

Echo

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/27043381) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/27043381>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	All For The Game - Nora Sakavic
Relationship:	Neil Josten/Andrew Minyard
Characters:	Andrew Minyard , Aaron Minyard , Nicky Hemmick , Kevin Day , Neil Josten
Additional Tags:	Non-Consensual Drug Use , Non-Consensual Kissing , Protective Andrew Minyard , Protective Kevin Day , Did you know they didn't have a recorded option for Protective Kevin Day? , your angst mileage may vary , Aaron is complicated and has his own kind of shitty trauma responses , Nicky did a shitty thing but isn't a villain in an after school special , Implied Attempted Rape/Non-Con , Reference to past rape/non-con
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-10-16 Words: 9,125 Chapters: 1/1

Echo

by [likearecord](#)

Summary

Neil gets drugged at Eden's. Again. They get him back quickly, but the parallels fuck with everyone and reveal what happened with Nicky the first time around.

But Andrew remains flawed, so doesn't know anything is happening until he hears Nicky gasp. Nicky makes a lot of unnecessary noises, so this one isn't especially concerning—not until Nicky's hand flashes out to grip Andrew's arm and he says, "Andrew," with such strained urgency that Andrew's head erupts into a riot of alarms.

He follows Nicky's pointed finger and sees, through the thick forest of bodies, Neil. With some guy. Kissing. He's out of his stool almost before he can consciously register the scene, leaving the scarred black metal toppling to the ground behind him and shoving into the crowd. Something is very wrong. Neil had been too still. Too loose. An unstringed puppet. Andrew knows what Neil looks like when he wants to kiss someone, and that—that isn't it.

Notes

I apologize in advance.

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

Andrew abandons Neil to the cluster of Exy groupies (or murder groupies; you can never be sure in this place) and carries their brimming tray to the table. Neil is exponentially more patient with that shit than Andrew is, though there's no real point in putting exponents on zero. Still, he leaves Neil to the tender mercies of the corseted guy asking him very specific questions about some play in a recent game, only stopping only enough to tap two fingers against his brow when Neil catches his eye before taking off without a look back. Neil's eyes narrow back without any heat, and Andrew leaves him with one corner of his mouth quirked up.

Winding through the crowd takes a lot more time like this, when he can't muscle through without spilling Kevin's precious drinks. It's easier when he and Neil bring them back together. One of them can always part the crowd ahead. Andrew is objectively better at that, but Andrew is also objectively better at carrying the tray, so that often means Neil is leading the way. It gives Andrew a better view, too.

Most of the others aren't even there when he gets back. Andrew sees what he thinks is Kevin on the dance floor, the black mark of the queen striking in the flare of the spotlights. With him, Andrew assumes, is Aaron. They share a very specific folie à deux that has them both convinced they're excellent dancers. They absolutely are not—though Kevin does get more pornographic in direct proportion to how much he drinks, which seems to have its appeal. If, that is, you take the rapturous faces of Kevin's lucky dance partners as testimonials.

It's only Nicky holding down the table, buzzed and stoned, with a pen held thoughtfully between his lips and a pile of soggy, ink-stained napkins next to him.

"Andrew!" Nicky says happily, his cheeks flushed, clearly riding high on the froth of the chemicals in his bloodstream. "Wanna help me write something?"

"No," Andrew says. The center of the table is taken up by a couple of glasses and more of Nicky's discarded napkins. Andrew shoves it all aside and maneuvers the tray into place.

"It's for Erik," Nicky explains.

"Still no."

"It's erotic," Nicky continues. "I'm trying to write him a sexy email."

"That's a napkin."

"I *know*. I'm going to type it up at home."

The chances of that happening are exceptionally slim, but Andrew is rarely motivated to state the obvious. Instead, he gives Nicky a stern, level look and says, "Do not read that to me."

"Oh," Nicky exclaims, brightening even further. "That's a great idea."

Which is how Andrew ends up grudgingly discussing the connotative differences between the words "rail" and "nail." He loses track of the conversation somewhere around when Nicky

starts trying to draw him diagrams of obscure sexual positions he thinks Andrew hasn't heard of. It feels like it stretches on and on, but Andrew can't really tell if that's because it's been a while or if it's because the unwantedness of this conversation is warping time.

Either way, his alarm bells lay dormant. The swirl of the lights and heavy bass lull him into a throbbing, neon complacency. By now, he should really have some kind of radar. He's earned it. His near-constant vigilance should have somehow instilled him with the ability to just *know* when something is wrong. If nothing else, he should know enough not to let any of these idiots out of his sight for long, and especially not Neil "Oh Look, Danger" Josten.

But Andrew remains flawed, so doesn't know anything is happening until he hears Nicky gasp. Nicky makes a lot of unnecessary noises, so this one isn't especially concerning—not until Nicky's hand flashes out to grip Andrew's arm and he says, "Andrew," with such strained urgency that Andrew's head erupts into a riot of alarms.

He follows Nicky's pointed finger and sees, through the thick forest of bodies, Neil. With some guy. Kissing. He's out of his stool almost before he can consciously register the scene, leaving the scarred black metal toppling to the ground behind him and shoving into the crowd. Something is very wrong. Neil had been too still. Too loose. An unstrung puppet. Andrew knows what Neil looks like when he wants to kiss someone, and that—that isn't it.

He's too short to keep eyes on Neil or the guy, but he knows the direction, so he keeps pushing through. And through. Neil isn't behind the third, fifth, or even seventh throng of people Andrew shoves past. Every not-Neil person Andrew comes across spikes something hollow and visceral in him, until he's frantically battering people aside with his shoulder and shoving drunk dudes out of their obnoxious formations. Neil still isn't anywhere.

He has to think.

Exits. Bathrooms.

Bathroom first—taking Neil outside of the club would be much more of a commitment. But if the asshole is trying to get Neil outside, that means his plans could be so much more sinister. Andrew could let him slip away with Neil while he was checking the stalls. But if he goes outside first, he might not be in time to stop whatever could be happening in the bathroom. Either way, he's going to be too slow. Too late.

The delusional hope that Neil could be going willingly whisps into view and immediately dissipates. Even if Neil somehow fell in instant, overwhelming lust with someone, there's a zero percent chance he would follow a stranger anywhere. He'd be too worried they were with the Moriyamas or some lingering vestige of his father's people.

No, if Neil is leaving with someone, he is not doing it on purpose.

He wouldn't take off without telling Andrew. Not again. Not even for sex.

Especially not for sex.

The bathroom vs. exit dilemma is still raging when he pushes his way out of the crowd and into the open area that has all of the nooks, facilities, and a couple of emergency exits. And—there they are. Each rapid thud of his heart ricochets through his chest like a physical blow. His eyes zero in on Neil's feeble attempts at self-defense so intently that they ache from the strain.

The asshole is heading for one of the exits that lets out on some side street parking, but Andrew finally has time. Neil is such a dead weight that the guy has to keep them moving slowly—Andrew assumes (hopes) that literally dragging an unconscious person out of a club would garner at least a little attention.

It doesn't look particularly far off from that, though. The guy has Neil pulled against his side closely; It could look affectionate. It probably does, if you don't see the way Neil's feet are stumbling. Although, he could just be drunk. This guy could just be helping his drunk boyfriend out of the club. Maybe Neil just overdid it. Maybe he always overdoes it. Maybe people feel sorry for the caring, long-suffering boyfriend who has to deal with his hard-partying partner. Maybe that's what they'll tell the cops after Andrew guts this piece of shit.

He breaks through the fringes of the crowd and picks up his pace; he gets close enough that he can clearly see the guy lift his free hand and shove his fingers into Neil's mouth. He watches Neil gag, he watches the guy hold Neil's mouth closed so that he has to swallow, and then he's close enough to punch the guy in the back of the head with every ounce of rage and murderous intent bubbling in his veins. The guy goes down hard, taking Neil with him so that they land in a graceless pile on the floor. Andrew reaches, but doesn't quite manage to pull them apart before Neil hits the ground.

"Fuck!" the guy curses. "What the fuck?"

Andrew ignores him. He wrenches Neil out from under the guy's awkwardly angled arm, avoiding the blind slaps Neil is frantically throwing. It's disturbingly easy to pull him upright and close. Now it's Neil who is too slow. He can't land anything before Andrew catches and relocates his fists.

"Hey, fuck you," the guy spits. "Get your own."

Neil mumbles, "Andrew?" and gets about twenty-five pounds heavier when his knees buckle.

"Andrew!" another voice calls. Andrew turns to find Nicky and Kevin rushing towards them. There's a glint of blond in the crowd that may be Aaron, but he can't spare the attention to be sure. It's not important yet—they might need Aaron for rudimentary first aid shit, but he won't be helpful right now. Even if he would fight for Neil, Andrew's not convinced he'd be any good at it.

"Here," Andrew says. He turns, manhandling Neil along with him until he can hand him off to Nicky. "Take him."

"No," Neil slurs. He tries to pull from Andrew's grip clumsily, his limbs flailing. "I don't want to."

“Neil. Go to Nicky.”

Neil almost moans his next *no* and braces his feet against the floor so that he can’t be pushed forward. The traction of his shoes isn’t enough to stop Andrew, but the panic in his voice is. “Not again,” he says. “Please don’t make me.”

The *please* hits like a punch to the gut. He really fucking hates that word. And he’s never even heard it in Neil’s anxious, pleading voice before.

Not again. Not *what* again? Andrew looks at Neil’s panicked face and then at the dawning guilt breaking across Nicky’s and he realizes there are fucking secrets here. And he is going to hear them.

“Neil,” Andrew says calmly. “Will you go to Kevin?”

“I need to find someone. I can’t. I can’t—,” Neil says miserably, but he’s already slumping pliantly against Andrew as his burst of resistance deflates.

That’s a yes, or as close to one as Andrew is going to get. Kevin, already bouncing anxiously on his feet, steps forward and scoops Neil away, hefting him effortlessly and tucking the bundle of Neil’s body close to his chest.

Andrew is about to turn on Nicky and get some answers, but Aaron interrupts him with a slightly bored sounding, “He’s leaving.”

Andrew follows Aaron’s nod and sees the guy hustling to a side door with his hand still cupped protectively around the back of his head. The further he gets from the dance floor lights, the more the shadows swallow him. The further he gets from Andrew’s vengeful hands, the more he seems to fade into the darkness.

Fuck. Fuck everyone.

He knows Kevin wouldn’t give Neil to anyone but him, so Andrew turns and chases the guy who’s pushing his way out of the exit door. He gets there in time to see the guy scurry into an SUV—big cargo area, Andrew’s brain whispers at him. Plenty of room—but he’s not fast enough to do anything other than grab a chunk of concrete from the broken sidewalk and hurl it through the guy’s rear window. The brake lights flutter, their reflection pulsing like a siren against the slick, wet pavement, but Andrew can only watch helplessly as they round the corner and disappear from view. He doesn’t have Neil’s speed. He’s outpaced. Too slow again.

The club door has locked behind him. He yanks on it angrily, pounds on it a few times, kicks it as hard as he can until he can’t bear the impact anymore, and then gives up. He’ll have to go all the way back around and through the front.

The corner is turning behind him before he thinks to pull out his phone and text Aaron: *meet me @front*. If the *keep him safe or I will kill you* part of that isn’t obvious, then Aaron has some real catching up to do.

The gravel crunching under his boots marks his progress, a horrible, screeching metronome that ticks at least five times for every step he takes. The ground shifts a little beneath him, gritty pebbles set to flight by the vicious pace of his stride. The popping noise each makes as it falls sets Andrew's teeth to grinding. It takes an eternity to get around the building, turn another corner, and make his way past the rows of blacked-out windows set into the concrete walls of the club. The pulse of the music twists his stomach; Neil is in there, in that loud, dark space crowded with bodies. Andrew can't see into the club, but in his mind it glows with the thermal flames that mark each body as it weaves and dances and crowds and conceals what happens in the corners. Somewhere among them: Neil, helpless. Again.

The others meet him just as he's poised at the chaotic fringe of the dance floor. He's so angry that the edges of his vision are blurring and the club's lights leave bright streaks across his eyes every time they move. He needs to hit something. He needs to hit that fucking guy. He needs to scream and destroy. He needs to get Neil in his hands, whole and protected and behind a locked door.

He needs to find out what happened with Nicky.

Kevin is first through the crowd, carrying Neil like they're about to cross the threshold of their marital home. Like he's rescuing Neil from a burning building. Like he's primed for someone to try to take something valuable from him. The vice grip on Andrew's heart loosens just a little. Next to Kevin is Aaron, moving stiffly. Andrew thinks Aaron is going for indifference, but he's not pulling it off—he keeps shooting glances at the limp hang of Neil's arm and looking away fast, eyes trained on distant corners.

Behind them trails Nicky, wearing an expression of stoic anguish that would be more appropriate for a firing squad.

"Give him to me," Andrew demands.

"I can carry him," Kevin says.

"Kevin," Andrew says sharply. "Now."

"He's taller than you," Kevin argues. "This is easier."

"Now," Andrew says. The threat in it must carry over the pulse of the bass, because Kevin blanches and gingerly shifts Neil's weight to transfer him to Andrew. Neil is warm and boneless in his arms. He's not *heavy*, but he is a couple of inches taller than Andrew, so It takes a little maneuvering to tuck Neil close enough that the splay of his limbs doesn't make carrying him impossible.

"He's been asking for you," Kevin says bleakly.

"And Nicky?" Andrew asks.

"He stayed away."

They need to get out of here. They're starting to get looks and the beat of the music is doing nothing more than whipping up Andrew's temper. He hefts Neil a little higher to accommodate for his uncoordinated shifting; Neil seems to have rallied during the transfer, at least enough to wrap his arms around Andrew's neck and mumble garbled nonsense against his shoulder.

Andrew allows himself one moment to press his face to the side of Neil's head and breathe.

"Car," he says. "Let's go."

They get Neil into the passenger seat and buckled in more or less uneventfully. There's a moment where Neil panics and braces his hands against the door and refuses to be pushed inside, but he lets Andrew coax him. He lets Andrew lift his legs into the car. He lets Andrew fasten his seatbelt. But, by the time Andrew makes it to the driver's side, Neil is scrambling ineffectually for his seatbelt fastener and slurring, "*Don't. Don't,*" at no one in particular.

"Stop it," Andrew says, knocking his hands out of the way and double-checking that it's still solidly buckled. "Sit still."

Neil quiets, slumping back against his seat and allowing Andrew to tug hard the belt again.

With his fingers wrapped tightly around the steering wheel, Andrew inhales a few lungfuls of the charged air in the car. When he looks in the rear view mirror to back out of his spot, he's treated to a line of grim faces; Aaron's angry, Kevin's haunted, and Nicky's...harder to pin down. He must feel the heavy weight of Andrew's eyes, but he avoids them completely, picking at the seams of his jeans instead. Don't talk to Nicky about whatever this is right now, Andrew tells himself. You're too angry. Tonight isn't his fault. You'll take it out on him. Wait until you know what happened.

"Andrew," Neil mumbles. Andrew glances his way and sees that Neil has twisted enough to tip his temple against the headrest and watch Andrew's profile. The erratic light from the streetlights casts the planes of his face in shadow. "Are you mad?"

"No," Andrew says, very calmly, very evenly, as close to soothing as he can get. "Not at you."

"Why is this happening again?" Neil asks quietly. His voice is so fucking *sad*. Every muscle in Andrew's body winds tighter with suppressed rage. He pushes his foot down harder on the gas. *Again*, Neil said. *Don't. No. Please.*

"You were drugged," Aaron snaps. "By some date rape asshole. Not us."

"Shut the fuck up," Kevin says, unexpectedly angry. "You don't know what this is like."

"I think I—"

"No," Kevin interrupts. "You do not. He didn't take this on purpose. And he's fucking out of it. You think it's that easy to tell the difference between now and then?"

Same fucking place, Andrew thinks. Same fucking people.

“Suddenly you care?” Aaron snaps back. “You didn’t seem to have a problem with it last time.”

Kevin’s silence expands to fill the entire car. How could he possibly answer that? The truth is, he’s changed. They’ve all changed. Neil has changed them.

“Both of you shut up,” Andrew orders. “Aaron. Does he need a hospital?”

Aaron’s face in the rearview mirror screws up in thought. “I don’t know,” he finally admits. “Most of the time I’d say yes just to be safe, but this is your psycho boyfriend and I don’t know how he’d react.”

“No hospitals,” Neil slurs. “I’m fine.”

Aaron snorts. “Sure you are.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Andrew says, pinning Aaron’s eyes down in the mirror. “Don’t talk to him again.”

“No problem,” Aaron grumbles. He pointedly slumps back against the middle seat and crosses his arms over his chest.

Andrew knows that Aaron is freaking out. His brother has a history with drugs and sketchy shit that may or may not have really happened when he was high. If he’d been thinking what they did and what this asshole did was different, Neil’s confusion has to be ripping that fantasy apart. Aaron is too vulnerable to feeling. Even the sullen set of his jaw twitches with guilt and shame.

Andrew doesn’t feel either of those things. He feels fury. He feels uncertainty. What is Neil going to remember about this when the drugs work their way out of his system? Are they going to have to start back at square one? Square two? Square zero? So much has happened since that first night at Eden’s, it has become fuzzy even in Andrew’s mind. How had he ever thought the whole thing was one-dimensional? The chisel of Neil’s drugged panic keeps chipping away at the memory, giving it form and dimension Andrew had missed before. It’s hideous.

He steals another glance across the car. Neil has curled in more on himself, getting smaller and smaller in his seat. His eyes are open but so unfocused that Andrew’s afraid to ask what reality Neil is in. It can’t be this one, he thinks. Or maybe it is. Maybe it is this one and it’s worse than Andrew knows. He clenches his fingers tightly around the steering wheel and keeps the car pointed straight ahead, as though aiming his headlights precisely, exactly equidistant from the white lines, is going to give him some kind of control back. It won’t. It doesn’t.

“Neil,” Andrew says loudly. “Are you with me?”

No response.

“Neil.”

They're still five minutes from home, passing the grimy local donut shop that makes the coffee Andrew likes. Neil stops there on his runs and jogs back with the hot cup, somehow never spilling even a drop. Andrew usually drinks it in bed. He reaches blindly over with his right hand and gropes until he finds one of Neil's and can tangle their fingers, pressing their palms together firmly.

"Abram," Andrew says this time. "You're safe. Keep your shit together."

"Everyone is mad," Neil mumbles. "Why is everyone so mad?"

"Nobody is mad at you. Tell me about exy," Andrew orders.

"I like exy," Neil says vaguely. "It's the best."

Andrew hears some kind of noise huff out of Aaron. He ignores it. "How do you play?"

"With the sticks," Neil says. He sounds confused. "You know. You have one."

"Is that it? We run around with sticks?"

These questions must be too hard. He sneaks a couple of looks at Neil's face as he struggles to put together an answer for that.

"You don't run," Neil says. "You stand still and ruin things."

"Ruin?" Andrew tries for a coaxing tone. It comes out grim instead.

Neil makes a vague noise. It sounds like *you already know* which is, of course, fair.

Andrew squeezes Neil's fingers. "What's your favorite play?" he asks.

Neil's sigh is exhausted. "I don't know. I've never seen one."

Andrew almost rams a slowly reversing Jeep when it blocks their street. He doesn't, but he does rev the engine obnoxiously until the Jeep's driver rolls his window down and sticks his arm out of it, middle finger raised proudly.

Andrew lays on his horn.

"What the hell," Aaron snaps. "You can wait *ten seconds*."

Andrew ignores him and zips around the Jeep when the way is clear, driving too fast down their street despite the late hour and the cars narrowing the road from both sides. He's never been fucking happier to see this house, the stucco and brick looming like a fortress despite its modest single story. Andrew just needs to get them through the castle gates. He swings sharply into the driveway and cuts the engine as soon as the car lurches to a stop. Home. He got Neil home. He has to get them inside now, lock them in their bedroom, and hold the rest of the world off at knife point.

But Neil, once he's been pried out of the passenger seat, takes one look at the house and freaks out.

"No," he says, his panic ramping back up. "No, not again."

There's that awful *again* again. Neil loves this house. The fear doesn't make any sense. Except that Neil definitely knows something Andrew doesn't. Andrew's eyes snap to Nicky, whose pallor is now so pronounced he's milky in the moonlight.

"What happened?" Andrew demands.

Even as weak and uncoordinated as Neil is, the fingers Andrew has looped around his wrist aren't enough to quell this round of flight; Neil is still trying to get away. Andrew pulls him closer, against his side, and wraps both arms around him to hold their position. They don't usually do this in public, but Neil doesn't seem to know the difference. He loosens, the tension in his arms relaxing, and slouches enough to drop his head onto Andrew's shoulder. He mumbles something Andrew can't make out, some kind of nonsense. Andrew's mind screams *protect* and *mine* and *destroy*.

"I kissed him," Nicky says quietly. "At Eden's, the first time. To get him to take the drugs."

A blood vessel in Andrew's brain explodes.

"And—" Nicky hesitates, then steels himself and pushes forward. "I took him to bed with me when we got back."

"You what?" Andrew asks flatly. His arms are full of Neil, so he can't lunge at Nicky and choke him like he wants to, but he vibrates with the need to do it. When Neil grunts in protest against his shoulder, he realizes he's squeezed too tight—he has to force himself to loosen his grip, deliberately uncurling each of the fingers that were digging into Neil's hip.

"Nothing *happened*—" Nicky seems to think better of that wording and rushes to correct it. "I mean, I didn't do anything. I just took off his shoes and put him in bed and got in after him. I wouldn't—you have to know I wouldn't touch someone passed out like that. But—I was there in the morning. In the bed. When he woke up."

And there it is. Andrew suddenly feels it. The shame. The guilt. It briefly batters back the anger, but converts quickly into fuel for his fury—the rage returns, towering higher than before. It's just that now it's turned upon Nicky and himself equally.

He hadn't known how precarious Neil's survival was then. He hadn't realized how life-or-death Neil's control was, how essential his lies were to staying alive. He doesn't think knowing that would have changed his mind at the time, but now—he realizes, painfully, that his neglect had allowed his own brand of trauma to seep into Neil's life. He'd been so pissed at himself for being so fucking into the blue eyes and the new clothes that he'd gone off to blow Roland and left Neil in the hands of a guy who had already made dozens of comments about how to get him into bed. A guy who, despite his many good traits, had never really figured out how to keep his hands to himself. He thinks about Neil, so desperate to keep himself safe that he paid someone to break his head to keep his secrets, waking up in bed

with a man without having consented to it. He thinks about the panic of the post-drugged haze, the lapses in memory, the fear of something having happened. He thinks about Nicky forcing his tongue into Neil's mouth, about the violation of that, about Neil knowing he was also being dosed against his will, not able to reject either the man or the drugs. The helplessness. The loss of control over what happens to your body. He is painfully familiar with the awfulness of that. How did Neil forgive Nicky? How did he forgive *Andrew*?

He turns his attention back to the boy in his arms and presses his face to Neil's neck.

"It's okay," Andrew says. "I won't let anyone touch you."

Anyone else, says the little voice in Andrew's head. Except Nicky. And Lola. Riko. Nathan. And this asshole tonight.

"You're going to leave now," Andrew tells Nicky. His voice is tight but flat. "Before my hands are free."

Detached, miles away, he watches Nicky's face crumple. Nicky caves in on himself miserably, his eyes shiny. "Andrew, I'm so—" he says.

"No," Andrew interrupts. "I want you out."

"Jesus Christ, Andrew."

He turns his head sharply toward Aaron, who, he notices, has stayed in the car. Out of the line of fire. Coward.

"He's your *family*," Aaron snaps. "That's more important than whatever this shit is."

"This shit?" Andrew asks. He hears it come out smoothly. He's so angry with everyone right now. Everyone. It's a wildfire, consuming everything in its path. He thinks he must be glowing with it.

Maybe he should put Neil back in the car and go somewhere else. A hotel? No. They're already here. Neil doesn't have to accommodate anyone tonight.

"Your Josten bullshit," Aaron says defensively. He jabs a finger towards Neil. "You're going to pick him over your own family?"

Family. Andrew's had a new one of those so often he's lost track. It's never done him all that many favors.

"Good point," Andrew says. "I wonder if Cass asked herself that too."

Nicky's hollow, "Andrew," is lost under the onslaught of Aaron's very loud, "Fuck you, this isn't the same."

A matter of degrees, he guesses Aaron is saying. What Nicky did isn't really all that bad compared to what happened to Andrew. What Aaron saw happen to Andrew. And maybe he's right—maybe it didn't matter that much to Neil. But it matters tonight. Neil is too fucked up

to fake panic. He was afraid of going to Nicky. Andrew can't have that in the house with them.

"You leave, too," Andrew orders. "Get a cab and get out of here. Don't call me."

Aaron's outburst is loud enough that Neil stirs, groping for leverage to push himself upright. Neil's mumbled, "What's happening?" comes out thick and slow.

"Nothing," Andrew says.

"He's not *Drake*," Aaron spits. "It wasn't like that. Even you can't be—"

"Aaron," Nicky interrupts. "Andrew is right. This isn't the time."

Andrew pins each of them with another warning look and pushes past to walk Neil to the front door. He's done this before, too—maneuvered a not particularly conscious Neil into this house. He'd had Nicky carry him that time.

Everything about that night seems tinged with filth, now that Andrew knows the whole story.

Why isn't Neil afraid of him, too? Why does Neil keep asking for him? Why didn't he reach across the console and yank on the wheel until they crashed? That seems like a very two-years-ago-Neil thing to do and this time he'd been conscious enough to do it.

Andrew has more information now, but all that it's done is spawn even more questions.

Their only saving grace is the season. It had been hot then. Neil had been a heavy, unwanted burden. By the time Andrew had gotten him out of the club and into the car, he'd been overheated and slick with sweat in all the places they'd been glued together. It hadn't been erotic. His unforgivable attraction to that jumpy boy with the fast eyes and the easy lies had waned when he was unconscious. There'd been nothing appealing about a runaway who couldn't run.

But it's winter now. The heat of their breath turns every word into a tiny flurry of mist. The light frost on the grass breaks beneath his feet every time he takes a step. He wonders if someone grabbed his and Neil's coats at the club. He wonders if he should take Neil to the hospital. He wonders if he'll wake up in a few hours to find that Neil has run again.

He wonders if that guy had managed to do anything to Neil before Andrew got to him. Anything more than kissing. Would Neil remember, if he did? Would it matter? Is the violation worse if you can remember its mundane details, or worse if it's just a sick feeling in the back of your throat?

Will Neil remember Andrew trying to pass him from one predator to another? What if he remembers nothing at all. What will Andrew tell him about what happened?

Too many questions. He'll never get all the answers.

They stop on the stoop when Neil drops suddenly to his knees and hunches over the neglected flower beds. The wrenching sound of his body rejecting itself winds Andrew up

tighter and tighter until he feels like he won't be able to move, like his anger is petrifying him. His pounding heart slows, inflexible, the stone spreading from his skin and bones to his vulnerable insides.

He thinks he's supposed to crouch and rub Neil's back and make soothing noises, but he can't. He is incapable of it. Kevin hovers anxiously at Andrew's side, wisely keeping his mouth shut and his hands to himself as the violence of Neil's heaving fades into pathetic hiccups.

Aaron and Nicky's cab hasn't arrived yet. They're just standing at the end of the driveway, Aaron staring down the street in stony silence, Nicky watching them with bald anguish. Andrew catalogues them once and then pushes them out of his mind. They're a tomorrow problem. Andrew has plenty of right now problems to deal with.

When Neil stops, Andrew helps him to his feet as gently as possible, pulls him in tight, and walks him into the house. The cold follows them into the dark entry, but it cedes to the furnace-heated air that envelops them as soon as they get in and turn the lights on.

"Bathroom," Andrew says. "You're gross."

Neil rallies enough to stumble down the hallway, mostly on his own. The vomiting could have cleared some of it from his system. It seems possible. Worth a whisper of hope. Andrew follows with his hands hovering around Neil's ribs, ready to catch him if he starts to fall, but they make it far enough for Andrew to prop him against the wall and duck into the bedroom. He grabs Neil's favorite hideous flannel pajama pants and one of Andrew's shirts that they've been sharing custody of.

He has to crouch to untie and remove Neil's shoes after Neil's attempt to toe them off almost ends with his face smashed against the floor. Just keep him out of the hospital, Andrew thinks, and this part should all be over tomorrow. Don't let him fall face-first onto the wood floors, don't let him run out into traffic, don't let him burn the house down.

Neil insists on going into the bathroom alone. Andrew doesn't like it, is worried that Neil will pass out and break his skull open, will curl up in the bottom of the tub and drown, but when he offers his help, Neil says no. Neil says no because he is stupid and drugged and not thinking clearly, but Neil says no. If Andrew can do anything tonight, it's honor that.

It's a narrow defeat—Neil really could slip and fall and need to be helped—but he wants to try to give Neil at least this little bit of privacy. Andrew says, "You're going to fall and break your neck."

"I'm fine," Neil says.

Andrew scowls. "No shower," he says. "Just brush your teeth and wash your face and change."

Helpless, against his better judgment, already kicking himself, he sits just outside the bathroom door and listens as the toilet flushes and the faucet starts running. No matter how closely he listens, he can't hear the sounds of splashing or movement. Not a great sign, but

theoretically, if Neil went down, Andrew would hear the thump. He won't barge in yet. He'll give Neil enough time that he might plausibly have fallen asleep on the toilet.

He tips his head back against the door and lets his eyes fall closed.

Normally, they wouldn't even be talking about leaving the club, but Andrew is exhausted. His brain can't keep up with the night; he gets lost in cyclical thought patterns about Nicky and his own culpability and whether or not anyone at the club would recognize a description of that asshole and his car. His sluggish heartbeat evens out; his breathing slows to a gentle ebb and flow. The rush of the water and the rhythmic humming and pinging of the heater lure him further into mindlessness. He lets himself fall into it; it lasts maybe three minutes. Ten. Maybe an hour.

The delicate peace shatters when the door to the den is flung open. Kevin flies out of it and towards the entry, a blur of flesh and dark boxer-briefs that's gone before Andrew can so much as blink. Kevin yanks the front door open with no more ceremony than he'd given the first and then he's sprinting out of sight in bare feet.

Andrew is slow to follow. It takes too long to move his heavy limbs. His joints ache in protest when he heaves himself off the floor.

When he finally makes his way outside, he spots Neil and Kevin almost to the stop sign at the end of their street. Neil is a little more clothed than Kevin is, having at least put on the pajamas left for him, but he's also barefoot, his hair is damp, and he's shaking so violently that Andrew can see it even from this far away. He goes back for the bundle of coats on the chair next to the door and leaves it ajar behind him. The slice of light that escapes illuminates his path as he makes his way to the sidewalk. It glistens in uneven patterns along the trampled grass Andrew is following. Nicky and Aaron are thankfully nowhere in sight.

"He's at the house," Kevin is saying when Andrew finally reaches them. His big hands are on Neil's upper arms, holding him steady. Kevin's voice is calm and worried even through the chatter of his teeth. "Andrew is right in the house."

Neil's head turns in that direction; when he spots Andrew a few feet away, the tension in his shivering body slumps into relief.

"Stupid," Andrew says. "It's cold. You're wet." He hands Kevin one of the jackets and wraps the other around Neil's shoulders. "What were you doing?"

"We have to go," Neil says. "It isn't safe."

"He ran by my window," Kevin says, frowning. "He probably shouldn't be alone again. If I hadn't seen him..."

Andrew can think of far too many disaster scenarios to complete that sentence; he refuses to linger in even one of them and instead directs his efforts to herding Kevin and Neil back to the house. Neil is still shaking, but less panicked. He and Kevin are both barefoot against the cold, rough pavement. It has to hurt to walk and it's only getting worse.

Neil keeps trying to see Andrew and almost dropping his coat in the process, grasping for the smooth, plasticky fabric with clumsy fingers and missing again and again. Andrew tucks it back over his left shoulder three times before he's had enough.

"Stop," Andrew sighs. He stops walking and holds up Neil's coat so he can slip his arms into it. Kevin waits, shivering visibly, his long legs bare. He stands sentinel, not moving on until Neil is zipped into the puffy, quilted thing. It's Nicky's, so it hits Neil at the upper thighs. Andrew grasps his wrist and forges ahead, tugging Neil behind him and letting Kevin take the rear. He suspects that the heavy press of his fingers will cast shadows on Neil's skin long after Andrew lets go, but he can't convince his cold, numb hands to loosen.

This time, he follows Neil into the bathroom and makes him sit in the tub so that Andrew can wash him down with hot water and the good, fancy soap. Every touch is careful and impersonal, Andrew's fingers stiff with cold and the fear of crossing a line. He crouches and works shampoo into Neil's hair with such singular focus that he almost falls backwards when Neil gently touches his wrist.

"What?" Andrew snaps.

"Andrew." That's about as much as Neil can get out before he has to stop and rub his face roughly. He's someone with such intrinsic purpose that seeing him lost and confused is horrible—Andrew feels an awful mix of pity and protectiveness. Neil would be furious about the pity, if he knew. No pity, Andrew tells himself. Sharp, focused Neil will be back tomorrow.

"Josten?" Andrew prompts.

Suddenly, Neil looks right at him. His eyes are their usual unusually bright blue, as close to clear as they've been in an hour or more. He touches Andrew's wrist again and lets his fingertips linger. "Love you."

There's a better than average chance that Neil will remember none of this tomorrow. Andrew doesn't think that cheapens what Neil is saying to him—his inhibitions and rational thinking are fucked, but this thing Neil is telling him? Andrew believes it.

He's just not sure he knows how to deal with it. Not right now. Andrew doesn't have the bandwidth to negotiate his own feelings and vocabulary as he kneels here, trying to ignore the ache of his knees. Because it's not love, what beats in him. Love is something everyone else feels. Love is plastered all over palatable movies and Hallmark cards. What Andrew feels for Neil, about Neil, can't be distilled down to one word. And if it could be, no one would buy it on cheesy, mass-produced signs to hang in their kitchens.

Anyway, he's pretty sure the fading intensity of Neil's eyes was supposed to tell him he doesn't have to say it back. That this is something Neil just wants him to know.

And, that. That is something he can give Neil. He holds Neil's face between his soapy hands, meets his eyes and says, firmly, "I know."

Spent, Neil slumps into compliance. He's pliant while Andrew rinses his hair, helps him dry, helps him dress, and gets him into bed. Even after the hot water, his skin feels cool beneath Andrew's hands. Every part of Andrew is heavy with fatigue and feeling, so he appreciates Neil's malleability—but he can't stop wondering whether Neil would have been this easy to handle with malicious intentions. Is he docile because he's with Andrew, or is this just the phase of the drugs he's in?

Questions.

He tells himself to take some heart from Neil's idiotic escape attempt and tries to force the slideshow of terrifying possibilities out of his mind, concentrating instead on changing himself and gathering overnight supplies: water, ibuprofen, washcloths, and a trash can for Neil if he needs to be sick.

And then he blinks and finds himself in bed. He could stay the night in the chair keeping watch, but Neil is clingy and less anxious when they're together, and anyway, Andrew's body is made of lead. If he forms himself to the shape of a chair, he may never be able to get out of it again.

He craves the soothing normalcy of this, too. The sheets are cool, the blankets warm, and Neil is a familiar weight beside him. It's the closest Andrew ever gets to peace—just him and this man cloistered under a blanket. Their rhythms are so set that the dance of covers and feet and shoving at pillows happens close to as smoothly as it ever does.

Even out of his mind, Neil can be so predictable. He rolls to face Andrew, burrowing into his arms and pressing his whole face against Andrew's shirt. He mumbles, “‘m fine,” and falls hard into a deep, cadaverous sleep.

It comes more slowly for Andrew. He keeps Neil tucked close to him, works his fingers through damp hair until it dries, and reminds himself who and where he is. Columbia. His bedroom. With Neil. But even with all the deep breathing and sheep counting he can stand, the best he can do is drift between nightmares and jerking awake every time Neil stirs or mumbles in his sleep.

He drifts and wakes to the feeling of Neil's lips moving against his shirt. He drifts and wakes to find Neil immobile, his face pushed almost into Andrew's armpit. He drifts and wakes when Neil spins away from him and almost falls out of bed so he can dry heave into the trash can. He drifts and opens his eyes to a flood of early morning light. His arms are empty, but the covers beside him are still rumpled and warm. Neil is out for a run. No, that's not right. He's usually back before there's this much light.

It all surges back so suddenly that his groggy head spins. What time is it? When was the last time he opened his eyes? Is Neil up with a hangover or is the empty space his first alarm that Neil has run off again?

Quietly frantic, he propels himself out of bed and bangs through the hallway. The front door is shut, the deadbolt still engaged. Aaron and Nicky's doors are open, revealing their empty beds. Kevin's is closed.

Andrew finds Neil sitting on the bathroom floor, his back against the cabinets, his toothbrush in hand. Neil doesn't seem to hear him approaching, but he does look up and attempt a smile when Andrew nudges his knee against Neil's shoulder.

"Hey," Neil says weakly.

"Why are you on the floor?"

"I was going to brush my teeth," Neil explains. He waggles the toothbrush slowly. "But I got tired."

Andrew offers him a hand up and then leans shoulder-to-shoulder with Neil while they endure the requisite two minutes of brushing.

After, Neil wraps himself in blankets and watches Andrew decide whether or not he should get back in bed.

He does. The house feels icy in comparison. He wants to be ensconced. When he settles in, he finds Neil watching him, curled up about a foot away. His hair is a disaster. He's still clammy and a little green, but his eyes are focused and clear, even if their vivid blue is clouded by the red that snakes through the vessels.

"What do you remember?" Andrew asks.

"Some guy," Neil says quietly. "You. Nicky. Kevin. A lot of yelling."

"You're not supposed to wander off long enough to get drugged."

A ghost of a smile crosses Neil's face. "Note taken. How are you?"

How is *he*? This asshole.

People misuse the word 'kryptonite.' Superman's conditional humanity isn't romantic. It's fatal.

"Not the one who got drugged," Andrew says pointedly.

Neil hums, considering. "I don't know. I was thinking about that. It happened to both of us. My memories are hazy, but I was with you. I was safe. You were alone."

Kryptonite.

"Tell me what happened with Nicky," Andrew orders.

"You didn't ask him?"

"Tell me your version."

Neil's face does the thing Andrew had found so infuriatingly attractive in the beginning—the slight hesitation, the almost imperceptible wrinkle of his brow, the aborted chewing on his

bottom lip. He's sorting through the versions of truth he could tell Andrew to keep tensions down. He is Andrew's very own, personal rubik's cube, endlessly a mosaic of truth and outright lies.

"Well," Neil says carefully.

"Oh, fun," Andrew says. "I can't wait to see how well your bullshit half-truth stands up to questioning."

Neil's long exhale seems resigned. "The night you guys drugged me at Eden's, Nicky used his tongue to get me to take another couple of doses. I paid that guy to knock me out. I woke up in Nicky's bed. He pushed me towards the trash can to throw up and then I took off through your bathroom window."

"You didn't tell me."

"Because you would have cared?" Neil asks skeptically. "I mean, I know you better now. I know you would care. But back then, all I knew is that you were the one calling all the shots."

"You thought I knew," Andrew realizes.

"Nicky kissed me. You came by for a threatening chat. Nicky kissed me again. Aaron knew. He was there in Nicky's room the next morning. It didn't seem like two different agendas."

Andrew closes his eyes and remembers. It's not as clear as he'd like it to be. All of this has turned the clarity of apathy into a chaotic mess of feelings. He'd been attracted—so attracted. He'd been suspicious. He'd been angry that Riko had sent him this lying runaway. He'd been angry that he wanted so much so badly. He'd been angry that Neil could surprise him. He'd been plotting to get rid of Neil with one hand and jerking off thinking about him with the other.

"I did not know," Andrew says flatly.

"I know," Neil says. "I know you didn't."

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

"No," Neil says, huffing it out on a dark laugh. "I made my peace with Nicky. I wasn't interested in a scorched earth campaign."

"You were afraid of him," Andrew says. "You were afraid of the house."

"I remember some parts of the first time like they were yesterday. I remember some parts of last night like they were two years ago. Like the most intense *déjà vu*."

Andrew scrubs harshly at his face, leaving his hand over his eyes so he can try to rub the tension out of his temples with his fingers. "I don't know what I'm going to do about him."

“Nothing,” Neil says. Andrew can’t see his face, but he knows what the expression would be. He knows this tone of voice. “I don’t want you to do anything.”

“I don’t care what you want.”

“I’m not asking you to forgive him. I’m not asking you to see it from his side. I’m asking you to just let it be.”

Andrew cracks his fingers and squints at Neil from between them. “I would kill him for doing that now.”

“He wouldn’t do it now.”

Andrew widens the crack. “Not good enough.”

“Nicky did something shitty. It took me a while to get past it, but I did. And he’s important to me too, now. I’ve never had anyone in my life like me that much.”

Andrew scoffs. That’s a fair point, though. Nicky has adopted Neil as much as he’d adopted Andrew and Aaron—maybe more, actually, since Neil has a reservoir of patience to cope with Nicky’s more aggressive care-taking that the twins are very much lacking.

“Andrew,” Neil says quietly. Andrew drops his hand and looks at him properly. “Tell him how fucked up it was. Be pissed at him. Hold a grudge. Tell him he’s lucky to be alive. Tell him you’ll kill him if he does it again. Tell him *how* you’ll kill him if he does it again. Just don’t banish him. It would fuck everything up and we’d all miss him.”

Banishment. Andrew realizes, once Neil has said it, that his plans had definitely been aimed in that direction. He’d been debating what to do *before* he told Nicky to fuck off forever, not whether or not he’d do it at all. And Neil isn’t wrong. Nicky would have to leave the team, drop out, and move to Germany if Andrew told him to stay away. He wouldn’t finish college. Aaron would be furious. A small, petty part of him thinks, *good, let them suffer*, but another part has grown enough to realize that maybe this isn’t his punishment to deliver. Nicky assaulted Neil, and Neil wants him to stay. Andrew has made a similar decision under much worse circumstances. But it’s not his choice this time. It’s Neil’s.

That’s Nicky’s saving grace and Andrew will make sure he knows it.

“Fine,” Andrew says. “He can stay. But I will make my position very clear.”

“Was that the worst of it?” Neil asks quietly. “For you?”

Andrew shakes his head jerkily.

“Did anything actually happen last night?”

“Yes,” Andrew snaps. “He drugged you. He kissed you,” He remembers the ragdoll drape of Neil’s body. He remembers the long minutes when he was searching fruitlessly, blinded by the crowds, no way of knowing what was happening on the other side. “I caught him on his way to the side door. But he could have done more. He would have.”

Why are they still fucking talking about Andrew? It didn't happen to him. Or maybe, if you look at it Neil's way, something did. Maybe something happened to both of them; he wasn't drugged, but he was in it. He was buffeted. He is still reeling, still grasping for control. He can acknowledge that.

Andrew inhales deeply; when he exhales, the tension winding its way up his spine seems to loosen a little of its punishing coil.

"He didn't. I'm okay," Neil says again. "I'm right here. You took care of me."

Andrew uncoils a little further. The crease of Neil's forehead smooths out a little.

"You won't drink anything I don't give you again," Andrew says.

"Okay," Neil says. "I'm good with that."

"And I'm putting a tracker in you."

"They don't make those yet," Neil says. "You'd have to make it wearable."

"I would," Andrew says.

"I know," Neil says, biting the tiniest smile out of his bottom lip. "And I know this is too soon, but I'm *really* hungry. Is there room in this angst for a trip to IHOP?"

Andrew snorts. "Asshole."

"Good as new," Neil agrees. "And I owe you pancakes."

The offer is clear: a return to normal, a little softness, a little self-indulgence. Syrup and whipped cream and hot chocolate. He's not surprised. Neil never lingers in his own trauma and he sure as hell doesn't ask Andrew to linger in his.

"Pancakes," Andrew says grudgingly. "Cartoons. A nap. You never leave my sight. You can tell Nicky he's been pardoned later."

"And you call Betsy," Neil says. His eyes are guileless but his tone is firm.

"I will if you will," Andrew counters.

Neil grimaces. Andrew raises an eyebrow at him.

"Fine," Neil sighs. He smiles, bright, if a little clammy, and says musingly, "I wonder if she's been watching *The Umbrella Academy*."

Andrew can't help himself. He leans in and kisses Neil once, hard, then pulls back and starts shoving him towards the edge of the bed. Neil puts on about a hundred layers, thick socks, and his atrocious Crocs, and insists on holding Andrew's hand in the car. There's no such thing as holding on tightly enough, but Neil rubs his thumb over Andrew's whitening

knuckles and doesn't complain about his bruising grip. Not even when the friction between their palms is replaced by the slickness of sweat.

At the restaurant, Andrew sits across from Neil in the booth, his french toast largely ignored, watching Neil reject pieces of his pancakes that don't have blueberries in them. Neil is still in Andrew's shirt, his hair is a complete disaster, and he has dark circles under his eyes. He's here and he's safe but he still doesn't feel completely solid to Andrew. If he reaches out, Andrew thinks, his hands might slip right through Neil.

Neil has never felt entirely real to Andrew, but at least he's always been there in the flesh when they're together. Touchable. Tough.

"Hey," Neil says, waving his fork to get Andrew's attention. "You know I have to pay for that even if you don't eat it, right?"

Andrew can't help the broken huff of laughter that escapes him.

This idiot is the most precious thing Andrew has ever had. Allowed himself to have. Under the table, the thick, round toe of Neil's rubber shoe bumps against Andrew's sneaker and pushes until Andrew gives in and lifts his foot so that Neil can work his own beneath it. Andrew lets the weight of his foot rest on top of Neil's, relieved at the substance of him, the presence—even as his ankle protests the incline. Solid. Safe. Still here. Still stupid.

Maybe Neil is a weakness. But Andrew has never been Superman. And this is worth it.

End Notes

Deepest of gratitude to @ahappydementor and @justadreamfox for their betas and second opinions and reassurances that I will probably not go to hell for this.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!