Warnings: references to canon events/past abuse

Andrew never liked the concept of time travel; there's no one distinct moment he'd go back to personally, no tragic world event he'd try to stop like in the movies.

However, due to today's events, he might just forgo that opinion to say he'd *gladly* go back to make sure Disneyland never existed.

Then, maybe he wouldn't have to listen to Kevin's nagging.

"You two *cannot* blow off Jeremy Knox!" Kevin rages, hands planted on the kitchen counter as Neil deftly works around him. Andrew's not quite sure what he's doing; he asked Neil for some ice cream a few minutes ago, and the sounds of clattering dishes and spoons are way more interesting than whatever Kevin is saying.

Andrew leans back into his beanbag chair, content to demolish Aaron in Mario Kart in the meanwhile.

"Yes we can," Neil says, like it's the simplest thing in the world. Andrew almost smirks.

It is; there's no way in hell Kevin's making them go to Disneyland on top of scouting recruits in California. Andrew doesn't understand why Queen Day can't just make another pit stop in Los Angeles after visiting the other recruit he has lined up in Washington.

Andrew exhales slowly, trying his best to keep his attention on the screen while he thinks about Neil. He's not sure when that became so difficult.

Alas, Andrew knows why he's being forced back to California. Neil cares far too much about Exy and his duties as vice captain to miss out on something so essential. He picked out some of these recruits this time around, and he wants to see them in action. However, in this case it's not even one of his picks, and all they need to do is drop off paperwork. Neil has been trying, futilely, to convince Andrew he doesn't need to come.

The consideration is appalling. Andrew's grip on his controller is enough to make the plastic creak. California is a sore spot for him, Neil knows that all too well, but not the area they're going. Andrew couldn't care less.

Besides...Andrew's not letting Neil travel that far all alone.

Nothing, not even his past, is going to keep Andrew from going with him to make sure he doesn't die or worse. It wouldn't be a problem if Kevin were accompanying him, but he's got his own recruits to scout.

Neil is capable, Andrew thinks. He doesn't need protection, but it won't stop Andrew from offering it.

He chooses not to think about how one day, he'll have no choice but to stay behind. One day, he'll live apart from Neil and have to trust he'll be okay.

He swallows down the dread he doesn't want to acknowledge, and claims first place.

"Motherfucker," Aaron spits, but immediately clicks the next level for them. If he can sense Andrew's mood, he doesn't comment, but...this helps.

And then he hits Andrew with a blue shell, and Andrew has to wonder why he shared a womb.

Andrew channels the uncertainty elsewhere, like kicking Aaron's ass and listening to Neil wave Kevin off. The rest of the time, he blames his nerves on the five hour flight he'll have to make in the very near future.

"We're not going," Neil says again, firmer this time. It's a tone that always sends Andrew's protective instincts into overdrive, Neil's temper flaring. But, it's just Kevin, which means there's more amusement than danger at play here.

Neil simply doesn't want to deal with it, so Andrew finds his voice. "Fuck off."

Kevin sputters, no doubt whipping around to where Andrew is sitting. He's not sure why Jeremy Knox is so set on taking them to Disneyland, but Andrew doesn't care enough to think about it. He's trying to do the bare minimum on their trip, and the USC Trojans are trying to make life difficult.

As Kevin groans on, Andrew hears the slightest indication of Neil stepping towards him. Neil's walk is distinct, in that it's nonexistent. Andrew often tests his hearing on how well he can sense Neil's approach.

And then, Neil is in front of him, and the world narrows until it's just Neil, crouched down with a bowl in his hands. Andrew hates what he's begun to call the **Neil Effect**, since it really has no concrete explanation, at least not an acceptable one. He gets second place in the game, and ignores Aaron's gloating for once. He'll get him back later.

There's something proud in Neil's eyes, self-directed, and that's when Andrew looks down to the bowl of ice cream.

Ah, now he remembers.

They hadn't been able to go grocery shopping, so the only thing in the freezer was boring vanilla. Disappointing, but Andrew's sweet tooth didn't care at the time. He needed dessert, no matter how lackluster.

However, this isn't just vanilla ice cream. There's large chunks of Snickers and peanut butter cups mixed in, haphazardly so, but well enough that someone obviously put in the effort.

Someone being...

Andrew looks between the bowl and Neil's steadily brightening expression, unwilling to linger on the fact Neil took the time to become a Cold Stone apprentice for the sole purpose of pleasing Andrew. It's all a waste though, because when he takes the bowl from Neil's hands, the reluctant words come out anyways.

"You're it for me."

It's not really a confession, since Andrew has known this for a while, but it still stings his pride a bit.

Neil blinks at him, tilting his head in that way that has Andrew glaring extra hard. "Hm?"

"Nothing."

He shoves the biggest spoonful he can manage into his mouth, and deserves the icy burn he gets for it.

Thankfully, before Neil can pry, Kevin is back at it again. Andrew's not sure if it's for better or worse.

The Queen himself rounds on them, blocking the television. "One of the best strikers from one of the top teams invited you to hang out for the day," he says, solely at Neil. He knows well enough that Andrew doesn't care about ranks. "How does that not excite you?"

An appropriate question, though. Why wouldn't it excite Neil?

"I don't know anything about Disneyland."

Neil plops down next to Andrew, indifference well conveyed. However, Andrew knows better. The restlessness in Neil's muscles is slight, but not surprising. There's a lot of things Neil doesn't know about, and while he normally wouldn't care, the idea of a place known for crowds of people probably isn't something Neil wants to explore.

It's not like the striker grew up with any exposure to the hundreds of movies or songs.

"It's an amusement park you loser," Aaron chimes in, and Neil scowls at him. Andrew pauses mid bite, surprised. A little. His brother's brand of comfort is the exact opposite of the word; it's a contrary, scathing thing, nearly as bad as Andrew's. But Andrew can detect it still, and that was definitely it.

Not that Neil would know though. The striker crosses his arms and sticks out his tongue, but Aaron's attention is already on getting Kevin the fuck out of his way.

"I don't care, I don't want to go," Neil responds petulantly, the words eaten up by the harsh impact of a pillow hitting Kevin's stomach.

At least he moves enough for Aaron's game to resume.

In the middle of Neil's protests, the door opens, admitting another one of Andrew's problems.

And she's unpredictable on top of it.

"Hi sweetie," Katelyn calls, punctuated by the slam of the front door. Andrew tries not to cringe at the name, nor his brother's dreamy sigh as Katelyn waves at them all. She walks over to kiss Aaron on the cheek before her attention is back on Neil's constipated face, which she blows past without a second thought. Oh, to be a cheerleader. "Go where?"

Kevin tears his gaze away from Aaron at the reminder. "Neil, you have to go to Disneyland, just fucking deal with it. You might be able to get some helpful pointers from Jeremy. Plus, don't you want to check on Jean?"

A cheap trick, and one that absolutely sours Andrew's mood despite the sweetness in his mouth. The protective itch is back from hearing Moreau's name, and he tugs Neil a little closer out of necessity.

Another reason for them not to go: Andrew's not sure he can stop himself from murdering the ex-Raven. Victim of Riko or not, he'd put his hands on Neil.

"If he wasn't doing okay I'm sure he would've reached out on his own," Neil counters, seeing through Kevin's appeal to sympathy. Neil, while he gets along with Jean better now, doesn't worry about him nearly as much as Kevin does.

Kevin can visit him then, if he's so curious.

As if Andrew said the words aloud, Kevin's stare intensifies. "Are you kidding--"

"Wait," Katelyn interrupts without care, and Andrew actually looks at her. He's been giving her that privilege a lot more now. Not everyone is dumb or brave enough to cut Kevin off, and even the striker looks impressed. Andrew's immediately thrown by the quality of her stare, the

determination. Neil makes a strained noise in the back of his throat, and well, he does know Katelyn better. "You guys are talking about Disneyland? Like...Disneyland Disneyland?"

The existence of a knock-off Disneyland is certainly a topic Andrew will explore with Neil later.

"Oh no," Aaron whispers, and that's all the warning they get.

Neil leans further into Andrew's personal space, almost guarding. Like he senses the catastrophe too. "Uhh, yeah?"

Katelyn screams.

Andrew's hand on the back of Neil’sneck keeps him from jumping out of their seat, but Katelyn's got a one track mind as she rushes for him, plopping down on the ground as Aaron checks his ears for ringing.

The only satisfying part is that Katelyn pushes Kevin out of the way in the process. He goes reeling back with a yelp, very unbecoming of royalty.

"Oh my god! Neil you **have** to go, it's so fun!" Katelyn cheers, clapping her hands together softly. She chooses then to show Neil her backpack, adorned with about 100,000 Disney pins. Just an estimate.

As if Neil knows what any of them are. Neil barely blinks at Elsa's face before Katelyn's back to talking his ear off. "I've been trying to get Aaron to go with me for months but we don't ever have the time. I have a super long list of stuff I want! If I give you the money will you get them for me?"

Katelyn bites her lip rather hard then, like she almost let a 'please' slip, and Andrew doesn't try to think about the consideration. Katelyn clasps her hands together instead, like a plea.

Andrew figures the only reason her forehead isn't on the floor is because she knows better than to have any faith in a boys' dorm room.

"Whoa, whoa," Neil says, raising his hands in the face of Katelyn's puppy eyes. "I'm not going--"

The puppy eyes turn into those of a rottweiler. Andrew doesn't know why all his previous judgements are being so twisted on this mediocre Thursday night, but whatever.

"Neil," Katelyn breathes, patience tested. "It's the *happiest* place on Earth."

Andrew's eyes flit to Neil's, communicating the same thing: bullshit.

Neil's confused expression falls into downright boredom, watching Andrew swirl the remains of his dessert. "Katelyn, I don't know how to tell you this, but I actually don't care."

Aaron wheezes at the same time Katelyn deflates.

"Josten--"

"B-but..." Katelyn turns her shining eyes on Aaron, cutting off his warning like a shiv. Andrew almost doesn't want to watch his brother be this pathetic. "Aren't I right, babe? Neil just *has* to experience it, he has to!"

Andrew hears Kevin open a bag of chips.

"I--um," Aaron tries, glancing between Neil and Katelyn's pout. It takes him about...two attempts to make words. "Yeah Josten, you have to."

"Wow," Kevin mutters, off to the side.

Neil glares at Aaron's weakness, but he had to know Aaron would be useless from the start. Aaron can't say no to his girlfriend.

What a loser.

"Katelyn, I'm not going," Neil tries again, dutifully not looking at the Disney-vomit backpack Katelyn keeps inching closer to him. "Andrew and I are just stopping by to drop off paperwork for one of Kevin's new recruits and that's it."

Kevin takes a deep breath, like he remembers he started this argument in the first place, but is cut off by Katelyn's backpack hitting the floor.

Neil is the only one who seems to take it as a threat, and he holds up a hand for Kevin to shut up. Now, Andrew knows most mafia movies are unrealistic and stupid, but he thinks he's had enough actual exposure to make a good guess.

This feels like some kind of standoff between two troublesome redheads, and he meets Aaron's confused stare with his blank one.

He wishes everyone would get out of his dorm.

"Okay, I get it," Katelyn says slowly, words spaced out by deep breaths for effect. Andrew would think she's a theater major, not biology. Neil watches Katelyn's hands fold in front of her, eyes hard. "I didn't want to have to do this."

Neil quirks a brow, somewhat amused.

"Neil."

"Katelyn."

"*You* owe *me*," she says, and the room freezes. Owe. Haha. That's a very dangerous word to toss around in the presence of Andrew Minyard, especially concerning his boyfriend who he's sworn to protect. Andrew turns on her with a frown, but she's undeterred by his ominous stance, fixed solely on Neil. "From the time. With the thing."

Katelyn flips her wrist back and forth then, an almost meaningless gesture, and no one knows what she's talking about

Except for Neil.

The striker's face goes *red*, and Andrew chooses then to grab the back of his neck. Neil's not panicking, Andrew knows, but it's an instinct. Katelyn's smug smile is starting to piss him off, and he shakes Neil sharply.

"Neil," he says, voice even despite the tension in his limbs. "What--"

"We're going to fucking Disneyland," Neil says with a groan, slumping into the edge of the beanbag chair. He looks far from distressed, more...like he's been bested.

Katelyn cheers, jumping up to hug Aaron, who still has no idea what's going on.

Same.

"I'll get my list ready!" Katelyn rips out her science notebook, nearly tearing some neatly written equations. Not that she cares, in the moment. "Oh Neil, you're the best!"

Andrew drags Neil by the chin until their gazes meet, and Andrew hates when Neil looks sheepish. It means he's up to no good. "Neil, she can't force you to--"

"She's not forcing me," Neil sighs, tugging Andrew's sleeve until he lets their fingers link together. Neil's smile is rueful as he slots his eyes over to where Katelyn is scribbling on her homework, and he makes sure no one is watching when he slides Andrew's hand against his cheek. "Trust me when I say...I made the bed I'm about to lie in. I honor my deals too. Okay?"

Neil is such a problem, because he knows Andrew too well. He grinds his teeth, but he comes up with no argument. It's Katelyn, so it's not like the deal Neil made is anything life threatening or degrading, but Andrew's curiosity is annoying regardless.

Maybe when his pride dies down a little, he'll ask.

"Whatever you say," he scoffs, but keeps Neil's hand tucked against his side. "I still didn't agree to--"

Andrew looks down to where Neil fiddles with his shackle bracelet, still shining around his wrist because of how well the striker takes care of it. Neil tilts his head, and oh, oh no.

Andrew glares at the offending gift, given by his own hands and delicately tied around Neil's wrist. If he knew it would be this much of a weakness, he would've thrown it in the ocean.

"Andrew?" Neil asks, squeezing his hand, and Andrew doesn't know what to do other than curse Katelyn, himself, and then Walt Disney.

"I hate you," he mutters, and Neil's all too happy to hear it.

--

It takes Andrew about five minutes or so to determine that Jean Moreau is in love with Jeremy Knox.

It takes even less time for Andrew to decide he doesn't give a fuck. In fact, Andrew's not sure why he notices in the first place. He doesn't care about those things, but maybe it's just that they're so obvious, Andrew's can't help but pick up on it.

The long glances, the way Jeremy keeps reaching up to fix the stupid headband on Jean's head...

Gross.

The landscape in Andrew's mind has a tremble in it today, so there's no way for him to tell for sure why the two of them are so apparent to him. The air around him gives him a lot of things to linger on; disjointed laughter, cheery music, and less upsetting, the smell of fried desserts. It ties a rope around his brain and leads him in different directions, leaving only Neil as his weight. No wonder the Jean Moreau shitshow managed to slip in there somewhere.

Andrew doesn't even have the energy to be annoyed at that, at his inability to reign himself in and decide what to cast aside or focus on. His gaze scans the massive crowd in front of him, behind him, painfully aware that he's surrounded.

That Neil is surrounded.

He sighs, and the sound makes his boyfriend flinch in relief. Like he forgot Andrew was there, and is now all too happy that he is.

Calm down, junkie.

Andrew's fingers itch for a cigarette, but that ship had sailed as soon as he stepped through the Disneyland entrance. He thinks this, but he's actually not particularly anxious. He's not Neil, who needs to know all the quickest ways out of a place and who takes a large crowd as an invitation to slip in and disappear.

That's mostly where the itch comes from, Andrew realizes with only some irritation; he's hyper-aware of Neil, and all his reactions. The striker keeps glancing around at the streams of people, the bright colors and signs inviting them to a landscape with no rhyme or reason.

It should be everything Neil hates, and Andrew watches his blue eyes trace the cobblestone and directories.

"Beautiful isn't it!" Jeremy gestures to the road leading up to main street, and some of the tension in Jean's shoulders notably dissipates. "Did you know Disneyland brings in an average of--"

"50,000 people a day," Jean deadpans, as if the thought still makes him queasy. He gets a genuine laugh out of Jeremy for it, so Andrew guesses that was the point all along.

Andrew remembers everything, and he did not need that useless fact. But alas, now it's *stuck*.

Neil's body is surprisingly still beside him. Calm.

Andrew pauses, waiting for Neil to show some sign that he can't handle this. It's not a reflection of any kind of weakness Andrew thinks he has, he simply knows that sometimes Neil pushes himself where he shouldn't. Andrew considers this a loophole in their non-finalized deal. He lets Neil fight his own battles, but Andrew is not afraid to step in and put a stop to the ones Neil doesn't know he's in.

But, to Andrew's unintentional relief, Neil doesn't look two seconds from a panic attack. The strikers face settles into a deadpan expression, a habit stolen from Andrew himself. There's no tremble, or fidgeting, or sign to tell Andrew to drag Neil back to their hotel and hole him up there.

Neil simply looks fucking *done*, and Andrew couldn't agree more.

Their unfortunate companions are there to remind them it's only the beginning.

"Oh my god, what should we do first?" Jeremy Knox babbles, stupid Mickey ears on his head, and Andrew watches with only some amusement as Neil leans back an inch in fear. The striker never did know what to do with genuinely happy people. Katelyn, he's come to understand based on the things they have in common. Their protective instincts and tempers ghost over her sheltered lifestyle and talkativeness, though Andrew still doesn't get how Neil stands her. Renee he simply hadn't trusted; Neil had seen the darkness beneath the smiles, but in time, he'd come to trust and value her as well.

Jeremy Knox is a different story, and currently even Andrew doesn't know how to feel about him. Such optimism and ignorance to the real world are things Andrew would normally write off in a person, but there's something swimming beneath the surface in Jeremy Knox's eyes that has him rethinking.

In short, Andrew gets the vibe that if pushed far enough, Jeremy Knox might actually have the capacity to snap over Disneyland. *Disneyland*.

That kind of madness is something Andrew can't help but recognize in people, and he keeps an eye on Neil as a result. He should've known; who gets custom Disney ears the color of their fucking school?

"Uh..." Neil tries, but he's apparently speechless. Andrew reaches down to tug on Neil's belt loop, and he won't ever say it's out of comfort. Neil takes it like one though, scooting closer, and the urge for nicotine is less powerful for a moment.

There's no avoiding it, and he despises feeling trapped. They're going to have to spend their whole day here. It really isn't their kind of place, but Andrew has no right to wonder how they got roped into this.

Andrew glares at Neil’s bag. He didn’t bring it for them.

That's why they're here, because Neil has a two-page souvenir list in his backpack courtesy of Aaron's girlfriend.

Andrew's scowl returns at the memory, and he turns it on Jean.

Just because.

"Jean, what's your favorite ride?" Jeremy asks, eyes shining. Neither Andrew nor Neil asked for the recommendation.

"Indiana Jones," Jean answers, seemingly without thinking too hard on it, and his eyes shine when Jeremy beams.

"Mine too!"

Gag.

Andrew's opinion of Jean Moreau has not improved over the past year. Andrew promised Neil he wouldn't confront the man while they were actually at the park, but it's a talk Andrew will eventually have if he has anything to say about it.

He's different though, that much Andrew can tell. The backliner still curls in on himself, making himself as small as can be despite his height. The tattooed '3' is dark against his pale skin, but the

sun has taken out some of the starkness. Jean always keeps his hands in front of himself, as if ready to guard against an attack, but his shoulders are less stiff around his new team.

They're observations, nothing more. Andrew couldn't care less about Jean Moreau's life or happiness. It's all his own to deal with, but Andrew cannot ignore the changes, since they mirror Neil's own.

Speaking of Neil...

He's still trying to find a polite way of telling Jeremy he has zero clue about what Disneyland has to offer, and Andrew notes that Neil must've sensed it too: Jeremy's batshit opinion about this place. Otherwise Neil would never hold back the usual bluntness.

Andrew would pay to see it.

Jean tugs one of Jeremy's Mickey ears, gesturing to the entrance. "The girls are here."

Neil's demeanor breathes a little when he sees Laila and Alvarez approaching; he likes them, and even Andrew knows they're not nearly as annoying as their teammates. They're walking hand in hand, the same Trojan ears glistening on their heads.

What is it with these people?

Andrew lets the greetings fall into the background, but can't say he feels awful when Laila cracks some dumb exy pun, making the edge of Neil's lips twitch in a smile.

Another thing the girls have to offer: they seem to know when Jeremy is about to launch into another tirade.

"Jeremy cool it," Alvarez says, holding Jeremy back by the hoodie before he can get anywhere further into Neil's bubble. "Neil's not going to remember everything about all the different sections, just let him explore."

For a split second, Jeremy's face scrunches up, like he ate something foul. "He needs to know not to go to....*that* place."

Laila rolls her eyes. "You mean Star Wars--"

"*Stop*."

Laila turns her aggravated stare on her girlfriend, but all Alvarez offers is a shrug. "He's right."

Neil turns to Andrew as if he'll understand, but he does not.

Jeremy's eyes flit around the park to all the decorations, the crowd a sea of Mickey ears, planning out where to drag them. And the rest of them allow it. Team dynamics don't interest Andrew much, but they're not following Jeremy out of fear. They're treating this journey, along with Jeremy's eccentricities, as inevitable and maybe even endearing.

Andrew wants to leave.

Then Jeremy gasps, staring down at his empty hands. "Neil, you and Andrew have never been here right? Maybe I should've gotten you a map, for the experience, you know?" Then Jeremy tilts his head up, in that haughty way Kevin might after lecturing them on an exy skill he acquired. "It's fine though, *I* know where everything is. You're in good hands!"

Andrew seriously doubts that.

"Oh, that reminds me!" Jeremy says, plopping his giant backpack on the floor. Andrew wonders if he packed for the possibility of them being stuck there for eternity. It's a gift for Jeremy Knox to be able to make Andrew's day that much worse. He pulls out two custom sets of ears from his backpack, styled in white and orange. Palmetto colors.

No.

"You guys can match," Jeremy says with a wink, and Neil looks torn. On one hand they're orange, on the other hand they're absurd.

But of course, Neil's obsession wins over, and he grabs for a pair of ears without hesitation.

Andrew can't.

"I'm not wearing those," Andrew states, uncaring of how the rest of them flinch. Neil's the only one not surprised, but he's giving Andrew that *face*, and Andrew has to hold himself back from telling Neil to stop.

We're in public, control yourself.

But Neil just sighs, fixing the ears to his head. They clash with Neil's reddish-brown hair, bright and sparkly.

Andrew hates being gay.

He ignores Jean's glare as Jeremy holds the other pair of ears to his chest. More evidence, Andrew realizes, and the pathetic kind too. Jean can't stand the thought of someone hurting his not-boyfriend's feelings.

"O-oh," Jeremy says, but his smile is back, undeterred. He spins to face Neil, who miraculously, doesn't flinch. "Well, I guess I'll wear them then! Neil, you and I can match! I don't want you to be alon--"

The stream of consciousness in Andrew's head comes to a jarring halt, tires screeching.

Unacceptable, absolutely not. He doesn't even have a moment to think about why, or stop himself from being so ridiculous.

He snatches the ears from Jeremy's hands and puts them on, refusing to meet Neil's smug stare.

"Shut up."

And thankfully, Neil does, but others do not.

"He's as bad as you babe," Laila whispers behind him, and he practically feels the heat radiating off Alvarez.

"Can it."

Andrew catches Jean's sigh of relief in his peripheral, and isn't quite sure why he agreed to not kill him in the happiest place on Earth.

"You guys look great!" Jeremy comments, but Andrew is already walking ahead, eager to be anywhere else.

That, and he's pretty sure the churros are this way.

Neil keeps up with him easily, given his strong legs, even knowing Andrew is deliberately trying to not look at him. Neil's gaze is a warm, affectionate thing, one Andrew will never be used to. Neil's so distracted, he almost trips, and Andrew hooks his arm around Neil's waist to right him. They're connected for merely a second, but Andrew's arm feels like it's on fire.

"Focus," he growls, but Neil doesn't take it as a threat. He never does.

"Mm, I can't," Neil says. "I like them. I like them on you."

"They're hideous."

"So our uniforms are hideous?"

"Yes."

They reach the churros, and Neil buys him three.

Jeremy starts to babble again as Andrew digs in, and Andrew can't help but notice he buys Jean one without being asked. The ex-Raven doesn't look super pleased with the sweetness, but he eats it anyways.

And throughout all the chatter, Jean won't stop staring right at Jeremy.

Why does Andrew keep noticing? He might just be able to blame Katelyn for that too.

Ever since he picked her up from Eden's, she's been responsible for a lot of unacceptable thoughts in his head. All because of one, stupid line of reasoning.

"I know, I know a lot of people use the word and they don't mean it, or they don't act like it but...that's on them. That's not real love, the actual thing, the definition. Just because people use the word incorrectly doesn't mean the feeling isn't real."

Real love. Already, there's so many things wrong with that phrase. Katelyn doesn't see it as subjective, Andrew doesn't see it as anything at all. Devotion, protective, consideration...they are all things people would perhaps put towards the definition, but they neglect the absences as well. Absence of hurt, of blame, of judgement.

That's the half so many people don't get right, and even if they do, Andrew cannot see how it could be wrapped up in a word.

He watches Jean sigh and lean into Jeremy's sphere, and thinks of how his brother looks at Katelyn. It's eerily similar.

Andrew would not use the word love normally, so he reaches in to pluck Katelyn's idiotic definition out from the past to see if it applies. The pretty parts are there; Jeremy is constantly aware of Jean's presence, careful to steer him to the edges of crowds, to check if he's alright. On the opposite end of things, Jean just looks like he'd burn the so called happiest place on Earth to the ground if it meant being able to listen to Jeremy's prattle.

He's not willing to analyze much more than that, not with Neil by his side. It puts pressure on the stone in him, dropped there by Katelyn that night at Eden's and steadily growing with every moment he spends around his boyfriend.

"I think we should definitely go on Indy though," Jeremy says, leaning in to take a bite of Jean's churro. It's so stupidly romantic Andrew wants to vomit. "I want to see Jean get scared again!"

The girls smirk, though a minute later Alvarez is teasing Laila just the same. Jean's face is colored red, not with shame, but innocent embarrassment. Not becoming of a Raven, but then again, Jean never wanted to be one.

"I was *not* scared, I had never been on the ride before!" Jean crosses his arms, and his teammates look at him in the way the Foxes look at Neil. Complete adoration.

"It scared him to death," Jeremy says to Andrew and Neil, trying very poorly to whisper.

And, without breaking eye contact with Jean, Andrew says: "If only."

Because really, *if only*.

Jean's the only one besides Neil who takes the statement as intended, as in completely seriously. The backliner's face goes white, staring at Andrew and waiting for it to be a joke. He has to know deep down it's not.

Jeremy holds his stomach from how hard he's laughing. "Ha! You're a riot Andrew," he wheezes, and Neil regards him as neutrally as he can. It's hard, when Jeremy sounds like a dying seagull.

Andrew pulls out his phone, avoiding Neil's gaze. Technically, he only promised not to physically confront Jean at Disneyland, nothing else. "That's me, comedy king."

Without looking up, Andrew opens his notes app and sidesteps Jeremy until he's closer to Jean. He has no qualms about calmly typing out the words 'I despise you' before showing it to him.

Honestly, no other Raven is this easy to read, but Andrew supposes it has more to do with Jean's complete revival than anything else.

Jean reads the message, blinks, looks at Neil as if to confirm his suspicions, and then nods slowly.

Well, now he knows. It'll be a good way to put a pin in things for now.

When Andrew walks back over to his churro holder (see: Neil), the redhead is shaking his head, grin way fonder than it should be.

--

It takes around fifteen minutes for them to ditch the group, and for Andrew to stuff his pair of ears into Neil's backpack to never see the light of day again.

It's absurdly easy, they barely have to duck into the crowd or put their heads down. Despite Jeremy's insistence that Andrew and Neil see all there is to see, he'd hardly taken his eyes off Jean. In fact, the two are so engrossed in each other they barely notice the girls, who seem to weirdly not mind.

Jeremy is the talker, and Jean is only too happy to go along with it, soaking in every nonsense opinion even when he seems to not understand the relevance or importance. Andrew wonders if

this so called 'love' truly makes people that uncaring, but then again, he knows it does. He's watched his brother fawn over every dumb little detail of Katelyn's life. Once, she'd gone on a ten minute tangent about her colored pencil coordinated note taking system. Aaron had been fascinated, not because he cared about the content of the words, but because of Katelyn herself.

Andrew doesn't understand, but his mind conjures up the image of Neil peeking over the top of a bus seat, the hours floating by.

They find a good spot to sit down on Main Street, perfect for the people watching Neil likes to do. Andrew's on his third churro with a fourth lined up, and if Neil's wallet is crying about it, he doesn't seem to mind. The striker's legs dangle lazily from the bench they're on, swinging in time with the cheery music blaring through the speakers. Andrew brought him here to escape the crowd; Neil always preferred to watch, to catalogue the different types of people. Disneyland, at the very least, should have an interesting variety for Neil to judge and pick apart for the nonsensical survival guide in his head.

Page ninety-two: signs of regret-filled parents. That's how Andrew would guess it's organized.

But no, Neil's staring right at him. Andrew could feel it mid chew, the striker's gaze penetrating and brighter than any of the thousand balloons he's seen flying around.

Andrew managed to hold out for about half a churro, no longer, before giving in.

Neil's triumphant smile is an indication he was all too aware of the game.

"Are they good?" Neil asks, and it's enough to make Andrew pause. He watches the way Neil adjusts those stupid ears on his head, the way he licks his lips to mimic the place Andrew assuredly has sugar on his own.

Rather than answer, and before he does something stupid, he shoves the end of the churro into Neil's mouth. It's not an uncommon occurrence.

Neil barely yelps before dutifully taking a bite. Andrew waits for the usual scrunch of his nose, the disgust at the sweetness. Still, Neil will never refuse something Andrew offers him.

"Not bad," Neil says, chewing slow. There's sugar on his lips now too, and Andrew realizes he made an error. "Still too much sugar."

Unheard of. There's no such thing.

With a scoff, Andrew wipes the excess sugar off Neil's lips with his thumb. "You disgust me, Josten."

It doesn't sound as convincing as it used to, and Neil's triumphant smile only grows wider. Only then does he sigh and lean back, staring into the sea of people who love wasting money. Andrew will never get the fascination.

There's a good distance between them on the bench which Neil hasn't tried to close, and won't until Andrew says otherwise. Andrew's not in the mood to feel his weight, not today. It wasn't brought on by anything specific, but Neil abides like he always does.

Neil doesn't seem any less content.

"I can't believe they haven't noticed we're gone," the redhead says, far from disappointed. The relief is something Andrew can relate to. It's been about an hour, and they've done nothing, but Andrew knows he's having a better time this way.

The last thing he wants is to watch Jean and Jeremy obliviously flirt and fawn over one another with no outlet. Andrew's not sure if they'd be worse if they were actually dating, and part of him considers just dropping the bomb on them to ruin any kind of movie moment they might have at this godforsaken place.

"I can," Andrew mutters, but doesn't elaborate. He's sure Neil hasn't actually noticed the pining, not with Andrew nearby, and certainly not with everything else going on. He doesn't need to know, because then they might have to talk about it.

Andrew doesn't have all the words for that yet.

Neil hums, interpreting the words in his own way. "Jean does seem...better. I guess he would be more focused on his friends. At least now Kevin will stop complaining, I'll get to tell him Jean's doing just *great*."

The topic of Jean Moreau isn't much better.

He's not able to keep all of his glower locked down, and he ends up making a passing school teacher flinch. "I don't care how he is," he says through his teeth, and Neil stiffens.

Yeah, wrong thing to bring up. Not as bad as the times Neil will drop his mother into conversation, but not good regardless.

Neil sighs, fiddling with his bracelet again. It's what he does when he wants to touch Andrew but won't. "Andrew, Jean is--"

Andrew turns the intensity of his stare on Neil. They've had this talk before, and he's not trying to bring it up again. Contrary to what other people may believe, he's not adverse to having difficult conversations with Neil. Arguments, even.

They happen, but...

There's something about it; Andrew won't say it's comfortable, but he simply knows it won't change anything. He and Neil disagree sometimes, but it seldom turns into a screaming match or the silent treatment. More often than not, Andrew's willing to keep coming back to a topic if it means they reach a compromise. He doesn't yield that way for anyone else, but Neil doesn't make it feel like submission or defeat. It's why it doesn't make Andrew nearly as antsy as he originally believed it would, when they started their *this*. For them, it's problem-solving.

This however...this is one thing Andrew can't excuse. Not yet, maybe not ever. They keep having to step away.

"Don't," Andrew says. Neil's eyes hold no fear, and they shouldn't. Andrew's not saying it unkindly, it's the truth. "Whatever you say will not change my mind. Not with this."

Not when it comes to people hurting what's mine.

Andrew's hands curl into the edge of the bench, the splitting wood a comfort. He's strong, his hands have the power to kill, to fend off. Why that's so important in this moment...

When Neil still doesn't look like he understands, Andrew reaches forward to flick the shackle pendant around his wrist, almost on instinct.

And well, guess it's become a weakness for them both.

Neil sighs, and bites his tongue in a rare show of restraint. The striker keeps back every counterpoint and argument, which he surely has handfuls of, and puffs out his cheeks. Any other moment it would be...maybe not so annoying.

But not cute.

Some of the trembling in Andrew's frame leaves; he's not dumb enough to think this is over, Neil is too stubborn. But for now, the striker accepts it.

Though, not without being infuriating. Neil's gaze pierces him, sticking Andrew to the spot.

"I'm safe with you Andrew," Neil breathes, and Andrew's not willing to acknowledge how Neil quickly aims for the root of the problem. It's a spike through Andrew's chest. Again, Neil races ahead of Andrew's own thought process at the most random times.

So that's it. Andrew thinks. A promise.

It won't happen again. Neil has no way of knowing that, but he wants Andrew to believe it; nothing will hurt Neil so severely again because Andrew won't allow it. Andrew will thrash and

bleed before it happens again, but Jean Moreau is a reminder that it *can*, even when most of the guilt falls on a dead man. There will always be others, lurking in the shadows. Weapons, threats.

But still, with all his paranoia, Andrew can't even tell Neil to be quiet, because to refute such a statement feels wrong in a number of ways. Neil's trust is something he earned.

Andrew hums instead, and refuses to repeat the obvious. Instead, he pushes Neil back by the shoulder, his back hitting the bench and forcing Neil to loosen up.

Better.

"I can't believe a place like this exists," Neil sighs, giving into the calm Andrew lends him. Andrew's not sure if he means it from the perspective of a runaway or not. Disneyland would be an enigma to most people with Neil's past.

"You don't feel happy?" Andrew says with a sneer, taking in the fighting families and crying children. He knows there's equal parts people smiling and having fun, and he's choosing to center himself on the negatives, but he's not in the mood to apply Bee's advice for once.

"Well if I did it would be because of you," Neil says, grin smug from the stare Andrew turns on him. No one needs his sappiness. "But I don't really like that word."

Haha.

Andrew pokes Neil in the leg, more like a jab, and Neil jumps. "Stop stealing my lines."

Neil snorts. "I just meant in terms of this place. Doesn't it feel untrustworthy from the get-go if you advertise your park as the happiest place? It can't *actually* be."

It's amazing how hard Neil's brain works when it comes to unimportant topics. "Careful, if Jeremy hears you he'll have a meltdown."

"That would be interesting though."

"And potentially homicidal."

Andrew makes a note to bring Kevin if he ever has to return here. Kevin won't be able to keep his distaste hidden, and he'll get to really test the Jeremy Knox theory.

"Have you ever been to an amusement park?" Neil asks a moment later, voice low. Treading lightly.

It's not a particularly bad memory for Andrew though, and he only shrugs. He's no longer shocked about how much he talks to Neil. it's easy, not draining.

"Mostly for school, I wouldn't waste time with the rides," Andrew says, and feels the memory of old dollar bills in his hands. Sometimes he'd be lucky enough for his foster homes to provide him money for food, sometimes not. "Carnivals were easier. I could just go off and find some abandoned corner to smoke or wait it out."

No one ever cared to come looking for him.

Despite his sweet tooth, he seldom had the actual money to spoil himself with the fried foods either. He makes up for that now, *obviously*.

Speaking of, he wants a frozen lemonade at some point.

Neil's eyes are devoid of pity, but Andrew knows he could quickly turn that understanding gaze into a rage-fueled one if he chose to provide any of the details.

He doesn't. He never enjoyed things like amusement parks, and he doesn't mind either way if Neil does, but part of him is simply at ease, here on this stupid bench.

Neil's protection can't reach back into the past, no matter how badly the striker would like it to.

"Everyone always talked about Disneyland as the best place in the world," Andrew offers instead, waving his hand around. If anything, the sheer size of the park is the most impressive thing about it. The other kids in his classes couldn't let it go; family vacations, dream dates, etc.

The hype around the park never died down no matter how Andrew aged.

Compared to Neil sitting next to him, the park is without.

"And your verdict?" Neil asks anyways, because he tries not to assume when he can.

Andrew's not sure why his heart reacts the way it does to that.

Neil's stupid ears pair with his Palmetto hoodie perfectly, and he looks like the pumpkin Cinderella would've taken to the ball. The fierceness of him isn't softened in the slightest by it though, his vulnerability comes from his eyes, the way all his alarms become inactive in Andrew's presence.

Andrew craves it, this complete, unyielding trust.

He hates how Neil can make any situation interesting.

"It's annoying," Andrew eventually says, rolling up his churro wrapper into a tight ball. He misses the trash can when he tosses it, and ignores the disgruntled stare he gets for it from a park worker. "Not awful."

Neil straightens up, too proud of himself. "Are you saying that because of the churros or because I'm here?"

"Be quiet."

Neil, because his death wish inclination isn't as active today, doesn't point out the non-answer. The striker just hands him money for another churro, though he's considering beignets.

Neil watches the way Andrew stares at the money, seemingly content to allow Andrew this indulgence. "I remember kids talking about it when I was younger. I could never understand why such a crowded place could be so fun. Much less the lines or overpriced food. But..."

Andrew clutches the money tight, but it's a poor substitute for Neil's hand. "But?"

"But well, it's not like I ever got the chance to try it out." Neil gestures to the precise decorations, the ornate buildings, and his eyes flit down the trolley lines like they remind him of a destination far worse. Andrew never asked Neil if he train hopped before. Neil sighs, his nose scrunching from the sweet, candied scents in the air. "Maybe I would've loved it. Then I'd be a lunatic like Jeremy."

It's meant to be a joke, but Andrew understands. That's the strangeness of the unknown. Had things been different, had they been raised like anyone else, there's no telling what they could've been like.

But things weren't different. Andrew isn't foolish enough to reflect on the past with bitterness or entertain what he could've been like *if only.* The asinine exercise would do nothing for him, for his *future*.

The future he's coming to anticipate and accept, because Neil also refuses to look back. It's still a globby, hard to see mess right now, but the more days pass with Neil by his side, even it begins to take shape.

But he doesn't have room in his chest to say all that, so instead he tugs on Neil's headband again. Snug.

"You're already wearing the ears," he drawls. As if Neil forgot, his hands fly up to tug on one of the ears, and Andrew is helpless to save the image forever.

"I should probably take them o--"

"No."

Just...no.

It's hard to make Neil blush, but when it happens Andrew makes sure to catalogue it. He watches the color spread on the bridge of the striker's nose, and then Neil laughs, a light and fleeting sound. Andrew hears it over everything else.

Neil turns on the bench, hugging his knees to his chest, and Andrew is moving to face him without thinking about it. "I feel like...if the others were here they'd say we're wasting the opportunity," Neil muses, pursing his lips. "Like we should be going on rides and watching shows."

"That's everyone's problem then," Andrew waves the thought off, tracking Neil's lips. He's not ready for a kiss, but he's warming up to the idea.

But, Neil seldom brings up things pointlessly with him.

"It is," Neil agrees, and Andrew presses his thumb into the crease of his boyfriend's brows. Neil doesn't flinch. "But they might be right. I guess I can't expect to have the same opinions now as I did as a kid on the run. I should at least be able to say, yeah I went to Disneyland slightly more adjusted and I still don't see what the big deal is."

Ah, the point emerges. Andrew will admit...

"You don't seem anxious," Andrew observes, because he expected Neil to be *very* nervous.

Neil tilts his head, and Andrew has to make him *stop* doing that. "What?"

Andrew leans back, and Neil follows the touch instinctively before getting a hold of himself. "If you really felt you were wasting time, you'd be all fidgety and irritating."

"I didn't say I *felt* like I was wasting time, just that I maybe should," Neil sighs. Andrew isn't sure what he means, but he doesn't have time to think about it when Neil's impish grin comes back. "But no, any time I spend with you isn't a waste."

Andrew leans in, slow and insistent, and lets Neil tense in anticipation of a touch, a kiss. Then, Andrew pushes his face away. It's what he deserves, and Neil bites his tongue.

Huffy.

Neil slumps back, but the pouty thing he's doing dampens the scowl. He needs to not spend so much time with Katelyn.

"You've become a sap Josten."

And it's dangerous for both of them. Andrew doesn't mean for the words to come out so light, but what's the use in correcting himself?

"I get it from you," Neil shoots back, and oh, *now* he chooses to read Andrew's mind. At the twitch of Andrew's mouth, Neil smiles, the kind reserved for Andrew and Andrew alone.

Andrew's nerve endings are still a little fuzzy, but he tugs Neil's sleeve until he follows. He brings Neil close enough to feel Andrew's heat, to smell the cinnamon. This works, for now.

And Neil, despite being somewhere people dream of visiting, looks totally focused on him. When he gazes down the trolley lines again, the expression is much more promising.

"Who knows? It might be fun if we went now, with all the foxes," Neil wonders aloud. "Not sure, since I think the closest thing to a ride I've ever been on is a train, and not legally."

Well, there's the train hopping question answered.

But that's it, he supposes. He feels nothing about this place, or any amusement parks for that matter. Even in his tumultuous childhood, he experienced them, never understood the appeal.

Neil's never had the opportunity to try. He's never been able to form an opinion.

Andrew thinks that's at least one aspect of his freedom Neil should have, even if it is something so trivial.

Andrew sighs; what has he gotten himself into?

Neil Josten is a whirlwind of an individual, but he's Andrew's.

That's what Neil would say, without hesitation, every time.

'But I'm yours.'

Andrew really *does* need a cigarette, but that frozen lemonade will have to do. He stands up, making a show of brushing himself off. He can *feel* the tilts of Neil's head behind him, for fuck's sake.

"C'mon then," Andrew says, turning around to adjust how crooked Neil's headband is. Another problem he didn't need, but it's too late now. Damn merchandise. When Neil still makes no move to get up, Andrew tugs his bangs. "Let's go on a ride."

Neil's jaw opens and closes, but Andrew is already turning away from him. Neil's fast, he should be able to catch up. "W-wait, are you sure?"

Neil scrambles to his feet, and Andrew can't look directly at him. He's sure there's something bright and shiny swimming in those eyes right now, and that's far too much.

He tries to go through his mind for what he knows about Disneyland, and asks himself if he's in the mood to be up high.

No, not today. Neil has him feeling far too much already.

"I think the Matterhorn is enclosed," he says, in lieu of an explanation, and knows Neil will get the meaning.

Neil grips the straps of his backpack, reigning in the energy as best he can. Andrew wonders when he'll work up the nerve to tell Neil he doesn't have to when it's like this. Even without touch, Andrew promised to take everything Neil had to offer.

He's not sure if Neil can sense the feeling, but his face softens anyways. "Okay...yeah!"

Neil falls in step beside him, and Andrew revises his previous statement with only mild displeasure. He doubts he will ever have enough of this.

--

The Matterhorn was, what a shocker, a bad idea.

Andrew will never say he tries to make his driving a comfortable experience, but he knows his road raging still would've been a more pleasurable time than being thrown around on that poor excuse for a ride.

The bumpiness of the Matterhorn was also not helped by how tense he was; he felt like a cutting board in a blender, trying to force away the unrealistic thought of Neil flying off the edge and plummeting to his death during the whole two minute affair.

A forty-five minute wait for two minutes of back pain that'll last the rest of the day.

"Well that *sucked,"* Neil says with a wince, stretching out his back slowly. Andrew pointedly looks elsewhere. "Why do people do this for fun? I feel like my spine got ripped out and then put back in the wrong way."

Andrew wants to tell him to stop being so dramatic, but for once Neil's words are accurate.

They tried. No one can say they didn't try.

"Nevermind you were right," Neil says as Andrew orders them a lemonade to share; Neil ignores the glare Andrew gives him for chugging the first half in one go. Neil sighs from the rush of citrus, placing the cold cup to his forehead. "Can we go home?"

"Doubtful, unless you want to walk," Andrew sighs. He retches the lemonade away from Neil, pushing away his grabby hands. An admirable tactic, but fruitless. "I knew carpooling was a stupid move."

"Hey, we take offense to that."

Neil tenses on instinct, like the hypocrite he is. He's so used to being the shadow, the nosy meddler who overhears everything. Andrew would think he's more than deserving of being on the receiving end if he wasn't so annoyed himself.

They turn to find the girls grinning ear to ear, and Andrew notes right away how there's no smiling bundle of 'I love Disney' with them.

Jean and Jeremy are nowhere to be found.

How 'bout that.

Alvarez unlinks her arm from her girlfriend's to ring out her damp shirt; Andrew notices they're soaked from head to toe, sneakers squeaking from their drenched socks. It makes Andrew grimace on the inside; it should feel atrocious, but the girls are beaming.

"So you two *do* act like a couple," Laila says, and Andrew's not sure he gets what she means. He *does* decide she's his least favorite of the two though. "I had some doubts."

Andrew couldn't care less about that, but Neil's a different story. Defiantly, Andrew silences his boyfriend before he can even go on his tirade by shoving the lemonade back into his hands.

An acceptable sacrifice; Neil's aware they don't seem like the stereotypical couple, but he hates having his feelings doubted.

He hates it even more when people doubt Andrew's, and Andrew pushes the thought of Katelyn's suspicious expression at Eden's out of his mind.

What other people assume about him is not his problem.

"Why didn't you just buy him his own lemonade?" Alvarez asks, her eyes flicking over Neil's expression. He's calming down, but the aggravation is there. Guess not all the Trojans are oblivious.

Andrew takes the bait for what it is, no energy to be contrary.

"Neil doesn't need that much energy, and he'll drink mine no matter what because he's annoying," Andrew says, and sure enough, he hears the slurp behind him, an alert that Neil basically sucked down the rest of his drink.

One down, several to go.

"It's true, I am," Neil chimes in at that, refreshed. It's then he actually seems to pay attention, scanning the girls from head to toe. "Why are you guys all wet?"

Laila claps a hand over Alvarez's wolfish grin before she can even respond to that, and Andrew is glad. He really didn't want to hear it.

At least Neil would get the joke this time.

"Splash Mountain," Laila replies hastily, like they have any clue what it is. "Horrible build-up, decent pay-off. Jean hates it though so it's the best way to make sure we don't run into *them*."

At her own words, she checks behind her, like Jeremy Knox can appear at the mere mention of his not-boyfriend.

They probably shouldn't stay in the same place too long.

"Outside Star Wars anyways," Alvarez adds, prying Laila's hand off her mouth for .2 seconds.

"*Hush*, he'll hear you!"

Then, Alvarez must lick her girlfriend's hand, because the goalie retches away with a disgusted yelp. "Hey! *Gross*!"

"Wow, you don't love me."

It's punctuated with giggles, and Andrew stuffs his hands in his pockets; why that word decides to plague him today, he's not sure. He wouldn't say the girls act as useless as Katelyn and Aaron do, but their dynamic is still distinct.

Affectionate.

Andrew turns his hard stare at the ground. No, no. It's still not right.

Neil, oblivious to Andrew's plight, squints at the empty space where Jean and Jeremy should be. "Wait...you guys ditched them too? Why?"

"They had the same idea as us," Andrew mutters, but Neil's lightbulb still hasn't gone off.

Laila's grin is as sardonic as it gets. "Ah, so you noticed?"

Andrew doesn't respond. He's steadily reaching his word quota.

Knowing the only chance of Andrew saying anything is by asking himself, Neil turns to him, too searching. "Noticed what?"

And oh, Andrew can't avoid talking about it after all, can he? He's not sure why he doesn't want to, there hasn't been much cause for concern with Neil lately. Not for months. Maybe not ever, but Andrew had been in denial there for a while.

Perhaps Andrew just hates being in this limbo, where he doesn't even know how he feels about a topic yet. It's happened before, but it's no less disconcerting than the other times. The jealousy, the concept of understanding, their first time...

His mind, a traitor, reminds him none of those situations ended horrifically.

"Moreau is in love with his captain," Andrew mutters, and watches the moment Neil blanches. No stopping the floodgates now. "Original."

Something in Neil's gaze twitches. Andrew's hasn't seen the look before, but it's surely not good for him or his pulse. Andrew turns his stare to the ice cream cart in the distance, but his sweet tooth is done for the day.

Another unfortunate reality.

"God, so they really are that bad," Laila groans. "For a second there, we thought it might just be us."

Alvarez scoffs, crossing her arms and putting all her weight on Laila. It must be a common occurrence; Laila huffs, but makes no move to push her away.

"We've been trying to get them together for ages," Alvarez continues, twirling her finger around like a never ending cycle. "We ditch them literally every *single* time in the hopes they finally have their moment."

Both their expressions fall then, truly defeated. Laila sounds at her wit's end, and Andrew feels little sympathy."But, no such luck."

Andrew can't even begin to pick apart how uselessly optimistic that is when idiots are concerned, but Alvarez seems to be tracking his every movement for some type of reaction. He should've never said anything, but she'll learn soon enough; he's not an easy read, despite a hot-headed outlier.

Neil blinks at them, a complex math problem with cliche romantic plots instead of numbers. "They're...into each other?"

The look he gets from the girls is similar to the pitying ones he gets from Allison whenever he says something particularly misguided about fashion.

Laila puts her hand on Neil's shoulder, patting him slowly. "Oh Josten, your face right now tells me all I need to know about you."

Then, the double shot of pity is poured right down Andrew's throat.

"You got an oblivious one too huh?" Laila says wryly, and Alvarez chokes.

"*Hey*."

Andrew won't dignify that with a response, but he figures it's obvious anyways.

Laila snorts, tugging on Alvarez's ear lobe. "But yeah, Jean totally wants to husband Jeremy. It's so painful. Disneyland is supposed to be romantic, but--"

Alvarez finishes the thought with a fart noise. Andrew's not sure why he speaks up, the conversation is so beneath him, and he blames Bee. He never used to talk so much before he realized that it actually *helped* his mind move down the endless river.

"Movie moments like that will never happen," Andrew says, nothing condescending or dismissive about it. It's the truth; he learned long ago that the grand gestures people expected seldom come to fruition. They could sit Jean and Jeremy at the table for two with violins playing around them and it most likely wouldn't do any good.

People won't do anything until they're ready to acknowledge how they feel, and even then they might not. Andrew never thought that was such a bad thing; shutting down a feeling, weighing the pros and cons of a decision until ultimately trying to be rid of it.

It was better that way.

He knows though, had he never let that go, he wouldn't have Neil next to him.

He also knows Bee would call that a *good* thing, the release of a way of thinking that he's yet to acknowledge as completely outdated.

None of that realization shows on his face.

"You sure sound fun," Alvarez mutters, but she's smiling in a way Andrew hates.

"Andrew's the funnest person I know," Neil adds, unhelpfully adding to the upbeat of Andrew's heart. If Neil could stop ruining the english language on purpose that would be great.

The girls wait for Neil to reveal it as a joke, but seconds of Neil's blank stare kill any chance of laughter.

No, Neil is completely serious. And maybe he's right, after all the good Trojan captain himself did call Andrew a *riot*.

Laila purses her lips after a moment. "Right..."

"Anyways, you better get a move on if you don't want to continue enjoying your date," Alvarez says, glancing behind her suspiciously while checking her watch. Laila's hand entangles in her girlfriend's, and Andrew notices the charm bracelet there. He wonders if it's a gift from Alvarez.

He's seen a similar, custom one on Katelyn's wrist for the longest time. He's about to ask himself why people are so obsessed with buying jewelry, before realizing he's in the same boat.

When did he come to permit this?

Ugh. He's not running around that particular race track again. "It's not--"

"We're going to go get drinks in the Star Wars cantina," Alvarez interrupts, hastily beginning to tug her girlfriend in that direction. Guess it's later than she thought. "Jeremy will come this way soon. He has a *very* specific itinerary."

Of course he does.

"Any...slow ride suggestions?" Neil asks before they go, and Alvarez squeaks when she runs right into Laila's strong back. Neil steadfastly ignores the glare Andrew sends him, though if they do have to go on more rides, Andrew would prefer something smooth.

The Matterhorn can burn.

"There's the storybook ride?" Laila says, pointing behind them down the path. "Or It's a Small World?"

Alvarez huffs. "There's a joke there somewhere..."

Andrew doesn't mean for it to happen, but his memory is a steel trap, with a layer of unpredictability wrapped around it. He can't stop it, can't turn it off. For the briefest of moments it brings him the image of a homely kitchen in California, his fingers tracing the carvings in the table while he watches Cass cook dinner. It smells good; he remembers. Of course he remembers, the dish, the ingredients, down to the stains on the tile and which cabinets were open.

The song Cass hummed from between her lips.

He'd never heard the real song, never cared to look it up online or search up the ride itself. But he knows the name, knows the tune.

"What's that?" Neil asks, and whether he means to or not, his voice pulls Andrew out of it. Not even just that...Neil has a way of firmly planting Andrew in this new reality he's forged and tailored.

For the better, Bee's voice reminds him.

Laila smiles, no doubt connecting the ride to memories of her own. Happier, softer memories. Andrew could have those too, if he wanted. It would just take some revision, overwriting. "It's just a boat ride, and it kills time for sure."

Just a boat ride. That's all.

Neil nods, turning to Andrew while the girls walk away. It's getting later; Andrew can tell by how blue Neil's eyes get, highlighted by the darkness. They're haunting in a way, like the unexplored bottom of the ocean. Horrific things lurk in the depths, but there's something pleasant about them too, calming in their mystery. Maybe because to Andrew, and only Andrew, it's familiar territory. Andrew has never felt that level of ease from something, but Neil's stupid expression is too soft when he speaks. "How about it?"

How about it? Hm.

Andrew looks off into the direction Laila pointed in, debating on if he should put himself through that. Is he ready to put himself through that?

He could take this step, he reasons. He could try to overpower the terrible memory with one of Neil, with the feeling of his weight beside him. Is it worth it? Will it work?

No, he can't think of it like that.

It won't erase anything; Andrew's not so naive to think he will ever be rid of the image in his head, the sound of Cass's voice. But...maybe he could make the crystal clear image blurrier, faded around the edges until his mind wavers, until he can no longer make out the scenes as well as before. Instead, his brain will default to Neil in the future. Whenever he hears the cheery tune, Andrew will think of his stupid headband and sugar-kissed lips.

Stronger, sturdier memories.

He's allowed Neil to implant them before, and it hasn't backfired. The process is not always easy, or without pain, but it's been worth it every time. Andrew sees no reason to mess with a working strategy.

Andrew grabs Neil's wrist, the firmest contact they've had all day, and something in him sighs at the same time Neil does.

He leads the way.

--

As soon as Andrew hears the tune as they enter the tunnel, he wonders if he made a mistake. Not because of the memory, though that's definitely there. No, it's the tune itself.

The music is loud, repetitive, with no lull. He's not sure how someone can work on this ride and not quit immediately. He should've expected it though, so the blame is on himself. It won't be over anytime soon either. The boat they're in is moving at an agonizing speed, but it's a relief for his back. The slow glide makes him painfully aware of the soreness in his legs, the heaviness of his eyelids.

The spotlights are pointing at the monuments and walls, leaving the riders in the shadows. If Andrew squints, the people in the boats ahead of him look like nothing more than silhouettes for the briefest of moments. Unreal, specters.

The song continues, and Andrew reevaluates. It's too late to get off the ride, and the song might be called fitting; there's a weird eeriness to it, along with the surreal feeling of the park noises being completely blocked out. It's silent, for being so loud, so irritating. But after a while he's sure he'd become numb to it, and then what would be left?

All he can hear other than the singing is the gentle slosh of the water and the occasional hushed voices of the people in front of them. Like the wind. He feels like a ghost on the ride, wispy and drifting in and out of centuries. The tune is ageless, has probably been around for decades, long before Cass started to hum it.

Somehow, it's a comfort. Cass had been insignificant, another way to separate her memory from the ride itself.

Some of the tension leaks out of his shoulders, and having Neil beside him lessens it further. There're two free seat rows in front of them; the line hadn't been too long at this time of day, and Andrew feels an inkling of gratefulness.

It's the closest thing to privacy they've had all day, he realizes, and some of the fuzziness from earlier dissipates. The static in his brain has had time to even and sizzle out; it's taken hours for him to get to this point, but when Neil lets a quiet 'yes or no' pass between them, the answer is easy. Certain.

Andrew pulls Neil against him, and Neil follows it up by entangling their fingers together. He hardly hesitates anymore, doesn't treat the gesture like something with an expiration date. Andrew privately thought it would be the case, but...he's yet to be tired of it.

It's not so rare anymore, holding Neil's hand.

They pass the first display of dancing puppets, just as the song repeats 'it's a small world after all' through the speakers. Andrew can feel Neil's wry smile before he sees it. "It really is a--"

"Finish that joke I'll kill you."

Neil throws his head back in the first sign of genuine joy from a ride, and Andrew thinks this is already better than anything else they'd previously done. It's less intensive, with just enough chaotic energy to appeal to Neil's sense of humor.

They're not the type of people usually caught dead on these kinds of rides, but the creepiness feels warmer than any of the other joyful displays Disneyland had to offer. Neil's laugh echoes off the high ceilings, and he smothers it quickly.

But Andrew's mind remembers, and he plays the cut off sound on a loop far more intense than the tune of the ride itself. He mixes them together, until they can't be pried apart.

When they pass the German section of the song, Neil looks at him expectantly, and the look Andrew gives him is unimpressed. Mischief dances in his boyfriend's eyes anyways, and again, it's not cute. It's not like Andrew is going to suddenly start singing along just because it's in German. Though, Neil's reaction might be worth it.

Neil critiques the lyric translation anyways, like it's not the simplest song to mass produce.

"This isn't so bad," Neil sighs as they pass under another archway to a different section of the *very* small world. His finger is starting to tap along on the back of Andrew's hand, and he's not sure if he should put an end to it before it gets stuck in Neil's head. Then he'd have to hear Neil humming it over and over, and while not as traumatic, there's only so much Andrew can take.

"Other people would probably call it torture," Andrew says, gesturing to the lifeless faces of the puppets. He wonders if there's any conspiracies about this ride online, he's sure Neil would get some morbid kick out of them.

"Wimps," Neil replies haughtily, and no, Andrew's pulse does not jump. "I'm atorture *connoisseur*."

He bastardizes the word so bad Andrew almost feels bad for France. Almost. When did Neil start thinking he was funny?

"That's not even remotely how you say it." Andrew untangles their hands purely for the purpose of flicking Neil's earlobe. Neil grabs for it again as soon as the punishment is doled out.

Junkie. "You speak that language..."

But Andrew's accusations mean nothing to Neil, per usual.

"I'm dumb remember?" Neil reminds with a shrug, and Andrew grits his teeth. He's still unsure how he feels about this; Neil's mind is vast when it comes to a lot of things. Languages, math, world knowledge, how to kill a man, basic things.

But otherwise...the ignorance can be...

Attractive.

Andrew almost gets off the boat from admitting it to himself. Dumb jocks with runner's hearts is a type he guesses, and it happens to be his.

Or, scratch that. Neil can't possibly fall into a group. Had more than one Neil existed, the mafia would've surely met their demise as a whole through a combination of violence and general dumbassery.

"You milk it on purpose," Andrew decides to say, because Neil *does*. Because no, Neil's far from dumb, he just knows what gets under Andrew's skin.

Neil chooses not to respond to that, predictably.

"It's just not as bad as I expected," Neil continues, leaning his head against Andrew's shoulder. He gives a long sigh, and Andrew's sure it can't be comfortable. As at ease as he is in Neil's presence, there's always a hardness there, a tension coiled in his body. Yet, Neil leans into him like a pillow and seems to cherish the steadiness.

For a while, they just listen to the song.

Andrew's not quite sure if he agrees with the message, but he doesn't care in the moment. He's come to acknowledge lately that he shares quite a bit with other people, much to his chagrin. Though in the grand scheme of things, he's eons away from them all.

Primarily, he doesn't like to think he could replicate this...*feeling*, whatever it is.

Certainly not enough to assign an overused word to, one stamped onto every relationship like a barcode. *'I love you.'*

He's never admired the words when other people used them. Is that fair, he wonders. Does it matter? He's stuck between a rock and a hard place; the need to be contrary itches at him. He shouldn't want to feel that way, shouldn't have to label this feeling as *love*...

And it doesn't feel right anyways.

He does not want to fit an insincere mold, but he doubts he and Neil ever could. They never have. This would not be so easily destroyed, toppled.

They simply share too much, and Andrew thinks back to his goal of replacing every bad memory with Neil. That's not an accident, or a desperate quick fix. That instinct is there for a reason...

Cass. Funny how his two separate problems seem to come together. Cass is an appropriate example. Andrew knows, better than anyone, that she hadn't *loved* him in Katelyn's definition, if that's what love even is. If *love* can be broken down like that, if it's *real*. Devotion, consideration, loyalty.

Andrew sighs; he can't go that deep into it. It's too much, bogged down by layers and layers of terrible experiences that have only just begun to be pushed aside like weeds. Never ripped out. The roots have taken hold, but they're withering.

Maybe it's because he's so tired of thinking about it that the words come out. He peers down at Neil against him, at the top of his head where the auburn curls are so within reach, and confesses to Neil's crown. He doesn't blame the need to admit things to Neil as influenced by love, it can't possibly be so contained. He just...something pushes him to work this out. "Cass would hum this, every now and again."

Andrew's not sure what he wants the reaction to be, but when Neil responds, Andrew's soul relaxes, so it must be what he *needed*. Neil goes rigid within an instant, robbed of the peace afforded them. Andrew didn't mean to throw it into their quiet bubble, but he doesn't regret it. These things aren't inconvenient. Andrew gives these pieces of information to Neil now, like he always has. Willingly, and they're received in kind.

Neil shoots up, eyes frantic when they meet Andrew's. He sees so many things in those blue eyes: rage at Cass, concern for Andrew, and things Andrew didn't ask for but will receive for as long as Neil is here. Neil looks frantic, and two seconds away from dragging them as far away from this place as possible.

Neil's voice is a whisper, sharp and desperate. "Why did you--"

Why indeed? Why come on this ride?

Andrew's puts all his boyfriend's worry and guilt into an early grave.

"I hate having her in my brain," he answers, and knows it's not an excuse. Being on this ride is far from traumatic, more therapeutic than anything, but he almost recoils. He's only ever admitted those things aloud, the pent up resentment and anger, in the privacy of Bee's office. Even then, it's pulling teeth. For so long he framed his time with Cass as the only blip of light in his life. But it had come with a price, and Andrew knows now it hadn't been remotely worth it. For so long he tried to protect that outlook, but now he wants it stained, blacked out. He just never knew it would be so hard to blot it out with his own hand.

And if that was not *love*...

Neil flinches, but Andrew keeps going, daring him to say something. He needs Neil to know he's serious, so he makes it personal, shared. "You're the obnoxious one, telling me to overwrite things all the time. That's what this is."

That's why I'm okay with this. It's you.

Andrew can see the moment Neil remembers; they'd been sitting on the roof, and Neil had asked him to only remember the *good* things, even if for just a moment. Andrew's not the best at employing this, and sometimes he vehemently denies the ability to do so, but not with this. Not today.

That feeling cannot be replicated; Andrew turns the idea in his head again and again, never getting closer.

But one thing is certain...

Neil's expression softens, and Andrew squeezes his hand before he flicks a look up at the bright orange monstrosity on Neil's head. "Now, this ride will just remind me of how terrible that headband is," he says, and Neil should at least be able to read between those lines. "Nothing else will come first."

I will latch onto you instead. Andrew never wanted that before, to cling to some idealized outlook again. But Neil is not that; Neil is painfully real. Sometimes he misunderstands, other times he keeps too much to himself. But at the end of the day, Andrew trusts him to do whatever it takes to remain by his side for as long as he chooses to be there.

Andrew is the same way; he can't go back to how it was before.

Andrew's not paying attention to the displays around them anymore, but he can feel his mind melding the images and the tune together with Neil's expression. Open, vulnerable, *welcome*.

Neil sighs a moment later, muscles relaxing. Not once does his hold on Andrew loosen, but he knows better than to pry about Andrew's past. Andrew has made it clear; this moment is not about an old memory.

Neil leans back, moving further into Andrew's space. "Mm, should I say something else annoying, make the moment stronger?"

And ah, back to normal already are we?

Andrew flicks the back of Neil's hand. "You just did."

He'll log that away too, as aggravating as it is.

"Yeah..." Neil breathes out with a laugh, his thumb rubbing small circles into Andrew's skin. Physical touch, muscle memory...Andrew needs all of it for this to work. He gladly focuses on that while Neil thinks; Andrew can tell solely from the crease in his brow the striker has more on his mind.

Neil's not necessarily like Andrew, he won't keep these things to himself for prideful reasons. He needs to let them out, or they will eat him up.

He's bad at hiding it too.

"Hey Andrew," Neil says eventually, and Andrew's ready for the words before they're even in the air between them. He'd been expecting this, dreading it, but not okay with putting it off any longer. He needs Neil's help, unfortunately, to piece it all together. "You said Jean was in love with Jeremy."

One day if life is especially cruel, and Andrew outlives Neil, he will make it his mission to pick the man's brain. Something in that stubborn subconscious always seems to anticipate the winding roads Andrew is currently stuck on, even when Neil actually has zero clue.

He's not so upset by this anymore.

Carefully, Andrew turns Neil's palm over to trace the heart lines. If he put them on a map, would they cross through all the places Neil's been? "I did say that."

And he's been re-thinking about if it's true. Who knows if Jean and Jeremy are actually in love. As much as he likes to compare them to his brother's and Katelyn's nauseating displays, affectionate looks and blushing cheeks can't be all there is to it.

Andrew had been stupid to chalk it up to just that. Not even Katelyn would've. And if that's the case, Andrew might never be convinced of Jeremy and Jean's feelings. Attraction sure, but he doesn't care enough to dig deeper.

There's not an equation to test levels of protectiveness, or comfort, in order to determine an abstract and troublesome thing like *love*. And why would he need to test his own feelings against such a thing anyways? He knows...he knows this is something he will keep for as long as he can.

"I thought you didn't use that word," Neil offers when Andrew is quiet for too long, debating on the best angle to attack this from. Neil tends to do that, when Andrew himself hasn't figured things out yet. If he poses questions that open up other doors, it clears the mess away. He notes how Neil says 'doesn't use' instead of 'doesn't like' or 'hates,' because it's true. Andrew isn't repulsed by the word, just annoyed with it and all its aspects. He does *not* get it.

It's like he told Katelyn...

"I don't, but only because it's untrustworthy," Andrew replies, rubbing the back of his neck. He's not making sense, not even to himself. He's simply trying to see if he's open to the idea of throwing out his old opinion, the one where the concept of love is something twisted beyond recognition. Fake. Overly reproduced.

It's far more difficult a feat than simply overwriting a bad memory. This feels more invasive, but Andrew knows he wouldn't be thinking about it if there wasn't something important lodged beneath.

Neil squints, unaware of Andrew's turmoil. "So you were insulting them?"

The game show buzzer in Andrew's head rings; nope, that's not it.

"I was applying Mrs. Minyard's definition..." Andrew tries not to sound too bitter. The whole reason he even let this issue cling to him is because of Katelyn. She's the worst.

"Katelyn?" Neil asks, but doesn't question further after Andrew nods. Andrew assumes he's used to this, and it's entirely likely he's had a similar conversation with Katelyn. Andrew won't think about that either.

Neil nods. "Okay well, do you care if they figure it out?"

Again, Neil strikes out, but it helps Andrew to eliminate the background noise in his head.

"No, it makes no difference to me," he says. He couldn't care less what becomes of Moreau's romantic life. "Though it would be annoying if we have to do this again."

Another forced outing surrounded by dense morons...

Andrew's had to deal with enough obliviousness.

Neil smirks. "You know, Kevin might flip out if they get together."

Ah, another rare pro...

Neil leans away, regarding Andrew like he's taken on a new sleuth role. He rubs his chin too, to add to the drama of it. Maybe Andrew should get him a monocle, if he's going to be this much of

a fuck. "So...if you don't care if they realize it, why think about it at all? I'll be honest, I didn't think you'd care about something like this."

Andrew's not quite sure why or if he does either. It doesn't have to be a thing that applies to them, if he doesn't want it to be.

Their *this* is unique. Andrew had been so resistant to using the word 'love' because it had been spit on and turned to bile, misused by people throughout his life. But in doing so, he ignored the times people used it genuinely. In the past, he would've contested that. He would've said it was never genuine, never earned. The commercialized concept wasn't something he'd let himself have in common with others.

But lately, Andrew finds that having some things in common with certain people isn't reprehensible. And in this case...

Aaron's voice comes barreling through his head, steering Andrew to destinations he couldn't find before. And well, now he knows why his brain can't let go of Aaron and Katelyn as his go to example.

"Our feelings for them are the same."

Yes. Andrew had slowly begun to accept that. Maybe that's why his brain wouldn't write off Katelyn's words so easily.

Begrudgingly, Andrew admits there's a lot more to his brother's relationship than pure affection, even when most of it is behind closed doors. Katelyn had been there through the worst parts of Aaron's college life, and she'd never once judged him or ignored the ugliest bits. Not even when he hated her, could Andrew look past those things. They meet her own definition, and Andrew's simply choosing to extend some trust to his brother. Aaron says he's in love, so Andrew believes him even when he doesn't believe in the feeling's history, in the way it's manipulated.

And well, if his feelings are the same...

Well, he guesses he can try to accept that too.

"I was testing it," Andrew answers, without much struggle. Katelyn's definition, *any* definition. Andrew looks at Neil straight on then, and the striker's grin fades. Something crosses over those eyes, like for once Andrew is ahead of him. "Love. I think I'm trying to decide if I...want to say it."

If I want to say 'I love you.' If it applies at all.

Not need, but want.

Is it something heavy, or is it something inconsequential?

It feels wrong, but Andrew knows he's reached the crux of his problem. This is where all his restlessness stemmed from, his observations about Jean and Jeremy, about the girls...

It had nothing to do with them, but everything to do with whether or not he'd ever want to have that in common with them.

He'd ignored the fact he most likely already does.

But the words...he never would've bothered before. They don't mean much, other than the weight society has put on them, and Andrew's never cared about that. He doesn't need them to know this is something sturdy in his life, and he doubts Neil needs them either.

It's more...this is another thing life took from them, took from Neil. They've never expected to regain everything; they never feel like life owes them.

It has nothing to do with that. It's just the same as with a lot of other instances; Andrew wants to give these things to Neil, because Neil is his.

Does there have to be some deeper explanation or justification for it? Even if there is, Andrew stops looking for it.

He waves off Neil's shocked expression, and doesn't ponder why it's there in the first place. He's been in the wrong before, assuming he's the only one who thinks about stuff like this. It's possible this has been on Neil's mind too, but that's not the point.

"I don't mean now, or anytime soon," Andrew corrects. No, no. He's not there yet, and it's not like it's some milestone they have to reach. Andrew doesn't like to think it could encompass how he feels, but maybe his biggest issue with this is that...he's not sure he hates the idea of it anymore. The word. One day, he might be able to say it and know it means a lot more than what other people think about it. And that would be enough. "But one day."

The shadows of the displays wash over Neil's expression, and Andrew can't pull anything out of it. Neil stares, hand still curled impossibly tight in Andrew's.

Andrew won't take back anything he said, but Neil's silence is beginning to unnerve him. He could have overstepped he realized, he should've asked for Neil's opinion at some point, weighed it against--

"You know, Aaron talked to me about this once," Neil offers finally. It's not what Andrew's expecting him to say. Then, Neil's face twitches, and Andrew can tell he's...holding back a smile. "That night you picked Katelyn up, we talked about...yeah."

Yeah.

Andrew knows the gist of what happened, Neil filled him in. Guess he didn't reveal all the details though.

Neil's laugh is a breathy, comforting thing this time. "He made me think about it. He asked if I loved you."

Neil smiles wryly, an expression he's begun to pair with Aaron lately. It's not a glare or scowl nearly as much anymore.

Andrew stills, but relaxes in the next second. They'd both been subject to the same thoughts after all, Andrew just didn't realize how similar the sources were. Aaron and Katelyn are menaces, and they don't even realize it.

Andrew doesn't feel nervous, or anxious. The way Neil feels about him is obnoxiously stone-like and unmovable at this point, as much as Andrew still sometimes tries to act like it's not. Neil won't say anything to make him doubt that.

"I said I did," Neil continues, like it's obvious. Andrew's pulse hiccups a little anyways. Stupid. "But I didn't know if I ever wanted to say it to you. It's more like...well obviously I *do* feel that way right? In the whatever--*traditional* sense."

Traditional. Ha.

He's not sure even Katelyn's definition is truly traditional in its selflessness.

Neil clears his throat, palm clammy in Andrew's own. Second by second, Andrew feels lighter. Neil's rambling is a strange salve, one more thing they have in common. Too much thinking, when the answer doesn't have to be so complex. Neil tries to glance away, but Andrew grabs his chin, keeping them face to face. He wants to have all this forever, every expression, every blink.

Neil swallows, but his smile stays, making a liar out of him before the words even leave his mouth. "But one word doesn't seem like enough, and if we *did* say it wouldn't it just be for other people's satisfaction? I don't need it to know you feel the same way..."

Andrew shakes his head in disbelief. *Neil*. Only Neil would expect that from Andrew. Andrew's mind exhales.

The convoluted mess of words echoes Andrew's own thoughts throughout the day, but it's never sounded clearer. No, it's true, one word will never be enough, but Andrew thinks if he could come to associate the word, the phrase, with this feeling, unique to *them*...

It wouldn't be so damaged anymore.

It would still be theirs, and no one else's. He'd have his own definition, to overwrite the rest.

"But even then..." Neil adds, quietly, his voice dancing with the song still playing around them. The lyrics are in English again, and Andrew knows the ride will end soon. Cass is barely a blip in his mind now, compared to Neil's words, the ones which mirror Andrew's. "I still thought it might be nice, one day, to say it. That doesn't make sense, does it?"

Logically no. All the contradictions, the back and forth...feelings are a strange thing and that's one reason Andrew's always hated them. There's no rhyme or reason, and there's two sides to each one. All justification is ruled out by one thing and one thing alone: *'I still want to.'*

And in that sense, Neil's words make perfect sense.

But he can't confess all that; instead he cups Neil's face in his hands, smoothing over the scars like he always does. The roughness is a constant, familiar. "I hate you," he says, with no heat. It makes both of them blink, and Andrew realizes it's been a while since he said it. That too, has changed. But in this case, he thinks it's more than fair. He's feeling more than he possibly knows what to do with. "Yes or no?"

The fact he asks makes Neil snort; it's nostalgic, because...they don't ask as much these days. But Neil's 'yes' echoes loud and clear as they pass under the final archway, and for the first time all day, their lips meet. Neil sighs into him, his hands coming up to rest over Andrew's, breathing in the unspoken promise.

Nothing was decided, nothing fleshed out. But it didn't have to be.

One day, maybe.

They're both more than okay with that. Besides, Andrew did always say proof meant more than words.

And he has mountains of it to last in the meantime.

With only a little annoyance, Andrew admits he fell into the trap without meaning to; they shared a kiss at Disneyland.

Andrew pulls away as the sunlight begins to pour over them, and he squints, already missing the ride. Quiet it was not, but not as bad as the sounds and size of the crowd. If he ever does have to come back, he knows it will be a place to stop.

It makes him think of Neil, first and foremost, and he's long since stopped denying himself that.

Neil tries to help Andrew out of the boat, but Andrew swats him away for being a shit. He doesn't *need* help. As revenge, Neil smirks at him once they're walking down the exit path,

adjusting his ears just to be even more irritating. Not cute. "Wait, so this means you admit Katelyn and Aaron are in love. Can I tell them?"

Andrew rolls his eyes, and Neil laughs. He'll never live that one down, and if Neil wants to survive he'll keep it to himself.

Mockery aside, Neil links their hands together, and Andrew pushes his face away before accepting the touch. Neil hasn't stopped smiling.

"Something to say Neil?" He says with a glare, and though he knows it's a joke at best, it makes that obnoxious *warmth* in him surge.

Neil smiles wider, dragging Andrew down the path with no idea where he's going. Andrew lets him.

"No," Neil throws behind him, humor lacing his tone. Gradually, the corner of Andrew's mouth twitches. "Not at all."

--

"Andrew! Neil!" Jeremy's voice booms from across the pavilion, and they both freeze in their analysis of where the best hiding spot would be in the entire park (Andrew is making a case for Toontown, but puts a pin in it).

Their time alone is officially over.

"Shit," Neil mutters, hand still linked in Andrew's. Normally at the sight of people they know, he'd pull away for Andrew's comfort, but Andrew keeps his grip firm.

He wants this today. Neil beams, sighing at the rest of the group's advance. It must be twice as sad now, since Neil *knows*.

Jeremy and Jean follow with the girls in tow, and as they get closer Andrew can see Laila's resigned smile. She and Alvarez have been caught too, despite their best efforts, and Andrew can tell nothing has changed.

The 'magical moment' they'd tried to pull out of Jean and Jeremy didn't happen, just like Andrew knew it wouldn't. Regardless, they're as hopeless as ever.

Jean trails close after Jeremy, eyes scanning his strong back while Jeremy keeps looking to make sure he's following. They're still dancing around one another, oblivious, but that's their own problem to sort out.

Still...there's a shift in Jean's features that wasn't there before, and Andrew is all too happy to wither it away with a glare.

He's accepting, not forgiving.

Whatever realizations Jean came to today have no other impact on Andrew other than an urge to get as far away as possible from it.

But there's hours to go.

Hours more to go, with Neil's hand in his. The striker throws a knowing grin back at him before pulling him forward, probably dead set on meddling as much as possible.

With the promise of *'one day'* still fizzing strong in his chest, Andrew follows.

There's no more memories of this place to overwrite, so he has no choice but to crack open the door a little for some new ones.

That, at least, he can handle.