people thinking she is a failure and more tired of people telling her she isn't going to make something of herself. If Dan can prove those people wrong, then there is nothing else she needs or wants.

ANDREW AND NEIL ON PRO TEAMS

Q: what's andrew and neil's relationship with their (first ?) professional team like? is there bonding or like mandatory tolerance or ? ((also how does neil's locker room issue turn out?))
(((thanks for existing)))

A: Neil actually learns to dress in front of other people his.. junior? senior? year. I can't remember which one now, sorry. They have a new kid on their line who's pretty badly burned ((thanks Brian's mom)), and he's bold enough to dress in front of the others. Neil sort of learns to change out around the others as an act of solidarity. It bothers him for a while, but he buries that unease as best he can and learns to deal with it. So by the time he graduates and has a pro team, he's gotten used to it – though now his new team has to get used to the myriad of scars. Luckily the pro players are older/more mature, and they let it drop after a couple odd ((unwelcome)) comments.

Here's a glimpse at their pro teams, taken from another post:

Andrew's first team respected him for his skills, but they were never quite comfortable around him, and the manager wasn't overly sorry to let him go because Andrew wouldn't cooperate on the things the mgr wanted him to (e.g. participating in publicity events and playing nice with the press). He traded Andrew to another team in exchange for future draft picks and a dealer he liked.

New team happened to have a former Raven as a coach and a few Raven graduates on the lineup, so Andrew was a much better fit personality wise. Neil was secured a year later when the coach realized how much effort Neil & Andrew made to see each other around their conflicting schedules. Pretty quickly the coach & manager realized Neil and Andrew were a matched set, that you couldn't have one without the other, a la Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews of the Chicago Blackhawks. All contract renewals going forward were approached with that in mind, and they made any and all necessary trades to keep under the salary cap.

((Neil did spend a year with another team before Andrew's second team picked him up. He got along with them for the most part, but he never got close to any of them, and he didn't talk to them about anything but Exy. Neil and Andrew get along with their new team really well, on the other hand – probably because the Raven grads are a bit psychotic, too, so it's a little like being back with the reckless Foxes.))

SCANDALS

Q: If a scandal were to come up about either Andrew, Neil, Matt or Kevin in their years as pros on Court, what would it be?

A:Def not Matt, because puppies don't cause scandals. Kevin understands the importance of publicity so he's not likely to get caught doing anything terrible. Neil's mouth gets him in trouble more than once, but I can't see him saying or doing anything outrageous enough to be deemed scandalous by the press ((the world already knows the worst things about him, so there's not much left he can do to shock anyone, y'know?)).

That leaves Andrew, I guess, for punching his coach when an injured Neil is put on the court. Neil wasn't supposed to get playing time, but the team was behind halfway through the second half, so Neil was sent on during a substitution. Andrew left his goal at the first sight of Neil coming through the door and knocked his coach clean off his feet in response. Neil had to haul Andrew back into place before things could escalate.

((with the obligatory reminder that Andrew's second team was coached by a former Raven. Sometimes Ravens gotta be reminded that the real world doesn't operate by Evermore insanity))

Not very scandalous, but

THE KIDS

Q: Would Neil hold Matt and Dan's newborn infant if Matt offered?

A: Yes, though he'd attempt to talk Matt out of it, since he doesn't know the first thing about babies or how to hold them or how not to drop them etc etc etc. Matt finds it entertaining; Dan tells him he can't be scared of a baby after everything else he's breezed past. Neil's tense the entire time, especially when the baby starts caterwauling. ((tbh Andrew handles it a lot better))

Neil is fascinated by the Foxes' children, though – he's looking at children that will grow up better off than any of them were, kids that are going to have loving families and parents who will chase off any and all nightmares.

Q: Howdy Nora! Merry Almost Christmas. :) I was discussing some headcanons with a friend and we were wondering how Neil would be at babysitting the Foxes kids? Like, does he enjoy it? Does he get along better with one of their kids and not another? I feel like he'd have issues with Amalia but do really well with Dan & Matt's kid and Allison's.

A: Merry almost Christmas to you as well :D

Neil doesn't go out of his way to volunteer for it, but he'll never turn the Foxes down if they need him to watch their progeny. He'd actually have an easier time with Amalia than the others, on account of who her parents are. She's raised on an *Exy-is-#1* mentality, and Neil understands that, so they have a lot to talk about and can waste hours practicing. Communicating with the other kids is harder, at least until they're old enough to have moved past toys and imaginary friends.

Q: If the the foxes's children were to pick up on swearing first, whose kids would it be?

A: Allison's, partly because she doesn't care what they pick up but mostly because of her (eventually ex) husband's unreliable temper and trash mouth. Dan & Matt's children would get there eventually, and Dan would let 'em do it if it was in "appropriate" situations (e.g. sports, dropping something heavy on one's foot, etc). Renee's would know better than to curse in front of their parents, and the first time one of them cursed in front of a friend they'd feel so guilty & empowered.

FUTURE FOXES

ROBIN CROSS

I definitely recommend just skipping this post unless you are really, really bored, because I literally sat down and wrote out a 2300-word post about a character you will never otherwise meet aka Robin Cross mentioned [here](#). I blame [coldsaturn](#) for asking *but who is Robin*. Knowing her or not knowing her changes nothing about the AftG books—she’s a character who won’t show up for several more years—but I took the chance to ramble and I ran with it.

Robin Cross started as the answer to a question: *what happens when even the cousins graduate and Neil is left alone at Palmetto State*? But once she had a name she needed a story, because I wanted to know what sort of person could become important to Neil like the original Foxes were. She is not the only future Fox whose name I know, but she is the only one I got emotionally invested in.

She also holds the unique position of being dreadfully important to only one half of the team—she comes into the picture after the upperclassmen have graduated, so the only ones she really knows are the three cousins and Neil. The rest of the original Foxes are just names and faces to her, people who treat her kindly because she is a Fox and because she is important to their friends.

Robin is a goalkeeper who starts her freshman year at Palmetto State when the cousins are starting their fifth year and Neil is a fourth-year senior. The Foxes already have a second goalkeeper, of course, but with Andrew on his last season it’s time to secure and train a replacement for him.

Robin isn’t their first choice. She’s technically not a choice at all, because she’s not Class I material and nobody submitted her information to Wymack to alert him to her existence. The only reason Wymack finds out about her—and the reason he decides to recruit her despite the work it’ll take to get her up to the level she needs to be—is because Andrew singles her out.

Let’s back up.

When Robin was five, she was taken from a playground in Newark while her mother was distracted on a phone call. *((It was a heated argument about a portfolio and her mother turned away to try and hide her obvious outrage from her daughter))*. Robin’s body was never found because her new “father” Steven had no intentions of killing her. She spent most of her childhood locked in a room with boarded-up windows. She was only let out of her room for dinner, and her Exy-obsessed captor would always put a game on while they ate. In this way Exy became associated with freedom to a girl who’d forgotten what freedom really was.

When Robin was eleven, Steven used her as bait to secure a new, younger child. Steven & child got away, but Robin did not. She was caught by a good Samaritan when she tried to run. Robin was reunited with her real family and subjected to a lot of unsuccessful therapy. For months she panicked any time her mother tried to coax her out of the house, so returning to school was out of the question. After struggling with the fear of letting strangers near her daughter, her mother finally recruited an older woman from church to home-school Robin.

It was this teacher who discovered Robin's notebooks: cover to cover drawings of Exy racquets and mascots painstakingly recreated from memory. Robin drew them when she was afraid, when she was on the verge of having panic attacks, when this world was too big with too many people in it and she missed her tiny prison and Steven's questionable protection.

The teacher's son was the coach at the local high school, so she'd learned all she could about Exy to support his passion. When all of Robin's schoolwork was done for the day the two of them would curl up on the couch and watch a game. Four months later the teacher talked Robin into leaving the house to watch one of the school's matches. Robin tried turning back twice on the way there, but stuck it out and was rewarded by the unparalleled excitement of a live game.

"You could play, you know," the teacher said to her, and Robin knew if she played she'd want to be a goalkeeper: with a wall at her back, enough armor to protect her from the world, and breathing room between her and the rest of the players on the court.

The teacher spoke to Robin's parents about it, then spoke to her church group, and together they raised enough money to buy Robin a goalkeeper's racquet. Robin started carrying it everywhere with her, and so long as she had it she could start leaving the house. She followed her father on walks and her mother to the grocery store and her teacher to games. Her rewards for these successes were books on how to play Exy, and the teacher's son started coming over in the evenings to coach her. She still didn't want to go for runs by herself, though, so her father put a treadmill in the basement next to his free weights.

When Robin asked to enroll at the local high school, her parents cried and cried, because their baby girl might be okay after all. Robin passed tryouts for the Exy team and became its substitute goalkeeper. Her father started working from home so he could take her to and from school, and to and from practices, and to and from games after that, because her parents feared what could happen at a bus stop, but it was a sacrifice he was willing to make if his daughter could start having a life again.

At the same time Robin took this tremendous step toward healing, Andrew started at Palmetto State as a freshman and began seeing Betsy Dobson on a weekly basis. Betsy's mother was from Newark, and Robin was in the local news. Betsy vaguely remembered when Robin went missing and better remembered hearing she'd been found; hearing she was starting public school because

of Exy was a story she wanted to share with Andrew. She talked about recovering from tragedy, sports as a means of rehabilitation, and the perseverance of the human spirit. Andrew—being Andrew—was an absolute manic asshole about the entire thing and derailed the conversation as quickly as he could.

But Andrew didn't forget, because Andrew doesn't forget.

Robin should have just been a name, a means of prying more out of Andrew than he was willing to give Betsy, but Andrew remembered her because Robin's "father" shared the same name as one of his foster fathers. They weren't the same person, but the association stuck, as did the knowledge that this man had gotten away. He'd kept and abused Robin for six years, then successfully sacrificed her in favor of getting his hands on a younger child. As far as Andrew was concerned, the recovery Betsy spoke of was skin-deep self-delusion.

Toward the end of Andrew's junior year, Robin's replacement is found dead in a river, and a third girl is reported missing. February of Andrew's senior year, the police finally get a lead on Steven, and Steven makes the mistake of heading for the Canadian border. He is apprehended by the border patrol and his newest daughter is returned home to a grateful family. It makes the news, but even if the Foxes see the clips it means nothing to them—they have nothing to associate the man with and they are fighting their way through championships. Andrew, as the only Fox not wearing Exy blinders, definitely notices the report.

Andrew breaks into Wymack's apartment the following night and leaves Robin's name on Wymack's desk, a handwritten two-word note held in place by a bottle of Walker Blue. Wymack looks into her in the morning. He finds the news first and her Exy stats second. Wymack is sorry for what she's been through but uninspired by her performance as a goalkeeper. He calls Andrew anyway and asks if he is wasting his breath asking *why her*. Andrew says Wymack has gotten into the habit of recruiting boring people these last few years and that this one, at least, might be interesting for a while. It is a sorry excuse, and the vaguest explanation in the entire world, but Andrew making an effort is reason enough for Wymack to abandon every other potential goalie he is watching. He calls Robin's coach and sets up a meet-and-greet.

It takes Robin a month to decide, because as much as she wants this chance, the thought of going so far from home is terrifying. In the end she signs the contract, though, and she moves into Fox Tower in June.

It is every bit as awful as she expected. The Foxes are a raucous and aggressive bunch, she has roommates for the first time in her life, the university is too big, and she is hours from home. She reacts by retreating, and that is the worst thing she can do. She is an easy target for the Foxes' frustrations, especially after they see her performance the first time she's in goal. Andrew watches it from a distance for a couple weeks, waiting to see if she'll break and ignoring the

pointed looks Wymack sends him from time to time. Neil steps in where Andrew won't, but he can't be there to protect her all the time.

The first time Andrew and Robin are alone, Andrew says *I assume you'll fight back eventually*, and Robin answers that she doesn't know how to fight. Later that night he takes her up to the roof of Fox Tower, leads her all the way to the edge, and tells her he will push her off if she doesn't hit him. He nearly has to make good on that threat before she panics enough to swing at him. Andrew tugs her back to safety, says her form is lousy, and leaves her there without any explanation whatsoever.

The next Friday he takes her to Columbia. He skips the drugs and leaves it up to her to decide if she wants to take any drinks off the tray (she doesn't). After Nicky & Aaron disappear to the dance floor and Neil takes the hint to go talk to Roland for a while, Andrew and Robin have a long and awful conversation. Andrew takes it where Robin doesn't want it to go—to the girl she helped Steven capture, who lived for years in that tiny room before he replaced her and dumped her body in a river. And then Andrew tells her about the six children Cass took in after he went away, six foster children where there should have been zero.

((Andrew doesn't feel guilty over what happened to those six—the way he sees it, they were hurt because of Luther's betrayal, not because he failed to speak out against Drake years ago. Luther promised he'd talk to Cass and convince her not to foster anyone else. Andrew drives this point home to Robin because it is something Robin never could face, an ugly truth she couldn't confront because she couldn't forgive herself. She handed someone's baby girl to Steven knowing what would happen to her; she is responsible for that girl's death by proxy. Andrew isn't the first person to address that guilt with Robin, but he is the first one she listens to. Andrew understands the difference between fault and blame, and it is a distinction Robin desperately needs if she is to ever truly move forward))

Saturday morning Robin moves in with the cousins, who've gone back to rooming together after Matt & Kevin's graduation the previous spring. There aren't five beds in the room, but Andrew relinquishes his loft to her and shares with Neil. Aaron & Nicky are a little confused by this abrupt intrusion into a family that hasn't grown since Neil's arrival, but they accept her on Andrew's say-so and make room for her in their lives.

On Monday Robin has a new seat in the locker room: the third cushion on the couch Neil & Andrew share. Andrew makes it inescapably clear that he will kill the Foxes if they lay another hand on her. The Foxes still aren't particularly nice to her, but they scale the bullying back. Andrew's lot takes on the task of coaching Robin after hours, and Andrew teaches Robin how to use Renee's knives. *((He leaves the knives with her when he graduates, just as Nicky leaves her a key to the house in Columbia. He doesn't need them anymore.))*

Her importance to Andrew is what makes Neil look at her as more than just another struggling Fox, and having her around all the time makes it hard to not grow protective and then fond of her.

Aaron introduces Robin to Katelyn, who promptly sets out to make Robin her newest best friend. Katelyn's enthusiastic approval is enough that even Aaron manages to be kind to Robin. Robin flourishes under their guidance, and by the time the cousins graduate she's doing better than ever.

The following year Neil & Robin are the only ones left. Neil's never been at PSU without Andrew, and the loss of the last of his original team leaves him adrift. Robin didn't know the cousins as long as he did, but by now she's used to having a support network. They grow closer out of necessity, and the bond that comes of it is unbreakable. They go everywhere and do everything together. Wymack claims a mouthy brat like Neil is a worse influence on Robin than Andrew ever was, but he gets used to seeing them connected at the hip.

Andrew's group put Robin back together as a person and taught her that it's okay to fight back against life and the world, and their tutelage and a year at PSU made Robin a better athlete. But it is Neil in their absence who gets Robin to the next level with Exy, because Robin can't spend every waking moment with him and his obsession and not rise to the challenge. By the end of her sophomore year she's unquestionably Class I material. Wymack makes her vice-captain her junior year, and gives her his team her fourth and fifth years.

JACK

JACK AND NEIL

Q: Who is Jack on the new line up? And what's his deal with Neil?

A: John-called-Jack is the striker Kevin chose. He is very good, and he has years of experience, and he pretty much decides from the get-go that Neil isn't worth the ground he walks on. He doesn't like that an amateur is vice-captain, he doesn't like that Neil gets more playing time, he doesn't like that Kevin is more interested in Neil than he is in Jack, he really doesn't like Neil's history, and he especially doesn't like it when he finds out Andrew & Neil are together.

Everything about Neil is basically unforgivable, as far as Jack is concerned, and he goes out of his way to make Neil's life as difficult as possible. He's rude, he's snide, he's uncooperative any time he thinks he can get away with it, and he is constantly reminding Neil that Neil isn't good enough to get the attention & prestige that's supposedly been dumped in his lap. It doesn't help that Jack has help—he and Sheena, another recruit, get on famously, and they take turns playing *Who can get under Neil's skin faster*.

He'll get better eventually, as Neil forcibly earns his respect, but it's a slow process and they're never going to be friends.

((Back when there was going to be a book four, Jack & Sheena were pretty much the main antagonists))

JACK AND ANDREW

Q: I don't like Jake... I want Jake to leave Neil alone. Also, I would love to know how Jake treat Andrew. I mean, if he make a living hell of Neil's life, why would he leave his bf alone ? (expect by good survival instinct I mean) and what Andrew think of Jake and how he react to the little... to Jake ?

A: Aside from Sheena, no one particularly likes Jack, ha. He doesn't give everyone the same amount of grief he gives Neil, though, and he's generally good at behaving in front of Wymack, so.

Jack knows better than to go at Andrew directly, though that doesn't stop him from making smart comments now and then if he thinks he can get away with it. Andrew finds him unimpressive and uninteresting. He does offer Neil a place to hide Jack's body—the same place he once considered burying Neil ((at the construction site on campus, so the new foundations and buildings would keep his corpse hidden for ages))—but once Neil says *I can handle him, I've got this*, Andrew decides to keep out of it.

Q: okay but how does andrew react when seeing neil knock someone's ass to the floor? like outwardly and inwardly

A: Andrew's only reaction comes much later, and all he says is that it took Neil long enough.

JACK AND KEVIN

Q: What about Kevin ? He choose Jake, so yeah youhou, perhaps he's good but it isn't worth his comportement, plus it's bad for the team relationship, so what does he think/do ?

A: Oh man, ya'll think way too highly of Kevin if you think someone's bad attitude is gonna interfere with what he wants on the court. It didn't stop him with Neil or Andrew. I mean, he grew up with the Ravens. Jack's a toothless child in comparison.

Besides, Jack has no issues with Kevin—Kevin is the champion, the legend, the star striker who's made an impossible comeback. Jack wants to learn from Kevin, and he'll ask intelligent questions and pay attention to the answers, and he'll very obviously try to incorporate any advice

Kevin gives out no matter how condescending Kevin can be when he speaks. So Jack is a-OK in Kevin's book.

That doesn't mean Kevin isn't ignorant of the issues, though he's as likely to chastise Neil for not getting Jack in line quicker as he is to lose patience with Jack for it. Neil's gone toe-to-toe with Riko and Andrew; he's too stupid to be cowed by anyone, so why can't he control his own players? Is he a vice captain or not? Does he want this position or not? ((This argument does very little for Neil's nerves, unsurprisingly, but Kevin & Neil are least quasi-discreet about how much they squabble this year.))

But before you think Kevin's switched sides or anything, know this: Kevin's not going to fight Neil's battles for him, and he's not going to pass up on Jack's talent just because Jack's a shitbag, but he'll put Jack in his place the second Jack starts thinking too highly of himself. Jack asks Kevin on more than one occasion why Neil, and Kevin says without hesitation: *because he is worth more to the court than you ever will be.*

NEIL'S RECRUIT

Q: Whatever happened to the new recruit that Neil has his heart set on making the cut??? Did they get along at least?

A: She needs some work on the court, but she does make noticeable improvements under the Foxes' tutelage. Outside of Exy, she asks very prying questions and she has this thing about fire that makes Wymack install extra fire extinguishers in his locker room ((just in case)). She's not necessarily on Jack's side in the Neil & Jack war, but she does use Jack's arguments to bring up things Neil doesn't want to talk about with a near-stranger. Overall she's all right, though. Neil has no real issues with her.

((Kevin, on the other hand, tells her flat-out that she shouldn't be here and that he wouldn't have signed off on her. He says he argued against her recruitment and demands she earn her spot on the line-up sooner rather than later. In response to his scathing tirade she only says *So you gonna fuck me or what, princess?* Kevin stops talking to her for a solid week after that.))

((Nicky offers to tell Thea there's competition, and Kevin smacks him upside the back of his head so hard Nicky complains for the rest of the day))

((Matt and Dan think "Princess" is comedic gold until the day they die))

RIVALS

RIKO MORIYAMA

Q: I don't know if I'm the only one interested, but I need to know more about the cinnamon roll Riko. He clearly had enough context to be more than just the antagonist in the other drafts, and associating him with Drake or Proust seems over-simplifying to me (even though I'd read a background on Drake and Proust any day tbh their headspace is a nightmare and I want in). So...who is Riko?

A: Riko has been a prick pretty much since day one, but the original Riko wasn't technically a bad guy. He was Kevin's boyfriend, and they'd broken up because Riko cheated on Kevin with Jean. (Kevin and Jean were Fuji and Miki, back then) Jean was the one who injured Kevin's hand when they got into a fight over that indiscretion, and Kevin transferred over to the Foxes in protest.

How Riko went from that to this is like trying to explain how Andrew derailed so far over the years. I wanted a stronger antagonist, so I kept giving him more power—and then I tore a chunk of it away in the final draft out of necessity. He had more presence in the second-to-last draft, just as Neil's father did, but I had to delete entire chunks to balance the story out. It's hard to talk about Riko without talking about Tetsuji, though, so there's a pretty good chance we're gonna detour halfway through this. Sorry in advance.

Riko was a mistake, a second son in a family only allowed to have one. He was passed off to Tetsuji as soon as possible, and his mother was quietly disposed of for not taking proper precautions. ((Never mind that she didn't make Riko on her own)) Riko was kept alive in case something happened to Ichirou before Ichirou managed to have his own first son, but that was pretty much the only point of his existence as far as the main family was concerned. Because he was a contingency plan, Riko had to be educated on who his family was and what sorts of things they were capable of.

For his safety, the security guards that patrolled the stadium and Edgar Allan's campus were Moriyama's people. It didn't matter that Tetsuji & Riko were castoffs— they still bore the Moriyama name, and the Ravens were a costly investment.

((Only one person was stupid enough to make an attempt on Riko. He was handed over to the Butcher and killed in Evermore's tower with a dull axe. Riko was made to watch, and he brought Nathaniel and Kevin with him. They needed to know what happened to those who threatened a Moriyama.))

Perhaps Riko still could have come out of this okay, since he was being raised far away from the Moriyama family business, except no one comes out okay where Tetsuji is involved.

Riko grew up at the Nest, watched over by Tetsuji's assistants so Tetsuji could focus on his Ravens. The only toys he was allowed were Exy balls, and when his tiny arms could hold more weight he was given tiny racquets.

Kayleigh brought Kevin by the Nest whenever her job brought her to the States, and Riko and Kevin would gurgle at each other in the locker room while their parents worked. These were the only times in those first years that Tetsuji interacted with Riko. Tetsuji wanted nothing to do with Riko until Riko was old enough to shape into a star. Riko was too young to understand any of it, but he could connect the dots on at least some level that Kevin being at the Nest = Tetsuji would actually look at him instead of just walk past him without slowing.

Tetsuji, who had plans for Riko, advised Kayleigh to leave Kevin with him. Her job meant she was traveling all the time—it would be better if her son got to stay in one place. She turned him down but said if something ever happened to her, she'd make sure he as the godfather got custody of her child. Tetsuji asked if the father would be a problem ((he'd known since her pregnancy who it was)) and Kayleigh reminded him that the father would never know the truth. Tetsuji believed her because he wanted to.

And when Kevin was old enough that he could finally start properly training, something happened to Kayleigh, and Tetsuji inherited her son.

Here is a fact: Tetsuji is not a good person, but he is not his brother. He is concerned with his little kingdom and nothing else outside of it; the Ravens are the only things he must control 100% of the time. He treats them like objects to manipulate, unruly animals that have to be broken before they fall in line, but he does not kill those who can't keep up. He simply breaks them to the point that they can't fight back. (Failed Ravens had a tendency to commit suicide)

But Tetsuji was still responsible for Kayleigh's death, in a roundabout way, because he opened his mouth about her to Kengo. He wanted more of his brother's money so he could invest in a new program for the Ravens, and he told Kengo his plans for Riko. He also told him about Kevin. Two days later Kayleigh was dead, and Tetsuji had both his money and his second pet project. Tetsuji immediately handed Kevin off to Riko. It took him a few years before he spoke to his brother again.

Having Kevin around could have saved Riko in a different life, a different draft. Kevin used to love Riko as desperately and obsessively as he loved Exy. Riko finally had someone his age around at all times, someone else to help draw Tetsuji's attention, someone else to struggle and learn and practice with. Up until this point he'd been surrounded by adults, the Ravens and the staff, with zero access to other children. His world literally stopped and started with Exy—before he was old enough for Tetsuji to train him, he only left Evermore when the Ravens went on away games or to Exy events. It was literally all he had, and he had absolutely no say in it.

Luckily, because Riko knew nothing but Exy, he didn't know how to want anything but Exy. He didn't resent his lot in life because as far as he was aware nothing else existed. The only thing he wanted that he couldn't have was to meet his father and brother, because when he was old enough to learn who he really was, he also learned that he was Not Wanted. Tetsuji said the only thing Kengo cared about was Riko living up to Tetsuji's promises on the court. Riko took that to mean that he could win his father's respect by being the best player in the world; he didn't understand at the time that Kengo only cared about the money.

Riko's life feels like a series of near-misses. He could never be a decent human being, but he could have been—less broken. He could've been kept with the main family. He could've been treated a little more like a human by Tetsuji. He could've let Kevin love him instead of venting his frustrations out on him. He could have been acknowledged at least once in his life by his father, or allowed to meet his brother a single time. He could have not grown up at the Nest.

Because in the end, the Nest is what broke him beyond repair.

We've talked about the Ravens, yes, and what Tetsuji made them into. You saw them for a brief chapter in *The Raven King*. The Ravens are not a healthy group. Whatever they were before they came to the Nest, they will never be again. Tetsuji is too controlling, too psychologically manipulative, too quick to punish. He created an environment ripe for hazing and—like Wymack—lets the Ravens police themselves. The Nest is a holding cell for a hive mind that can't survive apart, that rewards them for acting in sync but demands they be the best, that severely punishes those who fall behind and anyone who lets them.

This was Riko's family. These are the people Riko watched growing up. The people who tutored him when Tetsuji couldn't. The people who let him watch as they beat the ever-living hell out of each other for drawing Tetsuji's wrath at practice. The people who knew he was the master's nephew, who knew he'd rule their team one day, who never laughed at the one on his face. A few called him captain instead of his name— a joke, an affectionate nickname (as affectionate as the Ravens could be)— but the current captain disliked sharing a title with a kid. Riko opted instead to be King, and oh, did the Ravens like that.

Because the Ravens hated each other, but the Ravens loved each other, with a hateful and obsessive need that let them not kill one another despite everything Tetsuji put them through. They came to Evermore on five-year contracts, but the Ravens kept 16-hr days and what should have been five years were seven and a half. They had a symbiotic relationship built on a core of pure rage and determination. As the Foxes observed in the books, the Ravens bought into their own hype. They were miserable all the time but they believed in their image, in their skill, in their reputation. Because of this, they believed in Riko with a ferocity that fueled that raging fire inside him.

This was Riko's family. This was his kingdom. This was his, and he would be the best of them. Over and over they said it, and they believed it, because Riko was the master's progeny. And as Riko grew older, as he finally was old enough to join the Ravens, as he took the captain's title for real and was practically handed multiple contracts, Riko had justification for everything he'd built his life around. #1. King. Captain.

And then one winter Tetsuji sat Riko and Kevin down, and said to Riko, *The ERC thinks you are holding Kevin back.*

Kevin, who'd been there since the beginning. Kevin, who was sharp-tongued and brilliant, who could spot latent talent a thousand miles away but who never outscored Riko at games or at practice. His second half, his righthand man, his confidante.

Kevin – who reacted to Tetsuji's news with horror, not surprise.

Kevin, who lost the showdown Tetsuji forced them into, but whose performance didn't sway Tetsuji's opinion on the matter. Tetsuji wrote Riko off as a complete waste of his time and threatened to demote him if he didn't fix things. He meant for Riko to work harder, to improve, to keep his pet in line and to not let his ego get in the way of all of his flaws.

But Riko remembered what happens to those who threaten the Moriyamas, and he chose to eliminate the threat. Tetsuji responded by beating him within an inch of his life, which is why Riko & Tetsuji both disappeared from public view after the "skiing accident", but Riko wasn't sorry.

He wasn't sorry, but he didn't know how to live without Kevin, either. They'd been together for too long. Kevin left a hole behind that Riko didn't know how to fill, and Riko struggled in his absence. Luckily the Ravens were ignorant of the rumors, and they were equally oblivious to what really happened to Kevin. They never lost faith in their King and instead turned on Kevin, hating him for walking out and then transferring to the Foxes. Their malevolent support only proved to Riko that he'd done the right thing.

Riko wasn't happy, and he wasn't okay, but he was on his way to the top once more. They were going to get Kevin back as a coach so he could properly train his replacement strikers, Riko was going to make him watch from the sidelines as Riko lived out their dreams alone, and Riko would never be questioned by the ERC again.

And then some nameless, talentless child from a nowhere town in Arizona opened his mouth on live TV, and it was all downhill from there.

RIKO AND KEVIN

Q: so what exactly were kevin and riko's feelings towards to each other, both when they were children and at the end?

A: I started on this yesterday, but after a day I'm still not entirely sure I can put it into words that make sense. Riko said it right when he warned Neil that Neil would never understand it—there were a lot of layers to Riko & Kevin's relationship, and the biggest problem was that several of those layers conflicted. Owner & pet, brother & brother, partner & partner. Riko & Kevin never fully understood it, which is why until the day Riko died they still leaned so fiercely on what was familiar ((Kevin to his role as 2nd, Riko to Kevin's place at his side))

This is probably an incomplete answer, but this is the best thing I can come up with and I'm sorry:

Honestly I'm not sure I'll be able to answer this, because Riko & Kevin are screwed up and steeped in too much history for me to be coherent anymore, but... I'll take a shot at it. Because oh god yes, let's talk Kevin & Riko, my poor babies. They loved each other until they died, and they hated each other from the moment they met.

Did you know that from day 1 of All for the Game, when it was a shoddy little comic taking place in a Japanese high school, up until the second-to-last draft, they were lovers? The main drama in the first comic was that Riko had cheated on Kevin with Jean, and Kevin stormed off in a heartbroken fit, and Riko was trying to win him back before Kevin & Neil fell in love together. Ha! They'd grown up together, after all—it was impossible to think that they couldn't fall in love with each other and explore their sexuality and obsession together. Unfortunately I had to tear apart their relationship the same time I pried Kevin out of his obsessive relationship with Andrew & Neil.

((I've seen a couple comments on how I focus more on A&N when I comment on that threesome, but although N&A had more chemistry and screen time, K&A were far more dedicated to each other and were the source of a lot of insecurity on Neil's part. Kevin & Neil got into several arguments over whether or not Neil was just a replacement for the boy who refused to give Kevin the time of day. I've just left most of that obsessive KxA subtext out of related conversations because there's not much point dwelling on things that no longer exist.))

Kevin came to Riko & Tetsuji on the tail-end of tragedy—his mother's untimely death. He was shattered and withdrawn, and being handed off to Riko as a pet was an afterthought because he came as an athlete and Exy was the one thing his mother had instilled into him since the time he could sit still in front of a TV. He clung to Riko the way a weaker power clings to a stronger, needing some sort of support and stability to rebuild his broken life around, and although he feared Riko's cruelty he didn't understand at the time how wrong and unfair it was. It was just life, as he knew it, as he'd know it for the next many years.

To say Riko & Kevin were friends seems a lie, but to say they weren't is a worse one. Riko & Kevin couldn't be friends because the master-pet mindset was something Riko drilled into Kevin over and over, but they achieved an understanding and balance they shouldn't have otherwise. In short, Riko & Kevin were the end-all be-all of each other's existence. It was what saved Kevin from the majority of Riko's cruelty, but Riko would have hurt Kevin tremendously if he thought Kevin forgot his place.

Exy was the end-goal of everything they wanted, the purpose they built their lives around, but they were so codependent it was ridiculous. From the time Kevin arrived at the Nest to the day Riko broke his hand, they weren't ever in different rooms. It was something they started in the beginning, when Kevin was trying to recover from his mother's death and Riko was testing his new position as master of a human pet, but they never grew out of it. It didn't matter if they were going to practice, to interviews, or to the restroom—where one went the other followed.

I say “where one went” instead of “where Riko went” because the older they got, the more they found a balance neither one of them was 100% willing to recognize or admit to. They needed each other, because the only thing in the world they wanted was to be the best and the only way to be the best was by plunging into life side-by-side. They were obsessed with each other's potential because they knew what they could be together.

The critical difference was that Riko saw Kevin as a footstool, and Kevin saw Riko as a collar. Riko refused to think Kevin was anything more than a critical means to an end, and Kevin learned that Riko was a threshold he could not ((on pain of death, not on grounds of ability)) surpass. Thea was the first to mention it, the first to ask Kevin does he know you're better than he is?

It was downhill from there: Thea's words were validation for the gnawing feeling that sneaked into Kevin's head no matter how hard he tried to banish it. Because Riko was family, was a friend, was a captor, was his alpha and omega—but the only thing that could really matter in the end to either of them was Exy. And once Riko started to interfere with that, Kevin started to chafe at the restrictions placed on him. Maybe Kevin could have tolerated it for a few more years, maybe not—his will was never put to the test because Riko inadvertently confirmed every desperate suspicion he had by breaking Kevin's hand.

Kevin would never forgive Riko for that betrayal, but that outrage/grief could only temper his obsession with hate. Kevin & Riko remained obsessed with each other up until the point Riko died. The difference was Kevin learned how to balance his need for Riko with his need to be the best, and the scales finally tilted the way he needed them to.

Q: Were Kevin and Riko ever sexual together? What about Riko and Jean or Jean and Kevin?

A: Oh, no. The funny thing is, though, this is the first draft where none of them were at all involved with each other sexually. This final Riko & Kevin are too.. press conscious? Public-opinion oriented? They were going to be champions; they were going to be world famous stars. They didn't need anything that could "taint" that image, no rumors or hints that would put a dent in their stellar image. If Riko & Kevin had gotten together, Kevin wouldn't have had ground to stand on when he told Nicky to stop "corrupting" Neil.

Q: Ok can you tell us a bit about kevin and riko's past? I'm dying to know

A: This is so long-winded and meandering and probably full of 8000 typos. SORRY? I was hoping that if I sat on it for a while it would be more coherent, but uhhhh I was wrong.

Oh, but where to begin.

We've got a little of the groundwork already, and once that's in place there's nowhere else to go but up into the spotlight ((and into the resultant shadows of madness it casts)). But let's take a look at the master's pets.

I feel like Tetsuji had to be an otaku growing up, into those super high-strung sports manga & anime where even Go is **INTENSE!!!!!!** with **DRAMATIC MUSICS** and **EXAGGERATED SLOW-MOTION FLOURISHES**. There's really no other excuse for what he put his Ravens through. He created a hive mind and fed them this—this hyperactive, delusional, over-the-top view of the world. The Ravens have an image, have an ideal, and they love it. They believe in their own hype, in their fantasy, in their synchrony and their ugly toxic psychological incest.

This is where Riko and Kevin grew up, in the midst of this, the master's pet projects and the so-called heirs of Exy. #1 and #2, destined to be Ravens, destined to be Court, destined to be legends.

Someone forgot that they were supposed to be children first.

Rather, someone just didn't care.

Kevin came to Castle Evermore on the tail-end of his mother's death. Sick with grief and numb with the shock of sudden loss, he might've come out okay if Tetsuji wasn't a psychotic bastard, because Kevin knew Evermore & Tetsuji & Riko — not that well, because his mother didn't always have time to cross the pond to see her old friend, but they were at least familiar. But grief is a selfish, useless emotion at Evermore, and Kevin learned that lesson his first day. He had no space or time or room to grieve, and that wild, unresolved ache became an open wound that gave the Moriyamas a foothold into a battered soul.

The facts of life at Evermore: *Winning is everything. Exy is everything. Riko & Kevin will be the future of the school and the sport. They are the face of what is to come.*

The Ravens always knew Riko would be their captain one day, and they knew Kevin was Riko's right-hand man. They knew the two were Tetsuji's pet project and the culmination of everything they were doing. They knew Riko & Kevin never went anywhere alone, and they knew they never left Evermore. These were two little gods underfoot—off-limits, and very, very important. Whatever Riko and Kevin wanted, Riko and Kevin got, whether it was private lessons or access to notes and old games ((or Lydia Shetfield, when Riko decided he and Kevin ought to lose their virginity like all the other Ravens had)).

Riko and Kevin were in an awful place, two bits of coal under unfathomable pressure, destined to be diamonds if they didn't completely shatter first. Tetsuji treated them with spite and heavy hands, and the Ravens treated them as more than they were. At least Tetsuji wasn't allowed to hit them where anyone might see—the public was fascinated with these two prodigies, and their faces were in too many pictures. They needed to stay poised and perfect for interviews and stray photographs. Armpits to knees, however, were free game. If they fucked up, he'd fuck them up.

You will be perfect. You will do it again until it is perfect.

Again. Again. Again.

Again.

Imagine living underground with a violent hivemind that has put you on a pedestal, with a god that comes and goes with cutting words and a hefty stick. Imagine 16hr days, the occasional roadtrip to faraway stadiums, the flash of cameras and the awed speculation. The people who say “*but they are just children*” who are too quickly drowned out by “*the future of the sport.*”

You will do it again until it is perfect.

If it is not perfect you will not eat, you will not sleep.

*You waste everyone's time. You make a mockery of this sport. You are disgusting. **You are a disgrace.***

Having a cult fall in around you means nothing when your god cannot see you, when your sacrifices get spat on and your altars are kicked over no matter how well they are presented.

They should have shattered within a couple years. In a game of tug-o-war the rope never wins. Maybe all that saved them was each other, was the roles they fell into, the king and the prince, the captain and vice-captain, the master and the pet. This made sense. This was a safety net. These were lanes to stay within, lines they could color inside. *You lead, I'll follow. You speak, I'll*

answer: You smile, I'll nod. A moon orbiting its planet, desperate for an anchor, pulling the tide higher and higher. This was hell and they were in it together.

Together but not together, because Riko and Kevin knew from day one that they would never be equals.

Kevin didn't just learn Exy at Evermore; he learned how quickly to avert his eyes when Riko was angry and how to bite his tongue on everything he wanted to say. He took that terrible attitude out on the rest of the Ravens instead—where Riko was the haughty, refined brat, Kevin was the acerbic, condescending asshole. ((See also: why Riko was always more popular with the press and their fans)) They were ruthless perfectionists because they did not know how to be anything else, but one expected and one hungered and that was the critical difference in the end.

Kevin hated being Riko's pet, but at least Riko was easy. If Kevin remembered his place, Riko had no reason to hurt him. Riko was a safer bet than the master was, since Tetsuji was impossible to please no matter what they did. Kevin could survive two monsters only if one of them was dormant or otherwise entertained, so he bowed his head and did what he needed to do, and eventually he forgot he'd ever existed outside of Riko's circle. He stayed close enough that his leash wouldn't choke him and followed Riko to the top.

Riko was never kind to Kevin, but he was—for a while, at least—manageable. But the older they got, the more pressure that was applied to them, the addition of multiple teams and college classes, and the brutality that Riko could inflict on Jean without any recourse whatsoever, the more Riko started to fray at the seams, the more often the poison started to slip out, the harder it was to detect the cruelty before Riko lashed out with words or fists or racquets. But by then Kevin had forgotten how to fight back, so he cowered and hid and licked his wounds in private. This was his place. This was who they were. This was what Riko needed, and Exy needed Riko, and Kevin needed Riko. This was part of the deal.

His hand was not part of the deal.

Q: Can't remember if it's already been answered but: how did Riko break Kevin's hand?

A: See also: in which answers get away from me and I write more than you asked to know >>; whoops

The particulars have changed a few times over the years, partly due to location changes and partly just because. Originally he did it with an alarm clock, because originally the Ravens were already checked into a hotel room for their Christmas banquet. Riko slid something Kevin's way, waited for Kevin to reach for it, and used the alarm clock like a battering ram. Once, twice,

snap-crackle-pop, a blow to the face when Kevin dared cry out, when he dared protest this well-earned punishment.

For a while in-between Riko did it with his racquet, but somehow I doubt Kevin's fingers would've survived a full-on blow from something like that.

Most recently he did it by stomping the ever-living shit out of Kevin's hand. The master told them what the ERC was saying about Kevin, and he brought them to the court for a face-off. After he dismissed them for the night, Riko didn't make it further than the locker room before his temper snapped. He hit Kevin upside the face with his helmet to start the fight, and after landing enough blows to knock Kevin to his hands and knees, he just started stomping.

Kevin tried to pull away after that first blow, tried to ward Riko off with his good hand, tried apologizing, tried begging, tried anything, but—well, there's not much you can do against Riko when he's completely lost his shit, especially if you're not used to fighting back. Riko left Kevin a broken mess and went back to their room alone.

It was Jean's job to collect him later, and Jean who took a serious look at protruding bone and said,

"You're never going to play again, you know."

It was Jean who tried to clean a bit of the blood up and who attempted to put things to rights, because they both knew there was no way they could go to a hospital with this. It was Jean who watched and said nothing when Kevin's panic attack turned into a full-blown meltdown.

And then Kevin said,

"If you were ever friends with me, get him out of my room. I can't see him right now."

And once upon a time they were, even if that was so long ago, so Jean did as he was told and distracted Riko elsewhere. If Jean had known what Kevin was thinking, maybe he wouldn't have done it, because Jean suffered terribly when Riko realized Kevin was gone. But ignorance encourages cooperation, so Jean did as he was asked. Kevin stopped by his & Riko's room just long enough to get his wallet and a coat. He didn't look back on his way out of Evermore.

RIKO AND JEAN

Q: "and the brutality that Riko could inflict on Jean without any recourse whatsoever" Is there any chance we could get some detail of the things that exactly happened between these two? Or rather, the things Riko did to Jean? (I so just can't hate him tbh,)

A: There are two critical differences between Jean & Kevin that we should probably start with.

1. Kevin had a destiny. Kevin had a purpose. Kevin was part of the Plan and Tetsuji had wanted to acquire him. Kevin & Riko were meant to be Ravens, were meant to be legends, were meant to be the future of Exy. Jean was property, was less than property, was a thing with no rights. Jean was an afterthought, a boy with potential who was not otherwise required for any of Tetsuji's grand schemes. He did not volunteer for this nightmare. He was a transaction. He was payment for a debt—Moreau sold Jean to Tetsuji, and Tetsuji repaid the Moreau debt to Kengo in cash in exchange.

2. Neither Kevin nor Jean came to Evermore by choice, and neither one of them came at a good time in their lives, but Kevin came while he was sick with grief and Jean came angry and betrayed. No, *angry* is an understatement. Trap a cat in a shoebox, shake the shit out of it, and dare someone to open the lid again. Jean is the cat. Well, Jean was the cat, because imagine how well Tetsuji & Riko tolerated that shitty attitude and his flailing claws.

Tetsuji already had his hands full with the ERC, the fledgling Court, two prodigies, and the Ravens. He had no time or desire to train Jean. That meant Jean was Riko's responsibility, though he still suffered Tetsuji's wrath when his court performance wasn't up to snuff.

It was Riko's job to fix Jean's attitude. That took a while, because Jean had a lot of fight in him and Riko was still learning how far he could go, but Riko has a depth of cruelty Tetsuji does not. Tetsuji is merciless for a purpose. Riko is heartless because he enjoys it, because it pleases him, because it distracts him from the toxic heat licking at his smile and chewing up his chest.

If I tried to list everything Riko did to Jean over the years, I'd never get to sleep tonight, so we'll have to settle for some random examples. Here are a few numbers for you:

Six: the number of fingers Jean's had broken over the years. **Three:** the number he was ordered to break himself for Riko's amusement. **Zero:** the number of days he was allowed to miss practice for these injuries.

Four: the number of times Riko pushed Jean down a flight of stairs in Evermore. **Two:** the number of times Jean didn't ball up fast enough and bashed his head open on the concrete.

Two hundred and sixty-six: the total number of stitches Jean needed while under Riko's supervision, not including the ones he received after Kengo's death.

Ten: the number of times Riko tried waterboarding Jean. Once to see if it was as effective and traumatizing as the news made it out to be. Nine more times because it really, really was.

Sixteen: the age Jean was when Riko first ordered another Raven to fuck him.

((Riko will not engage in anything homosexual himself, but he is not above inflicting sexual trauma on others via others. See: Drake. See: Proust.))

Five: the number of times Riko passed Jean around. “Only” five, because **four:** the number of times Jean whispered *Please don’t do this to me*; **four:** the number of times Riko hit him for insubordination and ignored that haunted look in Jean’s eyes. The fifth time Jean didn’t break his own heart by fighting back. The fifth time he let the other Raven into his bed without a word or token protest, and that was boring as fuck, so Riko didn’t orchestrate a sixth demonstration.

One: the number of drafts in which Jean does not commit suicide.

If Renee hadn’t stolen Jean from the Ravens & Neil hadn’t bought his safety:

one hundred: the chance Jean would commit suicide graduation night.

Q: this was the only draft where Jean didn’t off himself; was there a draft in which Riko wasn’t killed?

A: The only draft where Riko lived was the unfinished comic draft where he was a cheating prick but not a total asshole. Every other draft he’s died—most of the time on-screen, a couple times off.

((the draft where he shot Kevin and the draft where he shot Neil, he died off-camera because there was no room to show both that and the necessary reactions to his actions))

((for the record, Neil survived that version, and the epilogue was him waking up in the hospital with his teammates waiting on him))

((Kevin did not survive))

THE TROJANS

TROJANS AND FOXES

Q: tbh i fell in love with the trojans from the start, and my love for them only augmented when Neil’s backliner (Alvarez?) said she’d love to play against the foxes the following year with the exact same number of players in the trojan’s line-up as them. so, does that game ever happen? and how does Jean collaborate with the trojans, seeing as the aggressive mentality and the toxic environment to which he’s used to are so very different from the trojans’?

A: The Trojans are sweethearts; hopefully they’ll keep it up throughout any & all future management changes.

The Trojans & Foxes do have a rematch the following year, albeit with different numbers – the Foxes have more players next year, so the Trojans are allowed to bring more to the court as well. This time the Trojans win, though it’s definitely a close call! The Foxes are happy with their

performance and with the Trojans' efforts, but losing there means going home – they draw straws for the second death match. So it's a little disappointing.

((USC goes on to win championships, soundly beating Penn State))

((Kevin is v v pleased))

((unrepentant fanboy))

Jean has a really rough time with the Trojans. I want to say “at first” but “at first” sounds so temporary, like a couple months of summer practices would be enough to really help him. In truth he has a rough time with them for the better part of his entire first year there.

He's had a pretty awful time of things, and everything in King's Men happened so fast – his abduction from Castle Evermore, his new unasked-for contract with Ichirou, the Ravens' defeat, Riko's death, and Tetsuji's resignation — after so many years of the same relentless abuse it is too much too soon for him to absorb. Hell, he and Kevin don't even talk about Riko or Riko's death until after the Foxes & Trojans face each other nearly a year later.

The good(??) news is that Riko's death kind of breaks something inside him. Breaks? Breaks is a strange word, but I don't have a better one. When Jean arrives in SoCal, he's pretty numb. *He is free and Riko is gone, he is free and Riko is gone, he is free???* It still feels like a trap. Riko is dead but the other shoe must drop at some point, right?

So yeah, Jean is a whole lot of Not Okay going into his new contract, but he's surrounded by a team that is both willing to absorb his hurt & rage and completely unwilling to tolerate Raven strategies & attitudes on their court. They can work around his sullen silences and smother his outbursts and stand calm in the face of his anger when it finally has to break, when their pacifism and good nature is just too much for him to take and Jean has to lash out, and then they can just pick up and keep moving like “OK but did that actually help?”

Jeremy occasionally appeals to Kevin for insight on how the Ravens' Nest worked so he can adjust his approach to Jean as necessary. Kevin helps where he can. Kevin is the one who warns Jeremy *he cannot go anywhere alone, we Ravens don't know how*. Jeremy wars with this concept for a while, because he doesn't want to encourage Jean to hang onto Raven ideologies, but he doesn't want to make the transition any harder than it has to be.

((That is one of the hardest things for Jean to adjust to, is the fact that the Trojans are allowed to do things outside of Exy that don't include each other. By the time he goes to California he's been away from the Ravens' hive mind for a couple months, but he's spent that time hiding in a bedroom at Abby's house. Being able to go to class or the grocery store or the gym without any of his teammates in attendance is just—unfathomable))

Renee is also hard at work behind the scenes, keeping in touch with Jean long-distance and giving him a safe place to vent about.

The further they get from Riko's death, the longer Jean is surrounded by the Trojans' easygoing attitudes, the more Jean talks to Renee and his new counselor, the easier it gets. Jean's fifth year is calmer than his fourth year was, though he'll never be true Trojan material. He's still not okay when he graduates, but he's significantly better, and he at least knows that he can maybe be okay one day.

LAILA AND ALVAREZ

Q: Just finished rereading the trilogy again and I was wondering if the USC goalkeeper Lalia and backliner Alvarez have any back stories?? :D

A: They don't, because Alvarez is one of the newest background characters in the story. Laila's made appearances in at least half of the drafts, but Alvarez didn't have a name until this last draft. Oops! :O

THEA MULDANI

Q: I think it was mentioned that theodora wears a necklace with her raven number on it, what was her number when she was with the ravens? how does she feel about the brutal raven way of life now that she's been graduated for a while, and what did she think of them after she found out what riko did to kevin's hand?

A: Thea is a Raven through & through. The longer she's away the more objective she might view some of it, but she'll also see the failings & miscommunications in her pro team and know that these things wouldn't exist in a team as well-oiled and co-dependent as the Ravens were. She's fiercely loyal to the Ravens til the end. She's furious at Riko for going so far, though she's not ignorant of his capacity of violence, but the shock of Riko's death takes a little edge off that hatred. After all, Kevin's playing again, so no harm no foul, right?

Her number was 14 ~~for reasons~~

LAZARUS

In the predawn light, Edgar Allan wasn't much to look at.

On paper it wasn't far behind Palmetto State in terms of enrollment and campus size, but whereas Palmetto State was built on sprawling land with low buildings and open lawns, Edgar Allan had taken a compact, vertical approach. That wasn't to say the architecture wasn't to be admired; even Renee, who had no eye for such things, could see the meticulous and ostentatious care put into the school's appearance. A pretentious coffin, Jean had called it a month ago, when Renee asked after it. Fanciful and grim, she'd thought then, but now she understood.

Her phone hummed in her hand, but Renee finished her slow sweep of the area before looking down at it. At this hour it would only be one person: she'd kept Stephanie up all night, needing another pair of eyes to guide her and lay the groundwork for this reckless stunt. Their call lasted most of the five-hour drive here from the cabin. Later Renee would apologize for the hours of lost sleep, and Stephanie would brush away her guilt and concern with the same easy care she always did. Now was too soon for any such kindness.

"It's sent," Stephanie's text said.

Renee held down until a heart appeared and slid off the car to her feet. Gravel crunched beneath her shoes as she went for the front door. There was an actual knocker on the door, but it wasn't likely to get her far. Renee put her thumb to the doorbell instead. The carved wood muffled most of the noise, but she heard the distant tones echoing down the hall. Renee let them fade, then pressed again. Two seconds later, again. And again. And again.

It took a few minutes, but at long last there was a sharp clack of the locks snapping out of place. Louis Andritch yanked open the door in a half-undone bathrobe, looking more like a harried professor than a campus president.

"Yes?" he demanded. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Jean Moreau is dying," Renee said.

Andritch stared at her like she was speaking a foreign language, mouth still half-open on an abandoned tirade. She kept her stance neutral and her hands loosely folded in front of her as she waited for him to finally clue in on what she'd said.

"Excuse me?" he finally managed. "What did you say to me?"

"Jean Moreau is dying," Renee said again, with an unhurried calm that ate away at her heart. Lashing out at Andritch prematurely would tilt this entire fiasco against her, she knew, but without Stephanie's steady voice in her ear she had nothing to keep her fear at bay. Everything hinged on getting to Jean. If she could just do that, nothing and no one could stop her. This was the only part that Renee couldn't control.

Renee held Andritch's gaze as she said, "Exy team, your perfect Court backliner. He is dead or dying as we speak, and I need you to take me to him."

"Listen," Andritch said, putting a hand out like he could ward off anything else Renee had to say. "I thank you for your concern, Miss...?" She held out her student ID and driver's license,

but he only gave them a quick glance. “If there was a problem with one of my teams, my staff would have already informed me. I assure you I will look into it, but—”

Renee saw the door start to close and moved into the doorway to catch it. “Mr. Andritch,” she said, in as pleasant a tone as she could manage, “I drove through the night for the slim chance of saving his life. I would prefer you escort me to Castle Evermore now, but if you would rather wait until your school makes the morning news that is your choice.” He frowned at her, not following, but Renee didn’t wait to be asked. “An article is queued to send to a half-dozen sites, and the author is prepared to give Kathy Ferdinand the scoop for her morning show.”

“Where are you even getting this information?” Andritch demanded, and Renee tapped through her phone with her free hand to send a short X out. “These are some serious accusations you are leveling at me, young lady, and I do not appreciate being strongarmed.”

“I would rather not do this,” Renee said. “We both know how much money is riding on championships this year regardless of the outcome. Our schools have too much to gain by seeing this through to the end. But I will not sacrifice Jean. Help me save him, and we can both forget this conversation ever happened. Please.”

Andritch’s phone started ringing before she was finished. He ignored her in favor of answering it with a harried, “Yes?” He tried again to close the door, but Renee braced it with a hand and foot. He fixed her a warning look she wasn’t cowed by. “Yes, hello? Can you give me just a—”

Andritch went still and calm as he listened, and Renee stared him down as Stephanie went up one side of him and down the other. She counted seconds between his “This is highly irregular” and “What proof do I have that this is not some cockamamie prank” protests, and they added up to so many minutes of wasted time Renee was tempted to leave him here.

The first plan had been to bypass Andritch entirely and go straight to Evermore. Stephanie had talked her down from that, careful not to ask how Renee would circumvent the security system there. They needed Andritch on their side. They needed a credible witness. Without him they had nothing. Even if she could get to Jean on her own—*they cannot stop me, Mom*—how would she keep him? Renee knew Stephanie was right, just as she knew the nearest hardware store wouldn’t open for another hour. She was not above breaking into it, but the consequences would hurt them all in the long run.

At last Andritch hung up. There was a sour look on his face that didn’t match the fear in his eyes, and Renee saw the tension in his imperious gesture to enter his front hall. The *what if* had taken hold; whether Andritch was more worried about his student or his school’s reputation she did not know or care so long as she got the desired results. Renee stepped in with a polite “Thank you” and stood off to one side so he could close and lock the door again.

Andritch ignored her in favor of making another call. “Coach Moriyama, this is Louis. I need to have a meeting with one of your Ravens this morning, Jean Moreau.” He listened for a moment, and his eyebrows went up in surprise. “New York? Oh, I am sorry to hear that. Of

course, family must come first. You have my condolences for your loss. Yes, of course. Yes, I can reschedule, it's not that pressing. We can discuss it when you are back in town."

Force, then, Renee thought wearily, but then Andritch hung up and pointed at her. "Do not leave this spot. I am going to get dressed and call security."

And check his email, most likely, because Stephanie would have sent him a preview of her page-long exposé. Abby had reluctantly loaned them photographs from Kevin's first night with the Foxes, leery of betraying Kevin's trust by releasing them but trusting Renee and Stephanie to win Andritch over before they were forced to go public.

Andritch's phone rang again before he was halfway up the stairwell. "Hello? Coach Wymack, you said?"

The rest of the conversation was muffled by distance. Renee hummed quietly to herself so she wouldn't ask him to perhaps be a bit more urgent about the situation, and then her phone buzzed against her fingers. She opened it to a query from Stephanie and tapped out a quick update. She didn't mean to click over to Jean's message next, but a second later it was staring up at her.

Kengo is dead, first. And then: *Thank you.*

Two words that meant nothing, that meant everything, when just a few days prior Neil had offered Andrew a threadbare smile and *Thank you, you were amazing.* before getting ripped out of their lives with violent force. *Thank you, goodbye. Goodbye. Goodbye.*

Renee closed her phone and squeezed it until her knuckles ached. She looked toward the stairs again. She wasn't sure if a "Hurry" or "I will meet you at the stadium" would make it out of her first, but then Andritch came down the stairs so fast it was a wonder he didn't tilt forward and fall flat on his face. Renee made a note to gift Abby a spa day as soon as this was over.

"You will follow my car," Andritch said, snatching his keys off their hook with such force he nearly pulled the rack off the wall as well. He got the door and shooed her out, and Renee went for Andrew's car with long strides. Andritch needed another moment to field another call, but he pulled his car door closed so hard Renee heard it over the Maserati's engine. Finally, *finally* Andritch got on the road, and Renee pulled out behind him.

Because Castle Evermore doubled as the home court for the national team, it was set a short drive from the rest of campus. Renee had never seen it before, but it was hard to miss the imposing building with its spired corners. There was no color on it; from the foundation to the towers it was painted a forbidding solid black.

Pretentious coffin, she silently agreed, and then, *But not yours.*

The entire thing was surrounded by a tall fence lined with barbed wire. Andritch passed a half-dozen gates before slowing to a stop at one, and he leaned out his window to tap away at a keypad. The gate remained closed, and Andritch tried again. After a few attempts he got out of his car, like somehow the angle of his arm was to blame for this. Renee assumed he had few reasons to come out this way, but that he hadn't secured the codes on the drive over was frustrating.

Movement in her rearview mirror had her glancing back as an unfamiliar car pulled up behind her. The driver's door opened, and she saw enough lettering to guess it was campus security. Perhaps Andritch's incompetence was just show, then, a means of stalling her until he could eject her from campus. She relaxed her grip on the steering wheel and waited for the guard to try her door, but he went past her without slowing. Andritch got out of his way to let him have a go at it, but he had no more luck than Andritch had. After two attempts, the guard had no choice but to phone his superiors.

Renee glanced past them at the fence. She gauged the height and tugged idly at her jacket, wondering if it was thick enough to protect her from the barbed wire along the top. Likely not, but before she could commit to trying it out the gate finally rattled open. The guard went jogging past again so he could get back in his car, and the three drove into the Ravens' guarded lot at last.

The spots closest to the stadium were all taken by a line of identical black cars, so they double-parked behind them. The security guard sent a curious look at Renee as she joined him and Andritch at the door, but he was too busy trying to get them into the Nest to ask questions. Unsurprisingly he needed to call in for this access code as well, and he held the door open for both of them when he managed to get it unlocked.

Renee expected to find a hallway; what she saw was a dark stairwell leading down. Red lighting on the ceiling did nothing to chase away the shadows. Renee was tempted to ask Andritch if he had honestly signed off on this thinking it was a good idea, but he looked just young enough she assumed he'd inherited this madness. Andritch led them down without comment or hesitation, so Renee trailed after him. One more door awaited them at the bottom, but the guard hadn't bothered to hang up his call and he called out a code to Andritch from the rear.

If Renee had expected the Nest to be an improvement, she was immediately and sorely disappointed. The rooms they passed through in search of a stray Raven were spacious, but the ceilings were too low and the entire thing was done in Raven black and red. It was a minor blessing that these ceiling lights were normal, but whoever installed the bulbs had chosen a weaker wattage that let shadows collect in all the corners.

Renee keenly understood why the Ravens spent so much time on the court, if this was their only other option. She had been here for only twenty seconds, and she was ready to never come here again. Jean had told her the Ravens only left the Nest for away games and classes, and she wasn't sure if that made this better or worse: she couldn't imagine coming back to this pit willingly, but the thought of being trapped here almost every hour of the day turned her heart cold.

Raucous laughter led them to a kitchen at last, and the conversation died when Andritch stepped inside. Renee looked past him to the four Ravens gathered around a square table. She had one moment to note their identical black clothes and another to take in their stunned expressions before one got up from the table with lethal intent.

“Who the fuck—”

“Your campus president,” Andritch cut him off. “I am here to see Moreau. Where is he?”

The four exchanged baffled looks before volunteering, “He’s in Red Hall.”

“Show me,” Andritch said.

No one seemed in a hurry to obey, but after a pointed, “You’re already up,” from one of the Ravens at the table, the first man scowled and crossed the room. He put a finger in Renee’s face as soon as he reached them.

“You’re a Fox,” he said. “You don’t belong here.”

She was idly impressed he recognized her so easily, but considering how sour things were between the teams now perhaps it was to be expected. “Neither do any of you.”

“Right now,” Andritch said before the Raven could respond.

He settled for giving her an ugly look and pushing her roughly out of his way. Andritch snapped at him for his aggression as he followed, but Renee let it go in one ear and out the other. Signage on the wall pointed out the directions to Red and Black Halls, and they went down the one that would lead them to Jean. Despite the name, there was no more abundance of color here than there had been anywhere else. Most of the doors they passed were open, but Renee only spared a couple glances at the dark bedrooms.

Finally their unwilling guide stopped in a doorway and hit the side of his fist against the frame. “Andritch is your problem now,” he said to whoever was inside, and he flicked a last annoyed look at the president in question. “Zane is Jean’s roommate. He’ll find him for you. I’ve only got ten minutes left of lunch before I’m due on the court, so I’m leaving.”

“Your name first,” Andritch said.

“Williams,” the man said. “Brayden. Striker, number nineteen. Done here?”

“For the moment,” Andritch said, with a tone that said this attitude was going to dearly cost Brayden when Andritch could spare enough time for him. Renee was expecting his shove as he went back down the hall the way they’d come, and she kept her feet planted so he couldn’t knock her over. She didn’t spare him another thought but followed Andritch to the doorway.

Identical beds were set against opposite walls, with two nightstands and tiny desks between them. Only one man was inside, and he wasn’t Jean. Renee glanced toward the empty half of the room and was surprised to see Jean had decorations up. Postcards were pinned to the walls, and the top of his nightstand was littered with either stickers or magnets. The urge to study his precious possessions was as fleeting as it was inappropriate, and Renee forcibly returned her attention to the greater problem: Jean wasn’t there.

“—he is?” Andritch was asking.

Zane didn’t answer immediately, but the look that crossed his face told Renee everything she needed to know. The Ravens they’d met in the kitchen seemed more annoyed and bewildered by this intrusion than anything; Zane’s hesitation now was a deeper understanding. He knew exactly why they’d come. Renee assumed he had a better vantage point for Jean’s ongoing trauma as his roommate.

“He’ll be with Riko,” Zane said at last. “They’re partners.”

“I don’t care whose partner he is,” Andritch said. “Someone is going to find him for me.”

Zane got up from his desk but sent a long look at Renee. “She shouldn’t be here.”

Andritch snapped his fingers to get Zane’s attention. “That is not your call. Move it.”

Zane led them to Black Hall. Another dormitory, Renee realized, with only one door closed at the far end. Zane knocked, listened, and knocked again. He checked his watch, tipped his head back to think, and said, “First shift, but what day is it? They might be finishing up on the court right now. Come on.”

As soon as he stepped past her, Renee went to the door. The knob turned easily under her hand. For one moment she was surprised at Riko’s boldness, that he genuinely trusted people to stay out of his space out of some semblance of respect. Then she had the door open, and the sight waiting for her erased every thought from her mind.

Zane caught her arm to haul her back. Renee didn’t even feel his skin under her knuckles when she put everything behind her fist. Zane wasn’t expecting it and wasn’t at all braced for it, and he nearly took Andritch down with him as he was thrown back.

The guard moved to intervene, but Renee was in the room and out of reach before he could get his hands on her. She let their outraged demands wash over her and was only distantly aware of how abruptly the shouting stopped when they followed her into Riko’s room. The only thing that mattered was the body on Riko’s floor.

Not a body, Renee thought fiercely, and willed it to be true, but how could it be true when Jean looked like this? That Riko had just left him here like this was almost as horrifying as the state he was in, and she was trembling as she knelt on the ground by his head. She took five seconds to calm herself to stillness before reaching for him, and she pressed her fingers to his bruised throat in search of a pulse. The relief it sent through her was almost sharp enough to bite away her grief, and Renee sent up a quick and desperate prayer of thanks.

“Jean,” she said softly, then louder: “Jean. Can you hear me?”

“Good god above,” the security guard finally said. “Is he—”

“Alive,” Renee said, and was just mad enough to add, “For now.” She looked toward the men standing across from her: the horrified guard who hadn’t signed up for this before he had his morning coffee, the Raven who looked uncomfortable but not surprised or upset, and Andritch, whose blank-faced horror could have been for his mangled student but was just as likely for his crashing career.

“What happened here?” Andritch demanded.

Zane lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Rough scrimmage, maybe?” At the foul look Andritch sent him, he scowled and looked away. “I don’t know, man. He hasn’t been my partner in a year now.”

“I am taking him home,” Renee said. “Help me get him to my car.”

Andritch didn’t move. “We need to call a doctor.”

“Josiah lives on campus,” Zane volunteered. “I’ve got his number saved.”

"He is coming with me," Renee said.

"You can't have him." Zane flicked her a venomous look. "He belongs here."

That he was angrier over her intrusion than had what happened to his own teammate shook Renee to the core, and for one frightening moment she felt all the years of anger management and therapy start to coil undone. Maybe Zane saw something change on her face, because he took a half-step back from her and tensed for a fight.

"You cannot stop me," Renee said, in a tone far steadier than she felt. "If you try, I promise you will regret it. Mr. Andritch, you know the terms for my discretion."

"Now listen," Andritch started, but there was more uncertainty than bluster in his voice. If he actually had a coherent thought to follow that, he couldn't seem to get it out. When Renee flicked him a hard look he was staring down at Jean's broken, bloody form. "I don't know if we can even safely move him. It would be best to get someone here first to make sure he's stable. Josiah, you said?" he asked Zane.

"Head nurse," Zane said, digging his phone out of his pocket.

"I left my team nurse at the hotel before coming over here," Renee lied as she pulled out her own phone. She hated making Jean a spectacle, but she knew she needed evidence. She took a few pictures of his bloodied, broken face. "I can send these to Kathy Ferdinand for her morning show, or I can delete these in the parking lot. Give me one Raven, or I will take them all."

"I don't appreciate your tone, young lady," Andritch said. She half-expected him to try intimidating her to silence, but perhaps he knew it was useless. He could try to confiscate her phone and throw her off-campus, but she'd set too many pieces in motion already. She didn't technically need Jean or these photos to destroy his school and he knew it. The best he managed was, "Let's not jump to any rash action."

Jean's fingers twitched against the carpet as their voices finally started to rouse him. Renee carefully peeled his hair out of the caked blood on his face and smoothed careful knuckles over his temple.

"Hey," she said, softening her tone immediately. "Jean, can you hear me? We're going to move you just in a moment. I'm sorry, but it's going to hurt. It's going to really hurt, and I can't stop that. I need you to bear it a little longer, okay?"

At long last Andritch chose his side with a tense, "Let's get him out of here."

The guard dragged Zane with him as he approached, and Renee moved out of their way. It took them a moment to figure out how they were supposed to get Jean off the floor. He didn't stir at the feel of their hands on him, but as soon as they hoisted him off the carpet, he made a wretched noise in the back of his throat that had Renee's eyes stinging.

"It's okay," she promised him, unsure if he could even hear her. "It's okay. It's going to be okay."

"—ry," Jean mumbled, so faint Renee could barely hear him. "Sorry, I'm—" the rest got swallowed up by another pained noise as the guard shifted his grip, and Renee locked her fingers together before she could reach for him.

Andritch sent Renee ahead of him so he could take the rear and focus on his phone. From the sound of it he was rounding up the Ravens' other coaches and calling them back to Evermore for an emergency meeting. Renee kept moving, trying to ignore the agonized sounds Jean was choking on as he was carried after her. She wanted to ask them to be more careful; she knew just from looking at Jean that they couldn't be careful enough.

Getting him up the steep stairs was the worst part, and Renee's cheeks were damp with silent tears when she finally pushed open the last door. As soon as the men were clear of the door she hurried over to Andrew's car. It took only a bit of jostling to slide the passenger seat back on its rails, and she tugged the latch until she could lay it as flat as it would go.

Jean was boneless when they finally got him settled. Renee saw the unnatural way his head lolled to one side and feared the worst, but when she squeezed past Zane to check on him, she could still find a pulse. Unconscious from the pain, then, which was only a half-step better. It was six hours and change from West Virginia to South Carolina. Abby had offered to meet her here, and Renee should have agreed, but she was desperate to get Jean out of the state before Riko and his uncle figured out how to respond.

"You'll keep us updated?" Andritch said. He sounded calm, but she saw the nervous way he turned his class ring on his little finger as he studied her.

"Hourly reports," Renee agreed as she pushed the passenger door shut. He was standing close to her, so she obediently tilted her phone screen his way and deleted her photographs in front of him. It wouldn't stop her from taking more once she got somewhere safe, but it was a token of good faith and the best he could hope for. "We appreciate your cooperation. Please feel free to delete the email you received this morning and contact Coach Wymack if you have any additional concerns."

"You're making a mistake," Zane warned her. "You will regret this."

Renee met his cold stare with a cool look of her own. "Your captain is free to take his grievances up with me if he has something to say about it. I'm sure he knows where to find me." She didn't wait for a response but looked at Andritch. "If we're finished here, I will take the code for the outer gate."

The guard had to call his office again to get it for her, and Renee committed it to memory as she got in the car and pulled away. She had six numbers tapped into the keypad when the stadium door crashed open, and Renee glanced at her rearview mirror to see Riko in the doorway. He was dressed in full court gear minus his helmet, and the distance between them couldn't hide the absolute rage on his face when he followed Zane's pointing finger to her car. He took a couple steps in her direction like he wanted to chase her down, and Renee quickly put in the last two numbers.

The gate rattled open, and Renee flashed Riko a peace sign out the window as she put the pedal to the floor. Unnecessary, she knew, but she could worry about her attitude later. All that mattered now was getting Jean to South Carolina. She had the window closed before they reached the interstate and called Stephanie on speaker.

"I've got him," she said. "We're on our way south."

"How is he?" Stephanie asked. "How are you?"

"Oh, Mom," Renee said, and risked a glance over at Jean's battered form. With the windows closed the smell of blood was thick enough to choke on. "I don't know how he's still alive."

"God's not done with that boy yet," Stephanie said. "Drive safe, you hear me? I know you were up all night. If you start getting tired, you call me to keep you awake or you make sure you pull over and rest a bit. You can't help him if you go off the road."

"I know," Renee said. "I'll be careful, I promise."

"I'm proud of you, honeybug," Stephanie said. "I love you. Be safe."

"Love you." Renee clicked her phone closed and dropped it into the cup holder between the seats. She reached out blindly for Jean, needing to check his pulse one last time, and thought she felt a hum against her fingertips as Jean tried to stir. "Sleep, Jean," she urged him, thinking of the lone packet of painkillers in the bottom of her purse. "Sleep, and I'll get us home."

"—ome," was the slurred agreement, and Renee turned her attention back to the endless drive ahead of them.

NORA AND THE FOXES

FANCAST

Q: I'm new to the books and going through tags and I had a question? You have casts for the Foxes but not for Coach Wymack or Abby or Rico. Do you have actors in mind for them??

A: *Ack*

OK um so

Technically yes and technically no, and a few of these choices were made so long ago that their actors/actresses are now too old to be valid.

The only characters I ever pinned down with 100% certainty and devotion were Andrew & Aaron Minyard. And honestly I'm a little leery of opening that subject because Tumblr has given him an alternative cast choice and I don't want to argue with their opinion. To each his & her own, yes? :D :D :D

Once upon a time I wanted Sean Patrick Flanery for Wymack because I was in a Boondock Saints phase, but I never could reconcile my mental image of Wymack with any particular actor. Watch any sports movie ((does anyone watch sports movies besides me? *We Are Marshall?* *Glory Road?* *Invincible?* Anyone????)) and any of those coaches would be acceptable, because in the end Wymack was more an idea, a forceful but well-intentioned personality, than a particular face.

Years and years and years ago I considered Kristen Bell for Dan, but to be honest I am in love with the new idea of Missy Peregrym because she looks like someone who takes no survivors.

I used to think Lucas Black could pull off Seth, but he always looked as old as he did grouchy. Brooke Rilling would make a stellar Allison Reynolds because she does not look like the sort of person who'd body-slam you on a court and call you every foul name under the sun. She looks every inch the pampered princess, which was the facade Allison maintained even after getting cut from her parents' inheritance.

Renee was harder to pin down because my main concern back then was who could pull off her hairstyle. Now and then I type white blonde rainbow hair into a search engine in hopes of finding the right face, but for the most part I've just given up.

For a while I thought Chace Crawford could be Neil, but he aged so quickly he lost pretty much all hopes I had for him. I briefly considered Zac Efron, too, just because of his eyes, but.

Matt, Kevin, and Nicky I never decided on. Unfortunately their comic forms left too large of a lasting impression, and I never could let go of their original versions to find RL alternatives.

Riko I didn't pin down on purpose, because the last time I looked at cast choices I was really big into Tenimyu and I thought that would be a *terrible* idea.

Me: So, we're not gonna talk about this thing

andrewjminyard: Nah, let's talk about that thing

Me: This sounds like a terrible idea, but OK, have 6 pictures to keep you company tonight—

Nora's
version
of
Andrew
& Aaron
Minyard

KEVIN/NEIL/ANDREW

Q: kevin/andrew/neil is my lifesblood tho pls tell me all your headcanons about it???how do the other foxes react??how does riko react when he realizes not only did kevin leave him but he's apparently hooking up with andrew and neil?does the press ever find out?tell me MORE please

A: Oh, bb, my love, I wish I had more to give you.

Unfortunately I don't, because all the threesome headcanons are still canon in a way—the only critical difference is that Kevin has been surgically removed. Everything people have asked about Foxes post TKM & everything people have asked about Neil & Andrew down the road, they're all old, valid futures that once had Kevin in them. If you add Kevin back to any of them and adjust for his narcissism then you're on the same path I was once on.

These are my headcanons; these are my futures. All I've done is cut a piece out and given him his own path to follow. I can't create new headcanons specifically tailored to them because reopening that relationship undoes all the agonizing work it took to make the last draft. I'm sorry. Perhaps it would've been better if I'd never mentioned that the three of them used to be an item.

As far as the other Foxes reacting, they were pretty startled, because they knew about KxN before they knew about KxA or AxN, so when they found out about KxA they were a little alarmed on Neil's behalf. Neil made it clear he had no issues with them hooking up. It was a

topic of great interest for the Foxes for a while because they'd known gays, they'd known straights, they'd known bis, but they hadn't yet met anyone who could hook up with two different people at the same time and make it work. So this was fascinating to them, and they observed them with great interest.

The press does not technically find out, because Kevin is not interested in inviting prejudice and neither Andrew nor Neil are the sort to invite the public's judging eye into their business. Maybe down the road someone will realize that they share an apartment between seasons, but none of the three are going to admit to being anything more than teammates. Their business is their business and no one else's; they neither want nor need the world to pass judgment on what makes them whole.

Q: okay okay but pls talk to me about a semi-happy au where the kevin/andrew/neil threesome happens (and how kevin's reaction to riko's death and his feelings towards riko in general factors in)

A: TBH there's not much of an AU to talk about here? Everything that happened to the Foxes post-King's Men would still stand. The only difference is that Kevin would be with Andrew & Neil instead of off with Thea somewhere. The shared apartment they came to between seasons/training sessions would exist, and they'd be a tangled mess of grouchy obsession.

As far as Kevin's reaction to Riko's death, Neil attempts to understand it whereas Andrew doesn't even try. It makes for a tense few weeks, because Kevin's not going to apologize for grieving and neither Neil nor Andrew are the sort to accept apologies from him anyway. But they get over it in this alternate future because they need each other and they're used to working around Kevin's issues.

Q: "remind me to tell you some time about the AU scenario where Neil & Andrew had to react to the news of Kevin's sudden death" Oh my gosh, please! That sounds devastating and I need it in my life

A: WHY YES THANK YOU FOR ASKING LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

*((Here's the short***** version of it, anyway, because the long version with actual narrative & dialogue is on the other computer. y'know, the psycho computer that overheats so badly the clock actually slows down 30-60min so I never have a clue what time it is or why files aren't saving or why it's making strange noises at me. whatever, haunted systems = conversations for another day))*

((***** added after the post was written: WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT MY DEFINITION OF SHORT???)

Did you know that half of the actual canon drafts of Foxhole Court ended with Kevin's death? It was kind of a messy thing back then, with the Ravens & Foxes getting into a brawl on the court after the Ravens' loss, and security guards getting on the court with the referees to try and break things up, and Riko getting ahold of one of the guard's guns—and Riko turning that gun on Neil because fuck this mouthy kid and Kevin doing the one real definitive defiant moment of his life by stepping into the path of the bullet.

((The last two drafts had Riko turning on Kevin, and Neil stepping into the way, because that was "character growth", Neil moving into the path of destruction instead of shying away from it, **he didn't run**, whatever, IDK, boring boring boring.))

((Boring because he lived through it and there was a cheesy epilogue of the Foxes visiting Neil in the hospital and Andrew chowing down on the chocolates some fans had sent))

ANYWAY at one point, back when Kevin & Neil & Andrew had their obsessive threesome thing going on, I decided to figure out how Andrew & Neil would react to the death of Kevin. And here such a scenario seems a little shallow because few ((none??)) of you have seen the drafts where the three of them were together, where Neil was "the other woman" of their relationship, showing up when Andrew & Kevin couldn't commit to each other but couldn't let go of each other either.

((I am usually a firm believer in "Let's not dredge up old drafts once final drafts have been decided upon but in this case let's make an exception?? We'll just pretend we didn't delve into this because final!draft Kevin is straight af the boring prude))

((((says the aro-ace author))))

Kevin & Andrew had the hots for each other since the story transitioned from comic to book, and their obsession lasted up until the second to last draft. Andrew refused to commit or give ground to Kevin's advances because 1) as far as he was concerned, he was just a stand-in for Riko, another psycho athlete to tell Kevin what to do and maybe fuck him on the side, 2) obviously the only thing Kevin really wanted from him was what he could do on the court, and 3) previous trauma made it difficult for him to imagine that anything healthy could come of the attraction.

Kevin confronted Andrew at Eden's Twilight once—he'd come to PSU to get away from Riko, choosing to hide behind Wymack, but Andrew was the first thing in his life that made him want more than what he'd always had. He knew Andrew was interested; he just couldn't figure out why Andrew wouldn't give an inch and let Kevin in. ***I know I'm right, so why are you fighting me, what are you so afraid of)***

ANYWAY

I really should go back to answering Asks in the morning, I think I was less meandering then. But I wanted to connect the death AU to what it stemmed from, because Kevin's death is unfortunate in general but it isn't tragic like it was the first time I wrote it out—when Andrew had wanted Kevin for over a year but feared wanting anything after what he'd been through, when Neil fell for Kevin but belatedly realized he might be a stand-in for the person Kevin couldn't have, when Andrew tried figuring out what Kevin saw in Neil and fell for Neil despite everything telling him *stop stop stop bad idea* — when Neil understood that they were all so broken that it was unfair to ask one person to be enough to put them back together again. When Neil confessed to Kevin *I kissed him* and Kevin was more exasperated than irritated because Neil got so easily what Andrew wouldn't give Kevin.

It was a tangled mess back then—winning Andrew over bit by agonizing bit, working around his efforts to not be caught alone with them, offering every olive branch they could think of and trying to prove themselves sincere, trying to prove this wasn't about Exy, that Andrew wasn't a substitute for Riko.

Riko nearly destroying everything because he traded one night with Andrew for the safety of the team, Aaron & Andrew's ugly tragedy, Andrew getting so close to breaking that the only way out was breaking down, Kevin punching Riko on live TV for what he'd done, Bee being the first person who could hold Andrew up and hold him together, Neil & Kevin starting over from ground zero in winning Andrew's trust))

((What am I supposed to do with two lost causes, Bee?))

((I think you should let them in))

((You don't really think so.))

*((She hesitated, testing the lines, wondering how lines could possibly exist in a situation like this, and erred on the side of love. **If I had any reason to doubt them, I would tell you. You know I would.**))*

They were all so obsessed with each other back then. They were nothing without each other, incomplete without the three of them.

So in true Nora fashion, I took one away to see what happened.

What happened was that Neil & Andrew had a fierce fucking falling out, because Andrew refused to deal with the concept of loss, much less the reality of it, and Neil couldn't handle losing someone else who was so important to him. They couldn't face reality so they turned on each other instead, with ugly words and angry hands and accusations that would take years to

finally smooth away. Neil tried to get on the court because that was what Kevin could want, and Andrew accused him of being the same as Kevin was, more interested in a game than the people involved.

And Neil just—disappeared. He took his contacts and his know-how and he left without warning/

They couldn't fix this thing or face this thing together, so it made sense to him for them to deal with it apart. But Andrew, who'd never really lost anyone who'd mattered, lost Kevin & Neil in quick succession, and he imploded. Wymack & Abby & Betsy did their damndest to keep him on an even keel but Andrew went full steam ahead into self-destructive mode. Violence and drugs and drinking and it was a spiral down down down down down. The Foxes searched high and low for any sign of Neil but of course they couldn't find him, because they didn't have the right contacts in the right circles and because Neil had done this too many times before to be caught by anyone less than the best.

Neil was gone for the better part of a year, but just when Andrew hit that edge of pull back or fall forever, Neil finally returned.

And they had to face it at long last—what they were together with Kevin, what they were without him, what they'd be if they lost each other for good. Andrew swore up and down that if Neil ever left him again he would hunt him down and kill him, and Neil knew if he ever left again he'd have to kill himself because he could barely survive a life without one of them. Living without both wasn't worth the struggle. It was an ugly, awful reunion, because those two are the least capable people in the world at vocalizing their needs and emotions, but for once they both had to tell the truth before they lost each other for good.

They ended up together, but they were still broken, and it was years, and years, and years before they were even halfway to fixed.

SEQUEL

Q: Your books are awesome, i can't Live without them. Are you going to write another book about the foxes or are you writing a new story? Can i ask you something? Can you post something about Andrew and Neil?Something after the end of the king's men?

A: Thank you for taking the time to read the books! I'm really glad you enjoyed them. We're done with the Foxes' books, so I've sort-of moved on to other projects.

Uhh not sure what exactly to write, to be honest! We've dabbled a little bit in their future lives as far as their future teams & their domestic lives, etc, but beyond that.. Was there something in particular you were curious about?

INSPIRATION BEHIND EXY

Q: What inspired you to develop Exy?

A: The easiest response is: *extreme laziness*.

I wanted to do a comic about a high school sports team, but using a real sport required extensive research & playing by the established rules. I was like “eff all that work, I just wanna draw dudes kissing” so I made up a sport in a fit of “I DO WHAT I WANT”.

WHY A PSEUDONYM

Q: I gather that Nora Sakavic is not your real name, yes? What made you decide to write under a pseudonym? How did you choose this one, if you don't mind me asking? Have you written anything else under a different name/do you plan to?

A: Correct, it's a pseudonym. The Foxhole Court was a little too crazy & a little too personal; I didn't want to share it with the people I knew in real life. It was easier to just put it up under a different name. The name itself has meaning, at least to me. The only other names I've used were for fanfics in old fandoms; there's nothing else original floating around out here. One day I'd like to publish under my real name, but that's a ways off I think.

WHAT CAME FIRST

Q: I have a question about writing TFC in general: what was first, characters or story? I mean, did you thought "I want to write about this and this" and then fit Foxes and their characters into what you've been writing or you first created Neil and rest and have their personalities and them build the story?

A: TFC came from the simple line of thought: “I want to write a comic about gay athletes”. Neil & Kevin came next, the other Foxes showed up as obligatory teammates, and 400 pages into the first draft of the comic there still wasn't a real story, just a drawn-out series of events. The actual quasi-coherent storyline came several drafts later.

COMIC VERSION

Q: so I'm very curious about the fact the foxhole court started out as a comic. were you also the artist for this comic? are there still existing pages of this somewhere? if so, would you be open to showing a little bit to us?

A: The original draft got chunked in the trash during one of the moves, and I have only scraps of the second or third draft. I'd have to dig 'em up, and they're absolutely awful, but. Yeah, I was the artist for all the drafts. ((My sisters are artsy, I just sit here and attempt to ruin lives via words))

Q: Nora! Nora wait! Before you step away from the fox kids, could we see your renditions of them from the comic?? It would be so, sooo soooooo wonderful to have a visual to go with all the intense feels! 2016 is not for another 24 hours... so I'm crossing my fingers. :D Thank you Nora, you radiant butterfly, and best of luck with your new projects!

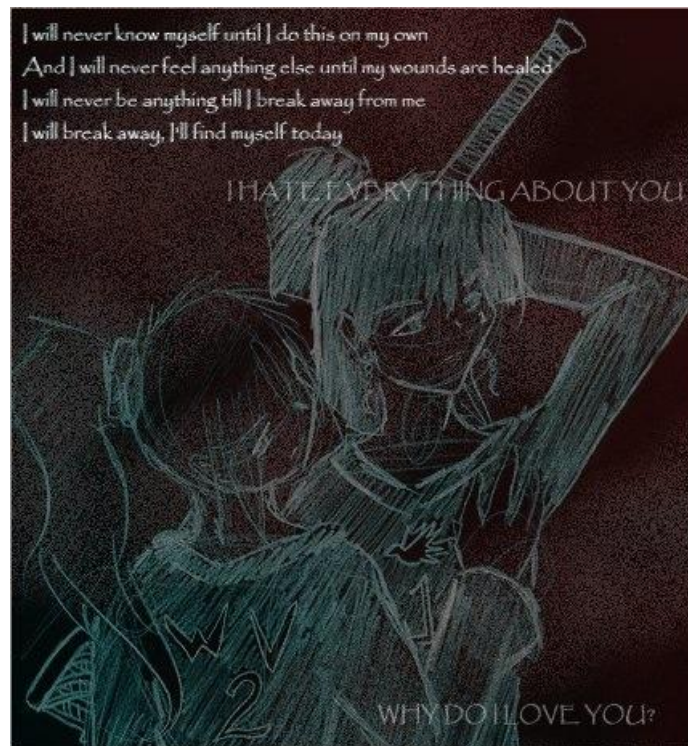
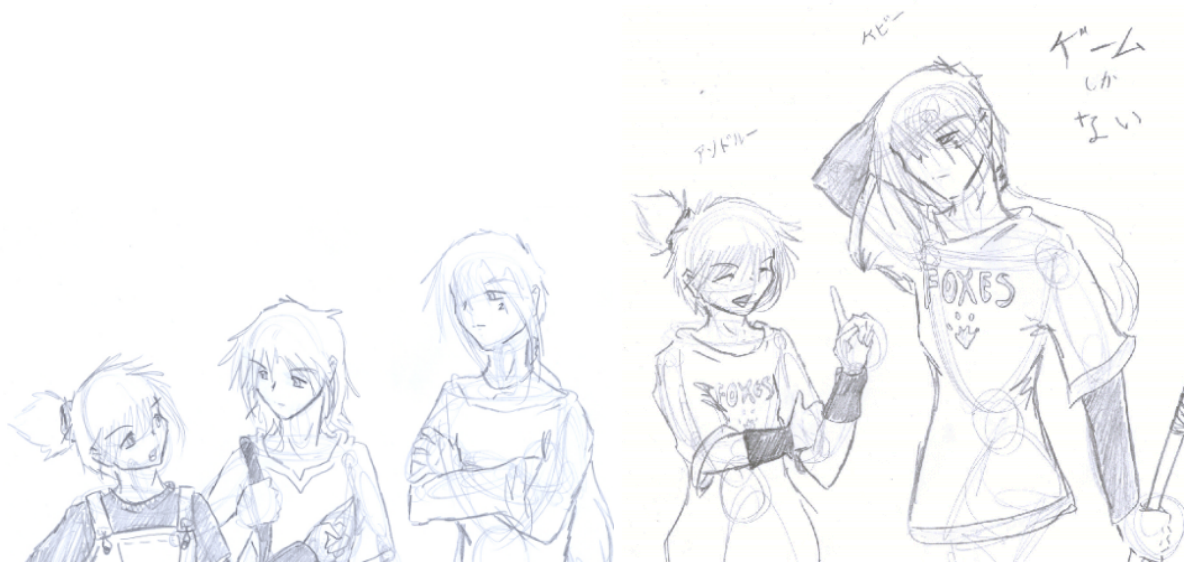
A: you.. you remember I can't draw, right? D:

according to the properties on these files, the newest of these doodles is from 2005. jfc help

** side note: For most of his existence Kevin had long hair because Riko liked how he looked with it – Kevin cut it off on Kathy's live show when Riko pissed him off.

** side note the second, the too-tall woman in the second picture is Abby, who used to be more of a surrogate-mother-type figure to Kevin





WHEN NOT WRITING

Q: hi nora! what do you do when you're not writing?

A: ~~drink~~

play video games, mostly. I'm currently obsessed with The Secret World, but Mass Effect, Star Wars: The Old Republic, and Knights of the Old Republic are also important. Just finished Ori & the Blind Forest, which is somehow beautiful and rage-inducing all at once?? It took me about 14 hours to finish and I died like 700 times ((no exaggeration, the game tracks deaths)).

FOX FANFICTIONS

collected by coldsaturday

FOXES AS INCEPTION CHARACTERS

lovies I am back I need help

was talking Inception with tashie and we're trying to sort the Foxes. assuming the avail positions are Extractor, Point, Forger, Chemist, Architect

I can mostly sort the team, but I can't place Matt. pls assist if able

Extractor: Andrew & Renee

Architect: Nicky & Allison

Point: Dan & Kevin

Chemist: Aaron

Forger: Neil

I am lovin' all the Extractor votes, ty

Makes sense, Matt has that easy trust-me personality that could get past anyone's guard eventually