

They were only one hour into what was starting to look like a very long day, and Spencer was struggling.

Somehow, against all hopes, dreams, and logic, the temperature had only increased from the day before.

Spencer had gone out in just his stiff long sleeve shirt, much to the horror of his colleagues, but midway through Hotch briefing the local police department, he had frozen, the uncomfortable slick feeling of blood leaking out from under his makeshift bandage startling him.

As inconspicuously as possible, he had clamped a hand over his elbow, trying to appear as though he was still laser focussed on Hotch, and glad all of his profier friends were facing out towards a sea of uniformed officers and not focused on him.

The second the profile was given (the typical, 40s, white, male, aren't they all), Spencer was hurrying off to the precinct bathroom, ignoring the eyes on his back as he opened the door and slammed into a stall.

Immediately, questing fingers hit a damp patch of his shirt. Swearing, Spencer wrangled himself out of the stiff fabric, looking in dismay at the blood seeping out of the edges of the tape.

"Shit." He whispered, tearing off sheets of toilet paper to press over it, soaking up the liquid. Once that task had been taken care of, he steeled himself, taking a deep breath as he ripped off the tape in one go. His teeth sunk into his lip and eyes watered at the pain, but he didn't slow down, instead looking down to assess the situation.

It wasn't good. With immediate regret, he looked at the limp back tape hanging off of one of his fingers. But, too little too late, and Spencer had just completely decimated any kind of healing processes that were going on. There were a lot of scab remnants on the tape now, but none left *in* the cut, and already it was starting to bleed faster again.

Spencer let out a loud frustrated breath, tipping his head back to stare angrily at the ceiling.

What the *fuck* was he thinking.

Sniffing, and deciding for his own sake that the tears were from the abrupt removal of his arm hair earlier rather than anything else, he pulled himself together, pressing tissue paper against the cut, packing it into the ragged tear. Then, he wrapped the tape back around the arm. The problem was, of course, that now he'd taken it off, the tape wasn't being so complacent with sticking back to his skin, and it took a few goes before Spencer could even get it to halfheartedly cling to the skin.

He looked at the patch up job with apprehension, an uncomfortable plan forming in his head as he slowly switched his gaze to his satchel, abandoned on the dirty floor, a realization that had him cringing.

He didn't want to do it. He really didn't want to, but there was nothing else in this tiny bathroom stall that was going to help him, and he couldn't very well ask to return to the hotel so soon without raising suspicion. The shirt was already damp with blood, if anyone touched the patch they would come away with red fingers and Spencer would quite literally be caught red handed. No, there was only one option.

Resigned to his fate, Spencer bent down to the floor, lifting the bag up by the strap, making sure not to touch the parts that had been in contact with the floor. Then he unzipped it, pulling out the mound of knitted sweater that resided inside.

He felt as though he was overheating just looking at it, but what else was he meant to do?

Spencer banged his head against the flimsy stall barrier only one time, restraining himself from continuing only through fear of one of the cops entering the very much communal bathroom and hearing it.

He was so stupid. He should have *never* gotten himself into this situation.

Regardless, here he was, and the sweater had to go on.

And so he did, wedging his arms and then head through the oppressive fabric. It wasn't scratchy, because none of Spencer's clothes were, but from the moment he was encased in the second layer, he could feel his skin prickling with heat.

Spencer raised his clenched fists, rubbing away the frustrated tears and trying to compose himself to go out and converge with the others outside, presumably waiting for him in the main precinct room.

Right as his hand landed on the lock to open the door, the main door to the restroom swung open.

Spencer froze momentarily, listening to see if he could work out who it was.

As it turned out, he didn't need to wait long, because it was only a second before Morgan's voice carried through the echoey space.

"Reid...?" He said hesitantly, Spencer could hear his heavy footfalls moving closer to the stalls, the door swung shut behind him.

"Reid?" He repeated.

Spencer startled out of his frozen state, giving a quick brush of his eyes to make sure any residual moisture had been removed, and brushing down his sweater compulsively, flicking his already sweat slick hair away from his eyes.

He pushed his way out of the stall, briefly glancing at Morgan before walking over to the sinks, beginning to run the tap.

His heart was pounding in his chest, but he couldn't work out why, couldn't work out what he was specifically anxious about. He guessed this was probably one of those situations where you didn't need to be anxious about one or even a few specific things - the situation itself was panic inducing.

He could feel Morgan's loaded gaze drilling into his back as he ran his wrists under the cool water, and it took herculean effort not to turn around, or allow his hand to twitch towards his sweater to make sure no runaway trails of blood had escaped onto the pattern.

Spencer continued running his hot wrists under the thankfully cooler than room temperature water, trying to cool down his pulse points to chill the blood flowing under the skin, anything to reduce the heat licking up his arms. Already there was sweat gathering at the armpits of his shirts. It was damp, and sticky, and uncomfortable, and Spencer was distinctly aware that very shortly he would be smelling.

The thought sent a shudder through him, which for whatever reason seemed to propel Morgan out of his stupor.

"Pretty boy, what the *hell* are you doing?" He said incredulously.

Despite knowing it would never work, especially with a profiler, especially with *Morgan*, Spencer decided to play dumb for the time being.

"Right now? Turning the taps off." He said, hand reaching out to do exactly that.

"Yeah, haha." Morgan deadpanned. Spencer could see his hands on his hips in the mirror above the sink.

He swallowed with a dry mouth, turning silently to push open the door to the precinct.

Suddenly though, as if he'd teleported, Morgan was directly behind him, snagging at his sleeve to pull him back.

Spencer winced, ducking his head to hide the grimace. The pulling of fabric had jostled the cut, which he was only now registering through the anxiety, *hurt*. Throbbled, in fact.

Sighing, he lifted his gaze to meet Morgan's supremely unimpressed eyes.

"What?" He said sullenly, knowing it wouldn't get him anywhere but unable to hold back the frustration.

If Morgan was taken aback by the tone, he didn't really show it, only possibly pausing for a microsecond, that no one other than Spencer (or another member of the team) would have been able to spot, before he spoke.

"You can't wear that Reid. You know you can't wear that, why the hell did you even put it on?"

Spencer hesitated, hand still on the door handle.

"...cold?" He offered halfheartedly.

"Reid."

Spencer worried the hem of the sweater between his index and thumb, he hadn't had enough time to think through his options for excuses. He wasn't all that good at thinking on the fly - appearing spontaneous usually wasn't difficult when your brain moves at a thousand miles per hour, but Spencer was drawing a big fat blank on this one.

Finally, after at least a full minute of uncomfortable silence, Spencer muttered "it just makes me more comfortable, ok?"

When he sneaked a peak up at Morgan's face, he could see it soften slightly, his dark eyes doing a quick check of his body language.

Spencer valiantly shoved back to urge to shut his eyes in shame.

The team knew he had a... "complicated" past. They didn't know the details, but they knew that much. He got away with quite a bit by claiming discomfort, especially seeing as Hotch and Gideon were always encouraging him to speak up about his wants and needs, and Spencer was always failing on that front.

The team's no intra-team profiling rule was total bullshit, but they could try, and certain things were a no go. Through some unspoken rule, if Spencer implied he was uncomfortable with something, they would leave well alone, or at least as much as they were capable, even though he could see them piecing things together every time he withdrew from the conversation when it turned to profiling schizophrenics.

They never asked for an explanation, but Spencer knew, instinctively, that using it here, in this context, wasn't right. Wasn't even a cop out, because that would imply it was just an easy excuse - it wasn't easy, even if it was convenient, but more than that, it was a betrayal.

It worked, though. That was the worst thing about most betrayals, they do *work*.

Morgan released his arm, clasping a gentle hand on his shoulder as they walked out of the bathroom and into the precinct together.

When Hotch caught sight of them, he turned, analyzing.

"All alright?" He questioned, in that neutral tone of voice he seemed to live in.

Spencer always thought Hotch had a kind of restrained violence held in that voice. Sometimes it looked like his suit was the only thing holding his rage in. Spencer didn't like noticing these things, in this moment especially because it only served as a reminder of how well they could all read each other, all the cues Hotch was probably picking up from him right now that he couldn't even hope to eradicate.

He nodded in response to the question, knowing what he said wouldn't even matter to a profiler anyways.

"All good. Where are we going?"

Morgan stood behind him silently, and didn't contradict the statement.

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Four hours later, and things weren't getting any better for Spencer. In fact, they were getting decidedly worse. The unsub's MO had evolved, as they had the unfortunate tendency to, and he was also devolving. Two more bodies had dropped, both now on off track terrain, both within the last six hours, much faster than his previous timelines. The pressure was amping up, they needed to catch this guy now, before he had a chance to get any more women. His victim type was indiscriminate, so it wasn't difficult for him - every woman in the city was a potential victim, and that knowledge was setting everyone on edge.

They weren't getting any leads through Garcia, or from their profile, which was devastatingly bare bones, so all the focus was on finding the new bodies, getting to the crime scene, and trying to wring some more information out of them. That meant the entire team had been hiking over rough Floridian terrain for the better part of the day, and the temperature was still in the sweltering mid 90s. Gideon had been pushing water bottles into people's hands at every opportunity, and Elle had stripped down to the vest she wore under her shirt, shooting warning glares at everyone, daring them to comment, but no one did, valuing their lives. Despite it though, they were all flagging, and no more than Spencer.

He was trying superhumanly hard to stop anything from showing on his face or through his body language, but evidently from the frequent over the shoulder looks he was getting, and the fact that he just kept falling behind the group, he wasn't succeeding.

It felt as though his skin had been stripped away from the heat, like his organs were writhing in open air, like every nerve was being bathed in stateless heat, like it wasn't solid, liquid, or gas, but something more malicious, something incomprehensible. His sight narrowed to each step in front of him, the most literal form of tunnel vision he had ever experienced.

He could have cried in relief when Hotch called them to a stop point, the primary location where they theorized the unsub had somehow subdued the women.

He allowed his weight to drop onto the nearest flat looking rock, ducking his head into his hands to discreetly wipe off the masses of sweat accumulating on his forehead, taking a few deep breaths that seemed to stick in his chest somehow.

"Hey Spence," A voice came from above him.

He looked up, startled, only to be met with Elle's decidedly unimpressed face.

"You're not looking so hot." She commented, outwardly impassively, but Spencer could see through it and to the concern behind. "Or maybe too hot, actually." She amended, brow furrowing as she took in his disheveled state.

"I'm fine." Spencer murmured, bracing his hands on his knees and pushing himself upright.

"I'm not so certain about that." Another voice joins the conversation, and Spencer looks up, shocked to see Gideon stood only a few inches away, openly inspecting Spencer and clearly not liking what he's seeing.

"You should really take that sweater off, Reid." He says. It's phrased neutrally, but there's a subtle command in there.

Spencer fidgets uncomfortably; he can still feel the thick, slimy, encrusted blood in trails down his arm. The sweater is not coming off.

"I'm alright." He says, in absence of any true diversion.

Gideon sighs, looking at him in that way he has that makes Spencer feel as though he's five again, but he doesn't challenge it any further. Instead, he reaches out to snag a full water bottle, pushing it into Spencer's hand. Then he just stands in front of him, staring expectantly.

"Uhhh..." Spencer utters, looking down at the damp bottle of Evian.

"You'll drink it." Gideon says, and he sounds so sure of himself Spencer wonders why he hasn't downed the thing already. "The whole thing, please, Reid."

With slightly trembling hands - and when did that start? - he uncaps the bottle and starts chugging it under Elle and Gideon's watchful eyes.

To his surprise, it awakens an almost animal thirst within him - before he knows it, he's trying to chug down air and the bottle is sitting empty in his hand. Really, he could do with another one, but a vague feeling of nausea is taking root in his stomach, and he doesn't want to arise suspicion over how bad he's really feeling by asking for another one, so instead he smiles languidly at Gideon, and tucks the empty plastic into a pocket of satchel to be disposed of later.

Gideon looks somewhat appeased, but not happy, and Elle is looking at him with outright skepticism. Fortunately, any further opportunities for interrogation are cut off by Morgan's yell - he's found something, they've finally got a lead.

They all flock towards whatever Morgan's discovered, and Spencer misses the considering eyes on his sweater clad back.

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As it turns out, Morgan has discovered the one part of the unsub's MO they couldn't work out - how he, an uncharismatic average looking man was getting women to a second location. They had toyed with charm as a method, but considering his profile, abduction was much more likely. But they hadn't worked out exactly *how*. The injection needle clasped between Morgan's fingers gives a pretty clear indication now.

From there, it's a scramble to get down from the hill they'd clambered up and back down to the base of operations, set up on the flattest part of the desert like land, close to the road for easy travel back to precinct.

They're about halfway down the hill when it happens. Spencer had paused for a moment to wipe the sweat off of his face again - his sleeve is rapidly getting soaked at this point. He's so thirsty it feels as though the air is too dry to breathe, but they'd underestimated the incline of the hike, and the effects of the heat; they're only ten or so minutes away from the operations base, so it doesn't pose a huge issue, but the water ran out a few path turns ago, everyone's complaining about thirst, and heat, and sweat, and Spencer doesn't want to add to the list. There's no water here to be had, so there's no point mentioning the thirst.

He finishes scrubbing his face with his sleeve, and hurriedly speed walks to regain pace with the rest of the group, and then a renewed wave of heat races over his entire body, and for one ridiculous moment Spencer thinks he might be too hot to be alive, before the pain registers.

His muscles from his left calf, thigh, and all the way through to his stomach cramp up at once, and, taken off guard, Spencer stops dead with a gasp. It's a crawling, clenching kind of pain, and he doubles over instinctively, but his hands flutter uselessly in the air, unsure which pain to address first.

Yet again, he finds himself in the shadow of one of his teammates. Judging by the shoes, it's Hotch.

He needs to straighten up, needs to pull himself together. It's only ten more minutes, and then the profile, and then he can rest a bit in the car back to the precinct.

*And then more frantic work, until this guy's caught.* His brain supplies, but he ignores that part.

Spencer digs a fist into his midriff, massaging away the pain, and it works enough to allow him to stand straight slowly, leg still screaming and hand pushing hard into his abdomen.

Hotch is looking at him, obviously, when he manages to fully straighten out, and Spencer stares back.

It's a standoff, though Spencer's not sure what over.

"Is everything alright Reid?" He says, and it's clear he knows everything is *not* alright, and to be honest, Spencer would be doubting his boss's profiling abilities if he didn't, despite his best efforts, he isn't exactly being subtle at the moment.

Spencer goes to nod his head, and then hesitates. Everyone has noticed that he's not dealing with the heat the best, but he hasn't noticed any analyzing looks directed towards his arm, and even in this state, Spencer is a good profiler, he trusts his instinct, and his instinct is that no one suspects anything is wrong with his arm, anything is wrong beyond the heat, and if he intends to keep it that way, it would be beneficial to give up a lesser secret. They all know anyways, he may as well, and flat out denial at this stage would be far more suspicious, lead them to think there's another, deep rooted cause behind this, which of course there *is*, but Spencer needs them not to know that.

"I'm not doing so good in the heat." He admits, looking up through eyelashes at Hotch's face.

Hotch looks back at him, unchanging, and then something... disbelieving flits across his face, and Spencer's already rapid heartbeat ratchets up dramatically, pounding aggressively against his ribs.

Hotch nods, increasing his pace to stroll forwards, but Spencer *knows*, he *knows* Hotch doesn't believe him, Hotch knows there's something else, Hotch suspects, Hotch suspects and Spencer is in trouble, has been in trouble this whole time, because of one bad decision in a shitty motel bathroom last night, but really because of a series of awful decisions and habits that began



when he was thirteen and that he never bothered to curb, and now everything he's built for himself is going to be cut out from underneath him. And he's known this, he has, has known really, that despite all his precautions, he's been living on borrowed time here, but you never expect it. He never expects things like this to happen *now*. It was always a vague, future continuous issue, and now it's here, and *now* and Spencer has forgotten how to breathe.

He's ripped out of his spiral by the distinctive and familiar sound of heavy boots keeping time with his stumbling footsteps, and looks to the side to see Morgan next to him. When he glances forwards, Hotch quickly switches his line of sight from Morgan to Gideon, who he starts murmuring to. They look as though they're disagreeing. Spencer can see the base in the distance.

He takes a deep breath, fills his lungs, and lets it all out at once. He won't give in that easily. He dragged himself here, to the FBI, from the slums of Los Angeles. One hot day was not going to take that away from him.

Determinedly, he firms his face, pushes his shoes into the ground with more purpose. He can do this. The base is close, and then it's just one talk, and then an air coned car. He can do this.

A new wave of heat and cramping washes over him again, from his feet right up to his hair, and Spencer grits his teeth through it. He reaches up a hand to wipe a hand at his forehead, but is surprised to find no more sweat there. The same can't be said for his torso, which by now is absolutely soaked, his shirt sticks to him like a second skin. It's also uncomfortably cold. It doesn't seem to cool him down any either, only gives the feeling of stickiness instead. Random parts seem to be immune to the chilled sweat as well - his arm is still encased in wet warmth, he assumes because of the extra layers wrapped around the skin - duct tape isn't exactly known for breathability.

Morgan keeps step with him all the way down to the operations base, in companionable silence. Spencer can feel Morgan's eyes on him frequently, but he doesn't allow himself to react. He won't give them anything more than he already has. With luck, and some skill, he can still leave this situation with his job and some dignity intact.

They reach the camp, and Spencer's so relieved he can't even hide it, instead rushing over in a throng of people to the table housing the water, immediately opening a bottle and downing it.

He regrets the decision the moment the bottle's empty, because his stomach starts rolling in on itself, clenching angrily. The nausea is staggering, and it's only years of study of human behavior and even more years of hiding injuries in high school that allows him to not react. Instead, he slowly makes his way over to where the team is gathered, in front of where the local law enforcement are grouping together. Every member of the team is openly scrutinizing him as he walks up - he knows none of them are happy with how he looks, or how he's acting, or maybe both, and he knows he would have had a much harder go of it regarding the sweater had this case not become so rapidly time sensitive. Really, the BAU is just a big team of mother

hens, their faces all blur into one big blob in front of him, swaying in the heat, but he can still see the concern. However, as always the case comes first, and none of them have *that* look on their faces, the look they get when he really has pushed it too far, like when Morgan discovered a minor bullet wound on him a couple months back (Spencer maintains a bullet graze *isn't* a serious injury, and so he didn't lie about anything). So they allow him to join the ranks with no fuss, Spencer standing at the end of the line they've formed, Elle on his left.

The profile given by everyone else seems to stretch on forever. The water from the table earlier wasn't enough, even though it turns his stomach, and the heat trying to consume him doesn't let up. Their words seem to smear into the air, the horizon shimmers in front of him and it doesn't help with the building nausea. He tries to rehearse what he's saying mentally, but the words slip out of his head. He reaches a hand up to wipe his forehead, but the friction of the sweater against skin hurts because his face is dry. He swallows heavily, trying to focus. This is important.

Everything has gone silent, and he realizes just that bit too late that it's his turn to speak, and immediately everything he was thinking of goes out of his head, just like that. He swallows again, thickly. His face feels like the sun.

"Um, so he's, uh..." He begins. The words sound as though someone else is speaking them, someone from a distance. He looks out at the law enforcement, squints and tries to focus, *focus*. There's a killer, a killer out there, he needs to...

"The unsub is, uh..." He says, he doesn't know what he's thinking. Instinctively, he glances to Elle at his side. She kind of looks confused, but Spencer's suddenly aware he can't really *tell* because she just looks like a paint smear into the messy umber background, there's no details to her features.

Disoriented, he reaches a hand up to put his glasses back on, but his hand encounters them on his nose still, hitting off of them and veering out into the open air uselessly.

Spencer swallows again.

What was he saying?

Saliva rushes into his mouth, his throat clenching, and he swallows around it.

"Dentists usually engage in uh, financial crime-" He almost gasps out, trying to think through the thick sludge of heat. The world seems to move sideways for a second, and he tries to shift, to compensate, and trips on his own feet, struggling to keep himself level for a moment.

"50%- no, 60, 62, 62%-" He rambles, and then is cut off by a very specific feeling.

"I'm uh." He swallows. "Sorry..." He mumbles, and then he's turning to the side, vomit cascading up his throat and right onto his shoes, splattering onto the dirt. The disgusting view swims in

front of his eyes, there's noise around him but it sounds underwater, he feels as though he's swimming in the fiery depths of hell. He gags again, the foul taste rising up his throat, just bile and water, it had been too hot for him to eat much these past hours... days? How long had it been?

He blinks lethargically, trying to focus, but everything slips left, sliding away from his eyes, a sickening rush of gravity snatching him, and then an abrupt stop. His legs feel gelatinous, non corporeal beneath him.

His head rolls backwards and he groans, wrenching his eyes open.

Elle's face swims in front of him, he can see her moving, but no sound comes through, her face is a mess of colors, dissolved.

He was- he's meant to be giving the profile, he thinks. He can't quite work out why Elle is looking at him from a height now, can't put together the series of moments that came to this point, the walk down the hill streaks into the motel, him and Morgan talking through a door in the desert, but that isn't *right*.

He blinks again, tries to focus in, catches the smudge of color he thinks is Elle's eyes.

"I'm sorry." He wheezes out, and then the world is rapidly spinning out of his reach, tilting in the wrong direction. Spencer's head falls back and the heat swallows him up.

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When Hotch sent him up to keep an eye on Reid on the walk down to the base, he wasn't at all surprised. Out of respect for the kid mostly, everyone had left the subject of his attire alone, but in the heat of the moment (ha.), in the urgency of the hunt, it had been left for too long. *Reid* had been left too long, and when he stumbled and slowed, doubling over with an audible gasp, Morgan had half expected Hotch to strip him out of the layers himself. But evidently not. They stood for a second together, on the fringes of the parade down hill. And then Reid was standing up again, and walking, and Hotch was catching up with him, telling him to go up and walk by Reid. Morgan didn't know the motivations behind not trying to persuade Reid out of his layers, but he didn't question the senior profiler. The possible reasons were numerous, and he had never claimed to be able to decipher the motives of Aaron Hotchner. It could be that Hotch, ever the leader, was prioritizing getting to the base, where he could then talk to Spencer, it could be that Hotch had information about Spencer that he didn't, information that allowed him to know not to push it. God knows there was a lot unknown about the kid.

Maybe not, seeing as he could hear snatches of the hushed conversation between Hotch and Gideon leaking up to him and pretty boy, the tone not sounding particularly as though they were agreeing. Then, Gideon exclaimed, slightly louder, seemingly tired of discussing presumably Reid - "he's an *adult* Hotch, we don't have to-", and then he had cut himself off, both he and

Hotch turning back to look at them. Morgan kept his face neutral, but looked at Reid. He didn't even glance up, seemingly tuned out to his surroundings. When Morgan looked back, the two older men had turned around again, and had either stopped talking or lowered it to the point where he couldn't pick up even whispers.

Regardless, whatever their thought process was, that wasn't Morgan's job to work out. His job was to walk by Reid, and watch him. So watch him he did. He wasn't exactly subtle, but Reid didn't comment, or even look up, so Morgan was happy enough to walk in silence and get as much out of Reid's appearance as he could.

Maybe, Morgan reasoned, Hotch hadn't stopped because Reid wasn't as bad off as Morgan had originally assumed. The kid was pretty pale, though it was hard to tell whether that was unusual or just Reid's complexion, which could be easily likened to a vampire's. Plus, now Morgan was closer he could see that there was little to no sweat on his face, and he seemed to be powering forwards with purpose. Reid wasn't exactly the most athletic, he had had all of his physicals at the academy waived, and hadn't slept well that morning, Morgan recalled. It was no wonder pretty boy had been struggling.

Still, the sweater and attachment to said sweater was weird, and Morgan, albeit guiltily, remembering Reid's words in the bathroom earlier that morning, allowed himself to turn over the possible reasons in his head as he kept a watchful eye on Reid as they meandered down the rocky incline. When they reach the base and Reid immediately scurries over to the water station, Morgan doesn't worry, in fact, he's grateful that he won't have to force some liquid down the kid's skinny neck. He looks to Hotch for guidance, who gestures with his head for him to join the forming line, facing out to the majority of locals. They wait there, splitting attention between Reid, who is trying to inhale water like it's oxygen and he's been drowned, and the locals, who look hot and bothered and generally unhappy to be here.

*Get in the queue.* Morgan thinks, lifting an arm to swipe the beads of perspiration off his face.

Reid clearly notices somehow that they're getting ready for a profile, because he finishes the bottle and turns to make towards them, but then his face does something funny, and Morgan can almost feel everyone on the team laser focus in on their youngest member. Reid stares off into the distance for only a split second before his face smooths over, but even in the glaring sun Morgan can see how his face has gone paler, and he can tell that everyone else has seen it as well. Sure enough, Gideon and Hotch are sharing meaningful glances next to him - they'll be taking Reid aside after this, no doubt about it.

Reid slowly makes his way towards them, joining Elle silently at the end of their line. That in itself sends... not alarm *bells*, but *something* off in Morgan's brain. Reid is many things, but silent is rarely, if ever, one of them. As it is, Reid's position mostly hides him from the other's views, tucked behind Elle and hunched in on himself. Morgan pulls his mind and gaze away from Reid, instead focussing on Hotch, who's relaying the developing nuances in the profile to the locals.

In no time at all, it's Reid's turn to go, but there's an uncomfortable silence before he starts stuttering through an opening sentence, as though he hadn't realized he would be talking. Morgan's sense of... *something* worsens. Reid, while often rambling in his explanations, is never *short* of them.

The concern doesn't abate. Reid can't seem to organize his words, and when Morgan leans forwards to catch a glimpse of him, the kid is pale and shaking. It's only the watchful eyes of the locals in front of them that prevents him from moving closer, that, and the idea that Hotch and Gideon haven't moved, so it's ok. Morgan will regret this blind trust later, will wish he had gone to Reid's side immediately, but in the moment he watches, like watching a car wreck, unable to look away, as Reid sways, and stutters his way around a statistic.

Then, he mumbled what sounded like a quiet apology, and Morgan only has time to furrow his eyebrows in confusion before Reid's lurching to the side, puke pouring out of his mouth and onto the dry ground. Morgan couldn't help it, he let out a kind of startled yelp, reaching towards him.

Reid coughed and spluttered again, gagging. The locals were looking at each other, unsure of what to do, and then, right before it happened, Morgan saw what was *going* to happen, and yelled out Elle's name, right as the kid's legs went out from underneath him. And suddenly Morgan was blocked off by a crowd of local cops who had recognised the emergency trying to get close and assess what to do. He tried to shove his way through them, the sight of Spencer limp in Elle's struggling arms only spurring him on. Still, it was difficult, it wasn't like the guys surrounding Spencer were easily moved, they were all heavily built, classic cops.

He managed to fight his way through the fray just too late, seeing Spencer's head roll back, his eyes fluttering shut with a groan, his body becoming dead weight in Elle's arms. She couldn't cope with the sudden weight, and Spencer slipped straight out of her hold, hitting the ground with a resounding thud that made Morgan's heart stutter.

"*Reid!*" He yelled, rushing to get next to his still body, heart pounding with panic in his chest. As he got to his knees next to the kid's unconscious form, Hotch came skidding in behind him, dropping to the floor with no hesitation, Gideon hot on his heels, still projecting calm, but Morgan could see the fear-concern-terror beneath, as he moved away everyone else.

"Can we get some space here please, thank you. Let's move away, get some room."

Morgan's eyes dug into Spencer's frame, disbelieving.

What had he missed?

Spencer's hair spread around his head like a brown halo, the dust was gathering in the strands. His face was so pale it almost seemed translucent, scarily so, and now he'd had all the

animation stripped away from him, it was easy to see how drawn and *sick* he appeared. Morgan was also struck breathless with just how *young* Spencer looked. Spread out on the floor, bundled in that *damn* sweater, with his face lax, Spencer looked barely of age, and *God* he wasn't really, was he? Morgan looked to the side, meeting Hotch's grim face, and he could see the same striking sentiment reflected back at him - why the hell was this kid out in a desert chasing killers in a fucking sweater with his cheeks still shaped from puberty. Why hadn't they reconciled these things?

And then, the moment of dissonance passed, and everyone was in action. That was the FBI - don't lose your head in a crisis. In one smooth, coordinated move, Morgan had Spencer's torso and Hotch had his legs as they maneuvered him out straight, Elle running her hand over his forehead to brush the dirt off of his face. Gideon had succeeded in clearing everyone away from them, and moved around to crouch by Spencer's face, placing a hand on his forehead in an instinctive move that spoke of forgotten memories of fatherhood. His eyes widened, and Morgan could see the barely restrained panic in his face when he turned to Hotch, and said, urgency accelerating his words,

"Hotch. We need to get him out of these clothes. I'm going to call an ambulance."

Even stony faced Hotch reacted at that, his eyes widening, hand sneaking forwards to touch Spencer's face, upon which he paled, in a perverse imitation of the kid still lying deathly still beneath them, swearing under his breath.

Morgan's hands reacted before his head could, propping Reid up against his own body and methodically divesting him off the sweater. He was so focussed on the task, on the fear for Reid, he didn't even react to the soaked state of the kid's body as he was stripped out of the thick argyle. When he finally had Reid out, he was sweating in earnest himself, laying Spencer back down on the ground in just the shirt. Like this, he somehow looked smaller, even younger. The dark material clung to him with sweat, and Morgan could see his ribs. Something clenched in his chest.

*Who is looking after this kid?* The thought ran across his mind, completely unbidden.

He blinked, caught up in looking at Reid, and then Hotch was next to him. Again, his hand came to rest on Spencer's forehead.

"The shirt needs to come off." He said, matter of fact, but there was a sense of guilt in it, a reluctance. Morgan felt it too, though he couldn't really explain it.

He had been shirtless in front of the kid plenty of times but... But for Spencer it just felt wrong. In fact- in fact, Morgan had never seen him in any less than two layers. Why had he never questioned that? Why had no one ever questioned that?

Uncomfortable with this course of action, even with things as they were, Morgan also placed a hand on Spencer's forehead. He immediately understood why Hotch was telling, not suggesting. Spencer's skin was terrifyingly hot, but more than that, like he previously had noted, it was bone dry. This was exiting normal heat exhaustion territory and entering the heatstroke danger zone. Pretty boy couldn't be embarrassed if he was dead.

He shuddered at that thought, looking at Reid's body to reassure himself, but Spencer's pale, unmoving form didn't do much in the way of alleviating the fear.

Hotch, noting his hesitation, nudged him out of the way with a shoulder, pulling Spencer up to rest between his legs instead, slowly lifting the hem of his shirt, getting his unresponsive limbs out of the way only a father could manage.

Morgan shuffled out of the way, looking down and away from the display, feeling oddly voyeuristic, the intense expression on Hotch's face almost difficult to look at. He turned his gaze to his hands resting in his lap instead, only to be shocked still.

His left hand was covered in the distinctive, rusty red of blood, fresh and wet, only drying at the edges.

And then he heard the yell.

He turned back to Hotch and Reid, only to see Reid, halfway out of his shirt and clearly disorientated, moaning and babbling incoherently, trying to push Hotch away with weak hands, and Hotch, who seemed unwilling or unable to restrain him, looking down at him with wide eyes.

Morgan leaned over them, trying to catch Reid's wild, unseeing eyes.

"Reid! Spencer!" He called, but Spencer was unhearing.

"No..." He moaned, a long, desperate, drawn out thing, trying to bat off Hotch's hands, which were trying to free his caught up arm from the shirt.

"Please," He begged, head tossing weakly.

Just as quickly as it came, the energy seemed to sap out of him, and Spencer sunk back into Hotch, eyes fluttering.

One of Hotch's hands went straight back to the shirt, the other landing on Spencer's head to smooth the hair out of his face.

"Please, I'm sorry..." Spencer sobbed, tears running clear lines down his face "don't- I didn't mean to, *please*, I'm *sorry*-" before his expression slackened, Spencer pulled away from them and into unconsciousness again. Hotch looks stricken, staring at Spencer's face, unmoving.

Morgan only watches for a second before he's helping, pulling Spencer's other arm through and out of the sleeve, leaving the kid shirtless and cradled in Hotch's lap.

But a huge problem is immediately obvious. The entire left half of Spencer's torso is drenched in blood. Some dried, some not, thick tendrils of it curl around the delicate knobs of his spine, wrap around his wrist like a bracelet. Hotch, for once, stutters and freezes, Morgan can hear Elle's breathing shudder behind them, and Morgan... Morgan just looks down at his stained hand and back to Spencer's skinny, blood drenched body, frozen.

It takes Gideon's arrival to shock them in action, he only pauses a moment before he's assessed the situation, barking out orders.

"Right, I'm going to wash off the blood so we can check for any other sources, Morgan, you take off that makeshift dressing, Elle, take the phone, get the ambulance to our location. Hotch, *breathe.*"

Elle reaches out, gripping the phone with shaking hands, and, now Morgan's looking, he can see what Gideon's talking about - there's a long black strip of... is that *duct tape*?

He sets to work on peeling it off, as Gideon opens water bottles, tipping them onto Spencer, who doesn't even twitch. It *is* duct tape, and underneath it lies bloodied tissue. He doesn't know how or when the kid managed to get injured, but he is going to *kill* him when he wakes up.

*When he wakes up. Because he will.* He reminds himself.

And those moments, that Morgan thought were as bad as they could get, would later be thought back on almost fondly, as the brief period where everything had gone to hell, but they at least had fought back some modicum of control. Right up until Gideon wiped away all the bloodied water, and Morgan pulled away Spencer's makeshift first aid efforts.

All of this to reveal Spencer's arm, Spencer's arm in all its scarred, bleeding glory.

There was no mistaking the scars for anything but what they were, even if their existence on *Spencer* didn't make sense, didn't make any sense at all because it *couldn't*.

There must have been hundreds, white and pink, and some purple, some red and raw and *bleeding*, crisscrossing all the way from his wrist to his shoulder, hundreds of marks, mostly in neat lines, and then the huge, gaping wound wrapping around his elbow, sluggishly pumping out blood.

The world seemed to freeze. No one breathed.

*Spencer.*



Elle was the first to react. She made some kind of aborted sound, a choked kind of thing, sounding like it got stuck in her throat, and then her eyes were wet and she was sucking in a gasping breath, which led to more hitching ones inwards. Gideon noticed, and visibly snapped himself out of their collective trance, eyes stuttering between Spencer and Elle as though he couldn't decide what to tackle first.

His hand reached over them, taking the phone out of Elle's slack fingers. Morgan tracked the movement, and with his eyes off of Spencer's mauled body, the roaring in his ears slowed, and he could just make out the tinny sound of the EMTs trying to get a response from any of them.

Gideon swiftly held the phone up to his ear, responding.

"Yes, is that ambulance on its way? Good. I need an ETA and- and be aware, the agent in question has now had a large laceration discovered, blood loss and heat stroke is suspected. Yes, he's 23 years old..." Gideon reeled off, moving away from them slightly. It was an admirable display of control, but Morgan could hear the way his voice shook, could see the minute trembling of his hand amplified in the movement of the cell phone, trembling against his ear. He could see Gideon's eyes desperate to land somewhere, anywhere, than the blood soaked kid on the sand.

He blinked, swallowed heavy saliva, throat clenching dryly, and then Elle was beside him, face pale but determined. She made eye contact with him as her hands snuck over his to press down on the wound. Looking down, Morgan realized his hands had gone slack in the shock of the situation - Spencer's blood was running down his arm again, recolouring the pale flesh and drenching Morgan's dark hands.

Elle's deft fingers pushed his out of the way, clamping down to staunch the blood flow.

She didn't say anything when he looked up at her with wide, shellshocked eyes. Maybe because her own lip was pulled into a shaky half smile- white canines pinning up the corners. She just motioned with her head to Hotch, and Morgan willingly went, wiping tense bloodied hands on his pants and shifting to sit next to his boss, usually the most stoic of them all, who hadn't seemed to breathe, let alone move, since Spencer's arm had been revealed.

Although, closer to Hotch, Morgan could now re-evaluate that thought, because this close Hotch's breathing was visible through his shirt, Morgan could see the spasming movement of his back punctuated by the short, sharp exhales of breath coming from the older man. His arms remained wrapped loosely around Spencer's limp form, but his fists were clenched, fingernails digging into the meat of his palms. When Morgan looked at his face he stayed staring straight forwards, jaw clenched but mouth quivering.

He posed a figure of contradiction, Morgan noted distantly. It was though he wanted to be angry but wasn't sure how to be. His eyes couldn't pick an emotion to land on.

Morgan had never seen Hotch so openly off his game, and it was difficult to know what course of action to take. But the police gathering around them were whispering amongst themselves, and Spencer was on the floor, bleeding. They didn't have time to not be in the moment.

"Hotch." He said, trying to sound professional and missing spectacularly. "Hotch." He said again, voice gruff, accompanied by a nudge of Hotch's shoulder with his own.

Hotch blinked, moving his eyes to focus solidly on Spencer's face, but he otherwise didn't respond.

"Hotch." Morgan said again, and it was weaker this time.

Hotch didn't respond, and Morgan allowed himself to look down at Spencer. Somehow he had gotten paler, and his eyelashes were a stark contrast to the paper white cheeks they fluttered uselessly against. The paleness only made the specks of blood that had found their way onto his face even more jarring. Spencer's face was slack in unconsciousness, innocent. There weren't even any lines, any wrinkles in his wan skin - life hadn't even had a chance to write its story onto his face yet.

Morgan could feel his eyes getting hot, his teeth grinding.

"Hotch..." He said, gripping at said man's sleeve and tugging, and he sounded exactly like a child approaching their parent after a nightmare - he flushed with the humiliation of the reedy tone and infantile action, but he needed *Hotch*, he needed Hotch to fix the situation they were in like he always did, and the man sat in front of him right now was very much *Aaron*.

It seemed it worked though, because Hotch snapped out of it all at once, turning to face Morgan fully, who looked at him helplessly before they both turned their gaze to the officers still conglomerating around them.

"We should cover him." Morgan blurted, only processing that that was a good idea after the words were out. The officers had already seen, this was going to be hell to manage later, but Spencer would have hated to be laid bare to their eyes, would have wanted some form of privacy even if it had already been violated, wouldn't want their eyes to be sticking to his arm the way they were. Spencer wouldn't want to remain a circus attraction.

Hotch presumably agreed, because seemingly out of nowhere he produced his own dusty suit jacket, holding out the arms to lay it gently over Spencer's torso. He reached his arms out, attempting to smooth down the fabric to lay over Spencer's arm without disturbing Elle's grip on his arm, but it quickly became evident he wouldn't be able to without removing Spencer from his position tucked inside his arms. Hotch only stalled for a second before Morgan had the jacket in hand, settling the soft material over Spencer to cover the worst of the scars and the bulk of his torso from the sun.

And then he leaned back on his heels. He could hear the ambulance sirens from down the road, faint but getting closer, the noise carried far on flat, deserted land like this. There was nothing else to be done now.

Unthinkingly, his hand reached out for Spencer's, his warm palm encapsulating the inexplicably skinny digits. Spencer's breathing rattled in the wind, the sirens grew louder.

There was nothing to be done. Nothing but sitting back on his heels, holding Spencer's delicate hand in his, hoping his teammates could keep it together so he could.

Nothing but think, as the ambulance workers began emptying around them:

What the *fuck*.