Warnings: references to canon events/past abuse

When Neil was a child, his father would use the sounds of an incoming storm to mask the screams of their home.

It's the thunder he remembers most; the beating of the sky against his brain was somehow traitorous to him, and he would watch the world outside grey out and cloud over with open contempt. It was as if year round, the sky would close up and go to war for the sole purpose of reminding Neil that no, he wasn't free. He was still trapped, and he was about to receive another lesson to get it through his head.

Thunder and lightning provided cover for the stomp of steel-toed boots down the basement steps, and each strike fell in time with the symphony of shattered glass and the clang of a blade on aluminum work benches. His crying, back when he still had the will to cry, never amounted to more than a riff off the next clap of thunder.

No part of the storm was safe.

The rain, so cool and clean, was just a means to wash away the blood from his bruises afterwards. He would watch it mix into the rainfall and slip down the drain, like stolen evidence from a case no one cared about. It never felt refreshing, or calming. Even years later, when he was safe and healing, he could never find the joy in storms.

He'd block them out by any means necessary; loud music, movies, sleep, whatever he could.

It's why he's careful about being out during the rainy season. But today really isn't his day.

Neil stalls at what he sees, what he *hears*.

The rumbling of the evening sky fills Neil with an anguish he can't explain or stuff down. He doesn't like to call it an anxiety, or a fear. To do so feels too much like a disservice. It's more that he feels a weight chain itself tightly around the chambers of his heart before fiercely tugging and dragging it towards his stomach. It nearly sends him into a spiral, and he swallows the feeling down, trying his best to get his bearings by counting to ten, by focusing on where he is. How long until he's home...

He flinches as the thunder begins again, his feet locking up as he looks down at the sidewalk. Already, water begins to dot the cement in sprinkles, soon to be doused and slippery. He blinks, and there's a flash of red, imagined, but enough to spook him into action.

Neil has never associated thunder with nature, but he's older now. He's not a child, and his father is dead. The only things chasing him now are the memories the storm will trigger, and he only has so long to escape.

Neil takes off.

Clutching his book bag, Neil tightens his hoodie around himself and sprints into the woods nearby. Already, the dirt is slippery, staining his sneakers. It's fine. He knows it's risky to run

through the muddy terrain if it starts to pour, but it's a shortcut. He's ten minutes from his house, and going through the woods will slice that time in half.

He sprints faster, heart pounding.

Don't panic, don't panic.

Nothing can get you.

As the thunder rings through him again, that's all he can find the will to give a damn about.

Neil keeps his eyes forward, even as the landscape grows blurry and dark. The farther he gets from the main road, the less the streetlights help him, until they're non-existent. But he's taken this shortcut plenty of times before, he knows it like the back of his hand, down to the weird trees and fallen branches.

Yes, that's right. Turn left here, then two rights...

He has to stay fixated on the path, even when there's none carved out. If he just thinks of his home and how to get there, he won't have time to see imaginary shadows in his peripheral, or turn around to see if his father is chasing him. That memory, over ten years later, is way too fresh.

He runs faster, and then faster still.

His feet kicking up dirt sound a bit too loud, a bit too much like boots running towards him, trying to grab him and force him into the dark. He squints into the darkness as he moves, barely avoiding running into some trees. Why are his footsteps so loud?

It's his imagination, he figures. The thunder grows in volume and his mind is already beginning to have a field day with it, throwing Neil back into a fear laced past. It's not real, he tells himself.

But it sounds like there are more footsteps, more stomping than just his own. A stampede, scuffing up the mud in piles.

He hears something jump off an incline to his left, and Neil flinches in that direction in time to see a black mass move just out of his sight.

It's ginormous, tall. Fast.

Neil's breathing grows more labored, and he knows now it's not the exertion alone. He's starting to panic. His pants come out as pitiful wheezes as he stumbles over a log, and suddenly he's not quite sure where he is.

He was fine a moment ago, on the right path home, but can he trust himself right now?

Did he take two lefts or a right?

Everything is suddenly too dark, too hidden. Even the trees remind him of tall, looming figures. His panting grows ragged, but it's *loud*, much too loud.

That's not him.

There's no way that's just him. He's not alone.

A twig snaps and Neil yelps, and makes the mistake of turning around. All he sees is black, a large shadow that's somehow darker than the night itself. All he can think is: *he found me*.

He's frozen for longer than he should be, but his flight instincts are stalled, waiting to see the ghost which Neil buried long ago.

He doesn't get the chance, but he doesn't have time to be thankful about it.

A sharp growl tears through the air, and Neil's hesitation burns off like fuel.

He fucking *runs*.

The stampede behind him grows, picking up the pace, but as Neil's survival instincts take over he finds that he really is lost. He'd run off the path he'd become so familiar with, straying deep into the woods. If he dies here, then no one will find him for weeks.

No one will hear over the thunder.

He slips into the mud with one awkward step, the stress sending him into a clumsy spiral. He slides into the dirt and feels the wet goop splash on his cheek. He doesn't have time to feel disgusted.

The growling grows closer, but it's distant, like it's searching for him.

For the first time in a while, Neil actually tries to look at where he is. All he can see is dense forest and gnarled branches. There are no street sounds or distant porch lights in sight to guide him towards civilization.

He whips his head around as the other footsteps continue, finally settling in the right direction. His direction.

Neil breathes fearfully as he blinks, and spots a small burrow tucked underneath the roots of a tree. Neil will take his chances with whatever animal might live there, it's his best bet to get away from...

To get away from what?

His own face flashes in his mind, and an eerie mirror of a man long dead.

Not long enough, it seems.

Neil dives for the burrow just as the black mass comes into the small clearing again. Already, even as Neil is desperately trying to bury himself in the dirt, he knows it's futile. He's been seen.

Suddenly, the world falls into silence. It reminds Neil of those nature documentaries, when a predator surrounds an unknowing animal. It's as if all life in the forest comes to a standstill,

making way for the kill, for the threat to carry out. It's funny; just a moment ago, there was thunder ringing in his ears.

Despite the danger, despite the dread, Neil feels just the slightest bit of relief.

When he dies, he'll die in the sweet, blissful quiet.

And that was never something he could've guessed for himself.

Still, his survival instincts take over, and they win out. Resignation only lives for that small beat of stillness, and then Neil is thrashing and throwing his feet out in front of him, kicking like a helpless child.

"No, you're not real," he says, and he thinks he repeats it a few times, trying to convince himself it's all one bad dream. Whatever is stalking him stops, but Neil can still feel its aura, its power. The presence it has is gargantuan, a wall Neil has no hope of getting past. Just like his father in front of him. At the thought, at the ghost of hands on him, Neil screams. "You're gone!"

And he opens his eyes just as the lightning strikes. It bathes the forest in a bluish glow for half a second, but it's enough for Neil to see.

It's not his father, it's--

The dog in front of him boofs softly, and Neil's eyes widen.

Puppy?

Neil blinks a few times, waiting for this to be an illusion too, before he realizes that no, that is indeed a dog. Neil tilts his head, and the dog follows suit.

Neil notes that it doesn't approach past where Neil's last kick extended out, kept outside the invisible bubble. From that moment on, all Neil can see is fur and paws.

Oh.

The anguish and helplessness pools out of Neil, washing away in the rain and mixing with the mud. Neil swallows thickly as he lowers his hands, noting the way the dog tracks them with an almost intimidating intensity. Neil shivers from the cold and the leftover dread as the dog crouches down slowly, eye-level with Neil as he tries to get a hold of himself.

His breath comes out ragged, his mind trying to rid itself of adrenaline, but it's somehow helped by the keen stare of the dog.

Neil's...Neil's never seen one quite like this. First off, the animal is massive, wider than the opening of the burrow and much taller than Neil. The fur is indeed blacker than the night sky, as ridiculous as that sounds. It looks soft, warm, like it could hide Neil and shelter him completely. But Neil doesn't dare reach out to touch. He's not afraid, but this isn't his animal. He doesn't want to scare it and risk it running away.

The dog's tail beats against the ground once, twice. It's loud enough to rival the thunder, but a more pleasant sound overall. Neil notes the fur on the dog's front legs, discolored and patchy. He

wonders if it's some kind of rare breed, or one of those fancy experiments between two giant ones. Only that could explain the sheer size and uniqueness.

Either way, Neil's just happy it's not his father.

The animal's eyes blink at him intensely, and they're eerily human. The color is a pretty blend of honey brown, wide and focused. Neil stares back, and wonders what the dog must see.

"Oh...oh hey there," Neil whispers, and his voice comes out choked and broken. He clears it, and sighs to himself in relief. "You're just a doggie."

The dog reacts at that, eyes narrowing as it sneezes in discontent.

Discontent, right.

It's a dog, Neil tells himself, but he can't judge his brain's thoughts right then. He did just have a major episode.

The dog shakes his head, and because of his size, he involuntarily shakes off a good portion of mud and water off his coat. It's then Neil notices the mud caked in the dog's thick fur, and he realizes it was probably his fault. The dog must've seen Neil running and followed him through the forest.

That's what was chasing him. Not a threat, he'd been safe.

He repeats that to himself, but as the thunder begins to sound again from above, it loses its power. He's not alone anymore, but he needs to get home as soon as possible.

Carefully, calmly, Neil extends his hand.

The dog doesn't move a muscle, but the tension in his chest coils and tightens noticeably. *Strange*...

Neil freezes all the same, picking up on the clear non-verbal cue: don't touch.

Instead, Neil tries another approach; he lowers his hand until it's flat on the ground, palm up. The dog stares harder.

"Come here. Are you lost in the storm too?" Neil asks, voice pitched a little high. The dog's ears fold back as his eyes narrow, and again, it's hard for Neil to read that reaction as anything other than annoyed. Neil finds himself smiling, and takes his hand back. He tilts his head to peer around the dog's giant body, surveying the damage. "Your pretty fur is all muddy."

The dog's ears perk up cutely at that. Neil laughs, and the dog again tilts his head and paws at the ground. Neil's not sure why, but it feels a lot like 'get up.' He laughs again, a foreign sound to him, but it's cut off by a burst of thunder, and he flinches. The dog's gaze snaps up to him at the reaction, and he rises to his full height. It happens in tandem as Neil stands quickly to wipe the dirt off his knees as best he can, as if the dog can’t bear to be beneath him.

All Neil does is smear mud onto his skin in his haste, and he grimaces.

When he looks up, he finds the dog's eyes are once again boring down into him. Even standing, the dog towers over him just a bit. Oddly enough, he's comforted by that fact.

Neil flinches at the next burst of thunder, and the dog's tail beats against the ground in bewilderment.

Neil huffs nervously, staring at the forest around him. "You really gave me a scare there, but I'm glad I'm not alone..." He swallows as he stares for too long at a tree in the distance, and swears it almost looks like a man. He forces himself to look back up at the dog, who hasn't taken his eyes off of Neil, and Neil smiles. "Want to come home with me? You don't have a collar or anything..."

How can such a beautiful dog not have an owner? Surely, the pound would have at least given him something...

Neil will have to figure it out later, for now, the thunder is growing much too foreboding. The rain begins to come down harder, only slightly relieved by the canopy of the trees, and Neil takes a few brave steps back towards the path.

When he turns around, the dog has also turned to face him, but hasn't moved forward. He seems unbothered by the rain, and despite the darkness, his golden eyes shine through the shadows. They're brighter than any light Neil could ask for.

But it still baffles him, the way the dog twitches and seems to mull over Neil's movements. It reminds Neil of a stranger weighing his options, almost...*thinking*.

Neil shivers for reasons unknown, and blames it on the fear and the cold. He pats his leg once, and prays the dog deems him trustworthy.

"Come on, let's get you a bath and some food. Would you like that?"

The dog appears to almost sigh, and looks behind him at the darkness of the forest. Neil watches nervously, wondering if he'll ultimately run away, a dream or illusion brought on by the storm. But after a long minute, the dog hops up, claws kicking up dirt with each step until he begins to walk beside Neil.

And as the thunder beats against the sky, Neil's feels the slightest bit of security, as if the dog moors him to the earth.

--

"There we go! Lots of bubbles!" Neil cheers as he turns off the faucet in the bathtub. It's an old, rusted silver contraption, and it whines as Neil turns the handle.

For once, he's glad this old house came with such a large tub. He never uses it, preferring the shower head, but it's perfect for soaking. Neil sighs at his work; he's changed out of his muddy clothes into his wetsuit top and swim shorts, and he's filled the tub up to the brim with bubbles and the scented bath bombs he got for Christmas.

It smells like candy and mint now, not necessarily his favorite scents, but better than rain and dirt for sure.

Proud of himself, Neil turns from his spot where he's standing with water up to his thighs. The dog sits stoically on the bathroom floor, watching Neil with suspicion. The ugly off-pink tile of Neil's retro bathroom is effectively stained with dirty paw prints, the leaves cakes into the cracks, and Neil huffs. Stepping out of the tub, he nearly slips. He swears he feels the dog's satisfaction.

Glaring, Neil blows his unruly bangs from his hair and makes a 'ta-da' gesture that he hopes the dog will accept.

"It's either a warm bath, or staying cold and muddy," Neil chides, and the dog sneezes again. Neil only smirks.

Resigned to his fate, the dog gets up, bringing more mud with him, and after one cautious sniff at the water, leaps into the bathtub.

Shit.

Neil jumps as the wave of piping hot water washes over his ankles, the dog displacing almost all of it, but it's...it's good enough.

At least he'll be clean.

Neil turns around and stifles a laugh at the sight in front of him. The tub is huge, yes, but the dog still rivals it, barely fitting. It's like Neil tried to squeeze too many sardines into a can. The dog's tail sticks out, and he can't turn in the tub without hitting one of the edges.

Neil giggles, picking up a sponge. "Chunky pup."

The dog growls grumpily, and sinks deeper into the bath water. At one point, he snaps at one of the floating bubbles, coughing afterwards. Neil's amusement dies when he finds that there's no easy way for him to get fully into the tub with the dog. Instead, he awkwardly perches himself on the edge of the off-white porcelain, and does his best not to slip as he pours some shampoo onto the sponge. "Wow okay...you're huge, I wonder what breed you are..."

The dog turns to Neil like he's an idiot, and Neil does not appreciate it. It's still a bit uncanny how well trained and expressive the animal is. Maybe he's purebred.

Neil shrugs it off.

"Can't believe you don't have an owner," he sighs sadly. He'd never been able to have a dog growing up, never bothered to ask for fear of what his father would do or say. The habit just stuck, and he's been too afraid to adopt a pet for fear of being responsible for its pain someday. Even still, he loves animals, especially rescue ones. Sometimes, when things are really bad, he'll go play with the unadopted kitties at the shelter. They've been abandoned, just like him, but animals are so much simpler than humans. If he loves them, they'll find it in their hearts to accept that love. At the thought, Neil smiles at the dog in front of him. "That's okay, I'll take care of you," he whispers.

The dog lifts his chin and stares, unblinking, and Neil still can't tell what he sees, but whatever it is, Neil hopes it's genuine.

Neil extends the hand holding the sponge to the first spot of dried mud on the dog's fur, but stops when the creature tenses up again.

Neil draws back, showing his hands so the dog can see them.

"No?" Neil asks, and lowers his hands respectfully. The dog stays put, fixated between the sponge and Neil's face. It feels weird to talk to a dog, and Neil knows he can't understand him, but he figures animals must have some kind of sense when it comes to intent, right? "Would you prefer to just soak? You have some dirt caked on your side...can I get that?"

Echoing the question, Neil holds the sponge up the spot he's referring to, watching the dog follow the movement. After an eternity, the dog wriggles to his side so Neil can clean him better.

Neil grins, and again the dog's ears fold back against his head.

"Good boy," Neil coos, and scratches the dog under his chin lightly before he gets to scrubbing. He tries to go as slow and comforting as possible, praising the entire time whenever the dog tilts his body just right. "Smart boy, you're so well trained. Who's a good boy?"

At that, the dog turns around abruptly, flicking water outside the tub. Neil can no longer see his face, and the dog stubbornly doesn't turn back around until Neil is done cleaning him. Neil laughs loudly, letting the sound bounce off the walls. He's not sure he's ever laughed in his own home before, but it feels good, it feels warm.

What a funny puppy...

Neil doesn't stop until the dog is squeaky clean, the water clouded over. Satisfied, he pulls the chain so that the water begins to seep down the drain, and the dog takes the gurgling as his cue to jump out. Neil can see the moment the dog is about to shake and holds out his hands in panic.

"Hold on, I'll get a towel!" he says through his laughter, and the dog freezes, looking more like a disgruntled, mangy cat all soaked. Neil grabs his best, fluffiest towels, and waits until the dog inclines his head. It's his permission, Neil figures, and he makes sure not to be too rough as he starts to dry the thick fur. As he does, it begins to fluff up like before, giving the dog his usual frame, and not that of a soggy chicken. Neil isn't ashamed to say he makes an 'ooo' sound when he touches the dog's dry fur for the first time. It glides against his skin when the towel falls from his hand, and he freezes to make sure the dog is still alright. "So soft...can I?"

The dog hesitates, ears straightening up to the points, and he brings himself back to his full height, as if it's instinct to show how big he is, how threatening. Neil knows this, yet he's still not afraid.

When no attack comes, the dog turns around slowly until he's facing Neil again, searching for any movement or danger. But Neil only holds his hand within the dog's reach, giving him the choice. The dog nearly goes cross eyed in surprise as he stares down at Neil's hand, and Neil suppresses his laugh.

He stays there, hand out for a long time, never once feeling an ounce of impatience or frustration. He finds himself taking in the animal for all that he is, every flick of light in his eyes that tells Neil one thing he may not be able to confirm, but that he knows.

You've been hurt, I understand. But nothing will hurt you here.

He wants to say that, but as someone who's been through it himself, it's futile. Actions speak louder, so all he says is, "I won't, if you don't want me to."

And the dog shouldn't understand, can't understand, but Neil supposes this language is universal. A moment passes, and then the dog fits his snout neatly in Neil's hand. A soft, content growl builds from the back of the dog's throat as he closes his eyes, and Neil scratches at his snout gently before moving his hand down the dog's chest.

He was right, of course. His fur is the softest thing Neil has ever felt.

"Thank you," Neil says, and the dog opens his eyes slowly, assessing Neil as if he's someone unbelievable. Confused.

And maybe Neil's using the dog as an excuse to talk through his own shit, maybe he's projecting, but it doesn't matter. No one has to know. Neil curls his hand into the dog's coat and sighs. "I'm not really a people person myself, they're hard to trust. But I won't hurt you. I'll prove that."

I won't be like him.

The dog makes another small noise, but before Neil can think aloud about what it might mean, the thunder from outside shakes him out of his coziness.

Right, he'd been so distracted with taking care of the dog, he'd forgotten his nightmare wasn't yet over. Neil can feel the dog's eyes bore into the side of his cheek as he stares through the nearest window, and he's sure he'd look pathetic to any human. He feels the chain around his heart again, and whimpers. The trees outside smash viciously against the double paned glass, and Neil swallows shakily at the crashing sounds from outside, and waits for the footsteps that never come.

It's the same every time, and it always ends, but it never gets easier.

Neil flinches when he remembers where he is and hastily gets up, leading the dog with him. This time, the dog follows without question.

"L-lets get warm," Neil says, but any cheeriness he tries to fake doesn't hit the mark in the slightest.

Whatever. The sooner he's in bed, the sooner he can bury himself under the covers, and ride out the storm with good company.

--

Neil knew he wouldn't get to sleep, but he never thought it would be for this reason.

Neil's bed is big enough to fit him and the dog, but it's snug. There's a sliver of space between them, but if Neil's being honest, he likes that. With the dog curled up close by, Neil feels safer, more protected, as if the dog is watching the door for him.

However, the dog has *also* chosen to watch Neil with an intensity unparalleled.

It's dark in the small room, and the lightning casts shadows of Neil's bookcase and figurines against the wall every few minutes.

Brighter still, are this dog's eyes.

They shine like a full moon, setting Neil's face aglow, and no matter how many minutes pass, the animal doesn't let up with flicking his gaze over Neil's face.

It's eerily reminiscent of a person, of someone on the edge of asking a question. But the dog can't speak, and Neil obviously needs sleep if he's thinking this way.

Regardless, Neil has to wonder if this whole thing isn't some figment of his imagination.

"What are you?" Neil sighs, and the dog blinks. Right. Neil groans as he rolls onto his back, covering his eyes with his forearm. He hears the dog's chest rumble, and doesn't let himself wonder what that could mean. "I'm talking to a dog, can you tell I don't have lots of friends?"

He means it as a joke, but he regrets it as soon as it leaves his mouth.

No...that's not right.

Weird and offbeat as ever, the dog waits for Neil to continue, breathing roughly through his snout. Neil lowers his arm away and turns back to that golden gaze, and it's softer now, drowsier. The bed creaks when Neil flips over to face him, struggling with their combined weight.

"I actually have a few friends, but they're out of town," he says, and thinks of Dan and Matt's smiling faces for a moment. It sends a wave of guilt through him, but he's been trying not to let those feelings fester like before. He's still not good at talking them out with the people he needs to, but he figures admitting them to himself is better than nothing. Neil curls in on himself slowly, a child all over again.

At least he's warm, unharmed.

It takes him a while to get the next words out as he plays with a loose thread on his comforter. Slowly, the dog's paw reaches out to swipe at Neil's hand, as if coaxing out the confession. Or, that's what Neil needs to believe. His voice is barely a whisper. "Honestly even if they were here, I doubt I would have called them for help. It's hard to admit when...when—"

He stops, kicking his feet under the blankets. The dog doesn't flinch as Neil laughs, the sound devoid of humor for once. "See? I can't even say it to myself, or to you!"

He's just a coward who never got used to the real world. Despite being free for many years and making a life for himself, he's not sure how to navigate these feelings, or the weights that constantly pull him down, storm or no storm.

Neil closes his eyes, but he continues to feel the golden gaze on him, piercing the locked boxes in Neil's mind. It helps. It helps more than Neil can possibly describe. He should've gotten a pet years ago.

Swallowing thickly, Neil peers through his lashes just so. He's not sure why, but it feels strange to not give the dog the respect of seeing him, *really* seeing him, as he sheds some of his secrets. Neil thinks he might still be a coward, unable to tell these things to beings who could actually respond, but it's a start.

"When I was little, my father loved stormy forecasts," he begins, and as if called forward, thunder booms through the sky. It's muffled, but Neil still curls closer to the dog, careful to not touch. He doesn't pay much mind to the way the animal blinks at the action. Neil just swallows, and pulls the blanket over the back of his head like a little hood. "He'd sit at the breakfast table and watch the weather, and he'd say, 'oh junior! Isn't it great? It's going to rain, so you and I get to play.'"

Again, Neil's smile is cold, cruel. He can feel it pulling at his skin, and the dog boofs softly again. *Yeah, I know.*

Neil hates it too, hates that he can't help it.

The dog is unnervingly still again at Neil's words, listening to the garble. He seems taller in that moment, blocking Neil's view of the window with his giant body. Neil shakes his head, trying to keep the memories at bay, but he's grateful for the dog's presence. "It's easier to beat someone up when no one can hear. Anyone walking by, the neighbors...it was all just—"

Lightning cracks through the sky and illuminates the dog from behind through the big bay windows, and for a moment, Neil almost thinks he sees rage locked in those human-like eyes.

He must be projecting, seeing his own feelings reflected back at him. Life isn't fair, or good, but he can't accept what happened to him so easily. It shouldn't have happened. Maybe he shouldn't have existed at all.

He wipes those thoughts away as quickly as they arrive

No, he's never been one to think that way. He's a survivor, and he's also the reason that man died a painful death.

That is more than enough value.

"Yeah, that," he finishes, gesturing towards the windows as the storm rages. "I hate when it storms, because there's nothing I can do to stop it. I know he's dead, I saw the body. But sometimes it's like he's still there, waiting for it to rain again."

And that irrationality is the worst part. He'll never be rid of it, but he hopes it gets better. Maybe it already has. After all, he stopped locking himself in wardrobes, didn't he?

Huffing softly, he extends his hand again, waiting. Gently, the dog slides his snout into the crook of Neil's palm, and sighs at the light scratching. *Nice boy.*

Neil smiles. "I don't expect my friends to understand all that, so I can't tell them. They'd just flip out and worry anyways and they don't need to. I'm fine."

The dog's relaxation is put on pause for a moment, and his eyes flit up to Neil in slits. It's the definition of disbelief, but Neil figures that's his own denial too.

Whatever brain, knock it off.

Tucking himself closer to the dog, Neil smiles again, scratching under his chin once more before pulling away.

"Maybe we can be friends, yeah?" He asks, and watches as the dog blinks back cutely at him. Well...cute is maybe not what other people might say. If Neil's being honest, the way this dog looks at him is scary, and eerily serious. But, he's not most people, so...

Yeah, it's pretty damn cute.

"After I get a better name for you anyways, though I do like calling you *doggie*," Neil says, and he makes sure to put a loving baby voice spin on the name. The dog stares back, unamused. It doesn't deter Neil though, and some of the remaining tension in his body bleeds out as he yawns. "Yeah....we can protect each other."

And I'll love you. Or, he hopes so. Neil has never loved anything, and he's not quite sure what it means, but he'd like to give it a shot. That's what pets are for, right?

The dog grumbles in the back of his throat, low and menacing, and Neil's sleepy brain only interprets it as one thing: an agreement. He smiles as the word blurs around him, vision fading out even as the storm rages on. He's never been able to fall asleep on nights like this, but as he feels the dog's gaze on him, it's as if he's willed under. A spell.

"Goodnight doggie," he mumbles, and reaches out for the dog's paw. He doesn't quite make it on his own, but the last thing he notes before the world goes black is that it doesn't make a difference.

The dog meets him halfway.

--

The morning sun shines through the windows the next day, and the only indications there has been a storm at all are the smell of oil and dew in the air, and the drying water on his windows.

The chill laces through Neil's body, and he wraps himself tighter in the blankets involuntarily. Had it been this cold last night too? He remembers feeling so warm, like he'd been next to a furnace...

Wait.

Neil's eyes shoot open, and he winces from the brightness of the room. Delirious, he blinks the blur out of his eyes and stares out at the expanse of mattress in front of him.

Neil finds himself alone.

Shooting up from bed, he whips his head around the room in search of a black coat and bushy tail, and comes up short.

Oddly enough, the door to his room is open. He usually closes it...

"Doggie?" Neil calls out, shivering as he throws the blanket off of him and steps onto the stained carpet. He's cautious as he walks down the hall towards the back porch, peering into each room and corner carefully so as not to disturb his guest. As he searches, dread and disappointment begin to swirl in his chest, an unpleasant cocktail. And foreign too. He's not used to missing something. He's not used to hurt feelings.

"Puppy?" He tries again, weaker this time, but all hope dies when he reaches the back door.

It's open.

The wind blows the screen door against the wall, and it makes Neil jump. The cold seeps in, but he can't feel it anymore. He's too fixated on the wet paw prints that dot the cement before disappearing into the grass.

In the distance, the treeline blows in the wind, offering nothing.

Friends, huh? Guess not.

Neil must've imagined the dog's agreement after all. He rubs at his eyes and scoffs at himself for being so stupid, so worked up over this. It was just a dog. And it didn't belong to him.

There will be other chances in the future...

He knows this, but after the hell he went through, it feels like another slap in the face to remind him that things can never go his way right off the bat. He never asked them to, or expects them to, but...

Just once. Just *once*.

Sighing, and resigned to spend the rest of the day curled up in bed, he moves to latch the door shut, only to find something waiting for him on top of the mat.

It's...it's a dead bird.

What?

Neil freezes as his grip on the door handle tightens, blinking down at the slain creature at his feet. He looks up at his back lawn again, scanning the trees, but finds nothing.

It's a clean kill, the bird silenced at the neck with minimal blood. There's no mistaking it though. It was pierced by jagged, giant teeth.

It's gruesome, it's gory.

It's a gift.

It fills Neil with a hope so uncalled for and random, it overwhelms him. Before he knows it, he's smiling and laughing to himself, and while he feels for the poor creature, its presence confirms one thing...

Yes, he can definitely call that dog a friend.

And while Neil doesn't know what this means, and knows it's just a dog at the end of the day, the bird at his feet feels like a comfort. He hasn't been abandoned, it wasn't all a dream.

And that's enough to soothe the pain in his heart.

Even if he never sees the dog again, it's more than enough.

As he smiles down at the bird, he sends a little thank you to the dog, wherever he is.

Suddenly, there's a rustle from the woods, and Neil jerks his head up fast enough to strain a muscle.

But when he looks, the treeline is as empty as before.

--

The next day, Neil checks out a book too many from the library, and they end up sprawled out on the sidewalk in front of him.

"Fuck," he mutters as people step over his workbooks, barely avoiding them, and he's not afraid to call them assholes to their retreating backs. They eye him like *he's* the rude one. This is why he avoids campus.

He doesn't have the energy or the time to lash out like he usually would, he's just glad no one else enters his bubble while he starts the laborious task of piling all the books up again.

He's not sure why he decided to do this, but he figures if he gets the majority of his math assignments done early, he won't have to be as stressed during finals. Plus, he likes math. The stormy season is only just beginning, and he could do with more distractions in the form of advanced calculus problems.

He tells himself it's for his own good as he stacks the heavy textbooks, and he's almost done when a hand shoots out in front of his face, beating him to the last workbook. For a moment, all Neil sees is a black sleeve, and heavy, thick combat boots.

Neil tenses, on alert immediately; he figures one of the assholes from before has come back to try and teach him a lesson, but when he follows the leather sleeve with a glare, he comes face to face with an almost unsettling calm.

That's the only way to describe the aura coming off of the man above him. Calm, focused.

Powerful.

Neil's not sure where they all come from, or why he's able to pick up on it, but he's never one to doubt his instincts. His brain screams *threat*, but his body relaxes for some reason, put at ease by

the steady gaze and stiff posture. Honey-brown eyes bore into his own, and Neil takes in the stranger completely as he rises to his feet. Upon doing so, he realizes he's actually a smidge taller than the blond.

He feels smaller though. The blond is broad-shouldered, and built. Neil knows he'd have no problem tossing Neil into the nearest dumpster if he pleased.

Unperturbed by Neil's silent blinking, the blond hands him his textbook without a word. When he does, his leather sleeve slips down a little, revealing black armbands as well. Neil's almost jealous, and he self-consciously covers his scarred arms with his hand before reaching out. The blond's eyes flick down at the movement, and linger too long for Neil's comfort.

It's like this man's stare could flay flesh from bone, piercing, but oddly stabilizing as well. Neil feels like he's just run a marathon, and now he's found a nice pillar to rest by. It's weird, and he finds himself dumbly saying, "thank you."

The blond's eyes go lidded, as if he's already exhausted with Neil's presence. "I wasn't being nice," he corrects, and Neil's shoulders tense up. "You're blocking the sidewalk."

Neil's jaw nearly drops, but he doesn't give him the satisfaction. Fine asshole, nevermind.

Neil's glare is something to be rivaled as well, he reminds himself, and he hopes the blond feels every searing burn of it on his skin. "No kidding," Neil scoffs, and picks up his books in a haste. He's about to stomp away when the man speaks again.

"You gave my dog a bath," he says, and it stops Neil short.

Tuning back to the blond, Neil blinks, and takes him in for a second time.

Then, it somehow makes sense.

All black, golden eyes...

People do say that owners can look like their pets, right?

This time, Neil's jaw does drop, and he can't help but smile a little. It's hard not too, when he thinks of his furry friend from the other night.

"That beautiful dog was yours?" He breathes out, and catches the way the other flinches. It's the first real sign of human emotion he's seen from the blond, but he can't define it. It doesn't matter anyways. Neil just cares about the dog. "Is he okay? Did he come home?"

The blond turns away for a moment, clearing his throat. "He...he's fine," he says, glaring at the sidewalk.

Well, Neil thought he was bad with social skills. It feels good to be on equal footing with someone for once.

He's relieved for a moment, before the anger takes over.

He glares, his grip tightening on his books and bending the spine of one. "What were you doing letting him wander around in a storm? You're a horrible owner, he could've been hurt!"

Granted, the dog seemed large and very smart, but still! Neil's glad he got to stay with him for the night. He waits for the blond's answer, because oh yes, he will be giving one.

Neil won't let him go without it. If he tries, well...

Fuck it, Google is free. He can call the shelter and report stuff like this, right?

Then maybe the puppy could be his...

As if following Neil's train of thought, the blond rolls his eyes dramatically. "My brother and I own the dog, it was his shift last night and the dog got out," the blond explains, and Neil continues to eye him suspiciously. In a brief show of compassion, the blond lowers his head and places his hand on his heart. Neil thinks it's sarcastic at first, but it's hard to detect any lies when the man says, "I wouldn't neglect the dog on purpose."

For emphasis, the blond lowers himself further, and as much as Neil would like to scoff, he just can't. He wants to believe no one would hurt that dog, and he looked well cared for so...

Some of the anger in Neil's body fades, and his shoulders sag in defeat. "I hope not..."

The blond's eyes flick up to Neil's face again, and he straightens up. Neil's not sure why, but there's a concealed eagerness in his movements, in the way he digs his heel into the concrete.

"My dog is scared of thunder," the blond explains. "I adopted him. I think his old owners were abusing him, they probably didn't comfort him during the storms. He's easily spooked by people too. I'm surprised he went with you."

Neil thinks back to the dog's demeanor, to the initial distrust and wariness he displayed. He's far from surprised, but hearing the confirmation from his owner that the dog had been just as scared and mistreated as Neil...

"That makes a lot of sense," he whispers, and his smile is fond. At the blond's last statement, Neil simply shrugs. He has no idea what made the dog follow him that night, what made him open up to Neil and come home with him, but he's grateful. "I just—I didn't want to betray his trust. That's all."

He's not sure if animals are that complex, if they understand boundaries and respect. But he likes to think they do, and maybe that's why the dog had no issues extending some trust to Neil and staying with him.

When Neil realizes it's been quiet for a bit longer than is socially acceptable, he looks up to find the other man staring at him with an expression that's unreadable. It's...a bit uncanny, how similar he is to his dog.

There's that same intensity, the same knowingness locked in his gaze while Neil feels completely lost, as if there's something he's missing, something he can't see. A coil of tension seems to roll back into the blond's shoulders as he breathes, like barely contained restraint.

It's over and done with in the blink of an eye, and then the blond whips out a key ring from his pocket, and presses the unlock button. A few stalls away, and black truck beeps awake.

"Get in the car," the blond says abruptly, and Neil flinches.

Um...

He may take strange animals home, but strange people? He's survived too much to risk that, he thinks. Clutching his books close to his chest, he winces. "No really, it's—"

But the blond is prepared for his refusal, and it coincides so perfectly with the beginnings of raindrops.

Neil feels the first one land on his head, and jumps from the chill of it.

Shit...

"It's going to storm again soon," the blond says, and begins to walk towards the car without looking back. "Take the offer or leave it."

You...seemed pretty insistent though...

Neil doesn't have the opportunity to be snarky, because the sky rumbles a moment later.

He bites his lip and weighs his options. There's no way he'll make it back before the storm starts, and he may as well be in more danger in that scenario. He can't trust his brain to think rationally, or get him home.

If it weren't for that dog, there's no telling what would've happened last time.

Neil's embarrassed to admit it, but fear wins over sensibility. His mother would be rolling in her grave if she could see him right now.

"Yeah, okay," Neil whispers to himself, and trots after the blond with his arm full of books. He catches the way the other's shoulders sag, almost relieved, and Neil makes sure there's plenty of space between them on the way to his house.

It's been a while since he's had to duck and roll out of a car, but he'll do it if he has to.

--

The rain starts to pour as they get close to Neil's house.

For the most part, the ride is silent, which Neil doesn't expect. The blond hardly seems like a talker, sure, but he also doesn't appear to be someone courteous, or who extends these favors for no reason.

Neil spends the entire fifteen minute drive observing him from the side. He homes in on the anxious bobbing of the blond's knee, the iron grip he has on the worn steering wheel, aged enough to smear a thin stain of black on his fingertips. He rolls his neck a lot, popping the tense joints, and Neil follows the movement down to the bob of his throat.

The whole time, there's no attempt to question Neil, to probe at him for secrets or information. There's simply silence, despite the deafening roar of the world outside. Neil realizes that the entire time, he hasn't been paying attention to the thunder.

Neil can only come up with one reason why the blond would do this, and it's the dog.

As thanks, maybe?

Something about it still feels off, not in line with the vibe Neil is getting, but he follows Matt's advice from months before.

Buddy, stop analyzing. Not everything has to be a conspiracy.

And well, he sure hopes he's right.

They pull up to Neil's house with a screech, the car firing rather suddenly. The blond doesn't look embarrassed by it in the slightest, so Neil tries not to act affected at the sight of his own yard. He...he hadn't realized it had gotten this bad.

He bought the dingy little house with the money from his parents' estate, eager to have a home of his own. Of course, a house is a bit much for one person to manage, and he'd bitten off a bit more than he could chew with the four bedroom arrangement, and a structure that hasn't been updated since the 60s.

The old wooden porch has a step missing, which Neil had replaced with a dirt mound and a brick. The white paint of the walls is bleak and chipped, worn down, and the railing doesn't match. It's a tacky teal, also rusted through. It's hard to imagine the house ever having looked immaculate.

The concrete foundation is less than appealing, with cracks and weeds sprouting between them. Sometimes he'll leave cheese at the openings, for the little mice he's seen. Mushrooms line the walls and borders, and the lawn is so overgrown, Neil's sure he wouldn't be able to see his feet if he stepped onto it. Apart from that, Neil's paranoia caused him to outline the house with wind chimes and bird feeders, just in case. He went a bit overboard, and the mass of them almost block his entire porch.

It would be hard, and very annoying, to try and approach his house silently, that's for fucking sure.

Already, the rainwater floods his tilted gutter, turning the sides of the house into a swamp.

He now understands what Dan meant when she said *'you live in an old witch's house, Neil.'*

But the blond only seems interested in Neil, not the abysmal state of his house. He reaches forward to cut the engine, and lets the keys dangle to a beat neither of them can follow.

He stares for almost too long, and only speaks when Neil opens his mouth to tell him to knock it off. "Do you go to the library at the same time everyday?"

At that, Neil falters dumbly. What? He opens his mouth and closes it again. "Yes, but—"

"I'll be here tomorrow then," the blond says, leaning back in his seat as if it's a done deal, a simple fact of life from now on.

Neil doesn't know what else to say. He stares back, and the blond's throat bobs again. He twitches too, and Neil wonders if they're nervous ticks. It doesn't make a difference. Does it?

Shaking his head, Neil decides to say screw it and bring his observations to light. "All this...because I looked after your dog?"

The blond reaches up to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, concealing the expression he clearly couldn't help. Then, he shrugs. "Something like that."

This piece of work...

Funny. People are usually saying that about *Neil*.

Neil's eyes narrow, unforgiving and ruthless. He's cold, and he's good at showing it. "You don't owe me anything," he says with a barely restrained growl. He doesn't appreciate pity, or favors that come out of nowhere. If the blond had said his intent from the get-go, maybe Neil would have been more willing to accept the act of kindness, but not now.

Something about this feels wrong, out of order.

Why is this man treating him like they're not the strangers they are? Neil didn't ask for the assumed familiarity, in fact, he abhors it.

You don't know me, and I don't need you.

"I know," the blond states, and it stops Neil's train of thought with the tone. Strict. The blond chews the inside of his cheek, like the implication was enough to disgust him. He taps his fingers on the steering wheel, and that's when Neil realizes he's gripping it hard enough to whiten the tops of his knuckles.

Whatever war the blond is waging with himself internally, Neil wants no part of it.

At a loss, he huffs. "I don't need rides from stubborn assholes," he tries again, and hopes it's a clear fuck off this time. While he appreciates being saved from another panic attack, it's not worth this frustration or confusion.

He can't read this man, and Neil's not quite sure he likes that, because he feels like the blond *can* read him.

And he shouldn't be able to.

Neil has always been an unknown, a mystery. A ghost.

Why do this man and his dog suddenly have the ability to pull out his truth without even speaking?

The blond hasn't even done much, hasn't pried or teased, but Neil feels laid bare in this truck, and he can't understand why.

But at that, all the blond does is quirk a brow. "So you don't want to see the dog again?"

And oh, this guy is good.

Neil all but deflates, whimpering at the thought of being able to play with the doggie again. He'd been so cute...so fluffy...

Maybe if they spent more time together, the puppy would even play with him!

Neil's not sure why the price has to be him taking rides from his owner though. In fact, it makes zero sense trade wise. What is the blond getting out of this? Neil would rather not know.

"If he wants to see me," he says instead, and for the first time, the blond huffs in amusement. It's an odd thing to see, the subtle tilt of his mouth upwards. He stares out the windshield, almost like he can't fathom Neil's existence in this world.

"It's a dog."

Neil shrugs. "So?"

It still has the choice. Plus, Neil figures a dog that big can get away with a lot. It'll find Neil if it wants to.

The blond shakes his head, as if to himself, before he turns to Neil again. The intensity is back, and the pinch of eagerness is too. Neil finds himself shivering for reasons unknown.

An eternity passes, and then, "I'm not going to let you walk alone during a storm," the blond states, like a promise, and Neil shivers again from the softness of it. This man looks anything but soft, and yet his words are an oath. A blanket around Neil's shoulders. "Hate me, for all I care."

Neil's mouth opens, dumbfounded. It feels warm in the car, like there's a furnace beside him, and where he only felt anxiety before, there's only calmness now.

The blond seems to be watching for the reaction; he follows the sag of Neil's body, and nods to himself, and Neil is too tired to open up yet another can of worms by asking why the hell he's looking at him like that.

"Why?" Neil sighs instead.

The other holds his hand up just as thunder rings out, and Neil flinches.

"I think you know," he answers, and Neil pouts.

Ah.

Neil's never been good at hiding his fear of thunder, but perhaps he should start training himself.

"And no," the blond finishes. "It's not pity."

So he wants to drive Neil around because Neil is afraid of thunder, but he doesn't feel bad for him? Right.

Neil rolls his eyes. The only thing that redeems the obvious explanation is the source of it. The blond's dog is also afraid of thunder, right? No wonder he would have a soft spot.

And while that doesn't necessarily feel right either, it's all Neil can come up with right then.

"Truth for a truth then," he says, turning his body towards the driver's seat with a newfound determination.

The blond blinks back at him. "What?"

"You figured out I'm scared of thunder," he says, and assumes it was from his reactions back on campus. The blond once again looks tired at the insinuation, or frustrated, but Neil ignores it and powers on. "What are you afraid of?"

He expects the blond to dodge the answer completely, or hesitate, but to his utter shock, neither happens.

"Heights," the blond says smoothly, nodding to himself. Neil deflates once more, at a loss. The blond seems all too pleased by the turn of events, a puzzle, an enigma Neil can't crack. He'll admit, it's interesting. A little...fun. Just a little.

Heights, huh?

"And this," the blond mutters, just loud enough for Neil to hear. Neil blinks in confusion, staring out into the same direction to see what there could be. But it's just the road, and the rain.

"This? What's this?"

And then the blond's face is shrouded again, as shadowy and ominous as his dog. But there's something new there this time, an amusement, a joke, and Neil could swear he's seen it before.

"Nothing," the blond says with finality, and while Neil anticipates another shiver from it, he feels nothing but fire. "Goodnight, Neil."

And Neil feels like he should question that, he should put up a fight and snark like he's used to. But he doesn't. He just fumbles for the door handle without taking his eyes off the blond's face, and almost trips on his way out of the truck. "Goodnight, uh..."

"Andrew," he finishes, and swipes his mouth for the second time to hide it. "The dog is...Atlas."

Neil's getting soaked by the rain at this point, the water seeping through the back of his sweater, but he can't help but pause.

It's fitting.

"Andrew and Atlas," he echoes softly, and Andrew jerks his head away. Neil smiles. Yes, definitely fitting. They both look strong enough to hold the world up. "I like it."

And he swears he thinks Andrew smiles.

But who knows, maybe he imagined that too.

--

As he dozes off later that night, he never thinks to question how Andrew knew that Neil had taken his dog home in the first place.

It never crosses his mind, but instead his dreams run wild with the howling of wolves and golden eyes. They drown out the thunder, and he sleeps peacefully throughout the night.

When he wakes up, he can barely remember the sounds and sensations, and all he hears is the sound of Andrew's truck pulling up outside. It fires twice.

Something settles deep inside him, an uncertainty, but not fear. He's not sure what's happening or what it means, he just knows he wants to find out. He's not sure if this is the conventional way of making friends, or whatever he sees Andrew as, but he's never done things the normal way.

Regardless, he follows his instincts, and trusts them to not lead him into danger, just this once.

On his way out the door, he notices paw prints in the mud, large and promising, and he smiles all the way to Andrew's car.