

Sleeping Habits

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Sleeping Habits

by [outofsync](#)

Summary

Overwhelmed by the pressure of his new role and by countless sleepless nights alone in the Archives, Jon falls back on an old method of self-soothing.

Elias sees an opportunity.

Notes

Takes place near the beginning of S1, veers off pretty quickly into AU/canon divergence.

(This was started in 2021 and picked back up/edited in 2024)

Beginnings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jon didn't need it.

It was an indulgence: a habit he fell on when he was particularly upset or stressed, but he didn't need it.

It started during his time at Oxford. The stress of university took its toll on him, leaving him exhausted yet unable to sleep. He couldn't calm down enough to rest, his thoughts racing all night and leaving him tossing and turning.

He found a partial solution at the bottom of a box labeled "JON" in scrawled Sharpie print. Jon was helping his grandmother move into a retirement home, and part of that process was packing up and removing decades worth of junk from her house, including his childhood bedroom.

Buried underneath a pile of half-remembered trinkets and old notebooks from secondary school was a small stuffed animal: a lamb with matted fur and a red ribbon around its neck. A wave of fond nostalgia overtook him when he held it. He had owned the lamb as long as he could remember and had adored it as a child; sleeping with it almost every night.

He felt guilty, leaving it for so long in such a state. So, he packed it in his suitcase and took it home with him. He thought little of it at first. It stayed on a shelf in his bedroom, a much more dignified home than at the bottom of a box, but otherwise, he ignored it.

Until one night, after tossing and turning in bed for hours, he decided to retrieve it from the shelf. He held his lamb to his chest and imagined he was a kid again, with no grown-up responsibilities or anxieties, without mountains of assignments to complete or infuriating colleagues or professors that spoke down to him.

It worked surprisingly well. He fell asleep within a few minutes and felt well-rested the next morning.

From then on, whenever he had a particularly stressful day, he would lay down with his lamb close to his chest, imagining that he was small, safe, and the responsibilities of adult life were far away.

If he occasionally woke up with his thumb in his mouth, well, that was no one's business but his own.

The nightmares started soon after he began working as a researcher. Understandable, given the nature of his work. The dreams weren't debilitating, but they often woke him in the middle of the night and made it nearly impossible to fall back asleep for hours, his heart racing with fear.

The fantasy, habit, *whatever it was*, began to change after that. Whenever he woke from nightmares, clutching his lamb to his chest, he would imagine a kind, faceless caregiver tending to him. They would speak to him with soft, comforting words, stroke his hair and calm him. "*It's okay,*" the faceless voice whispered. "*It was only a nightmare, you're safe here. You can go back to sleep.*"

He never imagined anyone in particular. It certainly wasn't his grandmother—she was a fine guardian, but never a particularly comforting one. He didn't think he was imagining his parents, either. It was just... a presence. A reassuring presence that would ward off the nightmares and keep him safe.

It was a harmless fantasy, really. An embarrassing one, one that he would never tell another soul about, even if he could find the words to describe it, but it was harmless.

(Even if it was, Jon reluctantly admitted to himself, part of why things fell apart with Georgie. Even before the nightmares started, he craved that form of comfort too much and was equal parts unwilling and unable to explain it to her. Sleeping without his lamb, constantly worried he was going to wake up with his thumb in his mouth next to Georgie just left him miserable.)

He still didn't *need* it, it just... helped. He was older now, more mature, and could go without out if he needed to. But he wasn't sharing a bed with anyone, so there was no reason to.

So, things stayed the same, until Elias promoted him to Head Archivist.

It felt like a hellish combination of his time at Oxford and his first days as an Institute researcher. There was an incredible amount of work that needed to be done, and even without strict deadlines, he felt an incredible amount of pressure to get things in order quickly.

It led to long nights and mounting stress, and the cot in the back room of the Archives became a familiar sight. Reading the statements first-hand, the *stubborn* ones that wouldn't record digitally, was also unnerving, and the nightmares began to come with increasing frequency and severity. His self-soothing habits became more important than ever, but he wouldn't dare take his lamb to the Institute. If he somehow lost her...

The sleep deprivation was taking its toll on him, however. For as much trouble as he had falling asleep when he actually wanted to, it had a habit of sneaking back up on him.

He'd fallen asleep at his desk this particular night. His head rested on his arms folded underneath him, the tip of his thumb resting on his bottom lip—not quite in his mouth, but close.

A hand was on his shoulder and he mumbled in sleepy discontent, drawing his arms closer around his head, mindlessly chewing on the tip of his thumb. He just wanted to rest.

“Jon.”

Elias.

And then he was awake, his head instantly off the desk. He scrambled back in his chair, startled.

Elias didn't look angry or disappointed, though. Slightly amused, perhaps, but not in a cruel way.

“Long night?” Elias asked, his tone sympathetic.

“Y-yeah, sorry,” Jon said, brushing the hair out of his eyes. “Lost track of time, was caught up in research and I guess I just...” he made a vague motion at the desk and suppressed a yawn. “What time is it?”

“A bit after eleven.”

“Ah,” Jon sighed, still a bit rattled from being woken. He wondered how often Elias stayed this late. Maybe he also had sleeping quarters somewhere in the institute—the building was certainly big enough.

“Let’s get you to bed properly, hm?” Elias said, extending a hand. Jon took it, standing up from the chair and wincing when his legs ached in protest.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll go—I’ll sleep on the cot,” Jon said, rubbing his eyes.

Elias put a hand on Jon’s shoulder and started to steer him towards the disused storage room where the cot was kept. Jon noted this with a bit of annoyance—he was a grown man, he didn’t need to be *put to bed* by his boss, but he was too tired to protest. It wouldn’t be worth it, anyway. There was no use trying to dissuade Elias from something once he had set his mind to it.

Jon sat down on the narrow, familiar cot and bent down to untie his shoes. Elias was there first, dropping easily to his knees and batting away Jon’s hands to unlace his shoes for him. Jon let him, far too tired to question it. Elias took off his shoes and placed them against the wall, then did the same for his socks. Jon simply watched him.

Elias rose to his feet and patted Jon’s knee.

“I trust you can do the rest yourself. Good night, Jon.”

“...Goodnight, Elias,” Jon said, puzzled by the interaction. He watched Elias leave, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Jon sighed and undressed, throwing his shirt and pants on the ground and curling up under the covers. It took him several minutes to fall asleep, heart and mind still racing from the strange interaction.

The second time was different.

He didn’t remember putting his head down on the desk. One moment he was researching, buried in his work, and the next, he was passed out. The cup of tea he’d found waiting on his desk for him last night sat next to him, half-empty, cold.

His thumb was in his mouth and he couldn’t even bring himself to be embarrassed when he heard the familiar voice above him and felt the hand on his shoulder.

“Oh Jon,” Elias sighed, but he still didn’t sound angry or annoyed, just concerned. “Again?”

“*m’srry*,” Jon slurred around his thumb, groggy and half asleep. He hardly even questioned Elias’s presence this time.

“Come on now. Let’s get you to bed.”

Jon’s legs wobbled as Elias helped him up, and his eyelids felt impossibly heavy as he was led to the back room.

Elias turned on the light and Jon sat down on the cot—his drowsy mind half-registering that the blankets had already been drawn back. Elias knelt to take his shoes and socks off, as before.

Jon didn't protest as he felt Elias guide his arms up to pull his shirt off. Nor when Elias put a hand on his shoulder, guiding him to lie down so he could undo his belt and slide off his trousers.

Jon yawned and turned onto his side, curling away from Elias.

"Oh, Jon," Elias said, a smile in a voice. "It's much too cold for that, let me put the covers over you."

Jon muttered something in annoyance but shifted his legs to allow Elias to pull the blankets out from under him. He smoothed them out over Jon, tucking him in.

Elias was right. The Archives were cold, but the threadbare blankets hardly seemed to help. Jon sniffed once, wishing he was back home, with the comfort of the heavy quilt on his bed and his lamb. He bundled up a portion of blankets and hugged them to his chest, trying to simulate the feeling of hugging his beloved toy.

"There, there," Elias whispered, stroking his hair. Jon flinched almost imperceptibly. He wasn't expecting that, but... it felt nice.

"Do you need more blankets?" Elias asked.

Jon shook his head. He didn't want to inconvenience him any further. It's not like there were any extra blankets in the room, anyway—Jon had checked.

"If you insist."

Elias drew his hand back and turned off the light, lingering for just a moment longer. Jon listened to the footsteps on the wooden floor as Elias walked away, leaving him alone.

Chapter End Notes

Additional notes:

1. I imagine Jon's lamb looking something like [this](#)
2. Let me know your thoughts!

Night Terrors

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jon awoke the next morning with a pounding headache and a small puddle of drool on the pillow underneath him. He flipped the pillow over and settled back in, deciding the day could wait five more minutes.

He took a moment to feel grateful for his dreamless sleep. Sleeping on the cot was never particularly restful, but at least he hadn't been woken by nightmares again. He yawned and stretched, feeling his joints crack with a sense of satisfaction. Once he got up and had some tea to soothe his headache, he'd be fine.

Then he rolled over, saw his clothes neatly folded on the bedside table, and felt his stomach drop.

The details of the previous night were fuzzy—Elias had put him to bed again? He didn't recall much, but he remembered enough to be mortified. What the hell had *happened*? He'd never crashed that hard at his desk before, he didn't even remember putting his head down.

He rolled back over and groaned, pushing his face into his hands. Elias had undressed him and tucked him in like a child. And Jon had *let him*. What the hell was wrong with him?

He wanted to curl up under the blankets in a cocoon of shame and stay there, but he knew dwelling on it wouldn't help. He had work to do, had to get ready for the day—maybe recording another statement would be enough to distract him.

He kicked the blankets off of him, pushing the incident as far into the back of his mind as possible. He would deal with it later. Probably.

The day proceeded as normal. Jon tried to push the events of the previous night out of his mind and focus on recording statements, but the memory lingered in the back of his mind, heavy and shameful, never fully leaving his thoughts. He kept one eye on the clock as evening approached, making sure to leave before it got dark.

He didn't see Elias much over the next few days. That in itself wasn't unusual—Elias tended to spend most of his time in his office, preferring his 'hands-off' managerial approach. Whenever Jon passed him in the hallways of the institute, Elias acted polite and professional; nothing in his manner would suggest that he had undressed and put Jon to bed like a child a few nights ago.

What Jon realized with dawning horror, however, was that he missed it.

The deep, childish part of him longed for that comfort, longed to feel Elias' fingers gently brushing through his hair again. He *couldn't* let it happen again, though—surely Elias wouldn't be as kind if he found Jon passed out at his desk a third time.

The long nights couldn't stay away forever, though. The next time Jon worked late and exhaustion crept in at the edges of his eyes, he resolved to at least not let himself fall asleep at his desk.

It shouldn't have been a point of pride that he was able to put himself to bed like an adult, but Jon would take his victories where he could get them. It may have been too late to go home, but he could at least make it to the storage room without help this time.

The cot squeaked as he sat down on it and bent to untie his shoes. He tried not to think about how graceful Elias had looked, carefully removing Jon's shoes for him and putting them aside, seeming to put such care into such a mundane act.

He buried himself under the thin covers, trying to push the incident as far from his mind as possible. His thoughts wouldn't stop racing, though—it was either Elias or the statements that occupied his mind, and neither made any sense.

When he finally managed to drift off to a fitful sleep, it didn't last.

He woke up in the dark, gasping for breath and fighting with his sheets. His heart hammered in his chest as he instinctively reached for the bedside table. The realization that he wasn't home made his stomach drop. He didn't have his lamb, he was alone in an unfamiliar and terrifying place, with nothing but threadbare sheets for comfort.

He rolled over and tried to back himself against the corner, hiding his head in his hands, dizzy with panic. He couldn't get his breathing under control; he hadn't had a night terror this bad in months and fear gripped his chest like a vice.

He tried to imagine his faceless caregiver—holding him, soothing him, speaking to him in soft, comforting words, but the voice in his mind sounded like Elias's, now.

Elias.

What time was it?

He peeked out behind his hands to check the cheap alarm clock on the bedside table. Only midnight. He hadn't been asleep long—maybe Elias was still there, working late. He hadn't seen him leave when he went to bed a few hours ago. It was a long shot, but...

It was unlike him—Jon would typically be mortified by the idea of confronting anyone like this, especially his *boss*, but his thoughts were muddled, his mind shrouded with panic and he just needed to be near someone else, *now*.

He untangled himself from the sheets and half-ran through the halls of the institute, his bare footsteps echoing off the walls. The darkness seemed to close around him, and he tried as hard as possible to block it out. He just needed to make it to Elias's office.

He nearly collapsed with relief when he saw light pouring out from underneath Elias' door, and he swung it open without a second thought.

Elias was at his desk. He looked up at Jon with mild surprise, like he was showing up early for his performance review instead of barging into his office in the middle of the night, in his underwear, hysterical.

"Jon?" he asked calmly, as if this were a perfectly normal occurrence.

Jon suddenly realized how ridiculous he looked, and how cold it was. There was no way he was turning back now, though. He wrapped his arms around himself and struggled to make words, to articulate why he was there.

“Are you alright, Jon?” Elias asked, standing up.

Jon shuddered. “No—no, I’m not, I—I’m sorry, I—”

He looked over his shoulder. The darkness petrified him—he was trapped here. He sniffed.

He turned back around and saw Elias walking towards him, holding a soft blue blanket in one arm. *Where had he gotten that from?*

Elias held it out to him. Jon accepted it and wrapped it around himself.

“What do you need, Jon?” Elias asked.

Jon was silent for a few moments. “I had—I had a nightmare,” he muttered.

“Oh dear,” Elias murmured, not unkindly. He smoothed the blanket over Jon’s shoulder. “Do you have trouble sleeping alone?”

Jon shrugged, avoiding his eyes. What a strange question. It had been years since he shared a bed with anyone else, but the loneliness of an empty room certainly didn’t help.

“Why don’t you come lay down on the couch? I’m just finishing up some work,” Elias said.

Jon wondered again if Elias ever actually left the institute—he seemed like an immutable presence, as permanent as the walls or ceilings.

Jon looked at the couch across from Elias’ desk—an old, green, velvet sofa that was probably worth more than he made in a month. It didn’t look particularly comfortable, but then again, neither was the cot.

He nodded.

Elias smiled. “Alright,” he said softly, stepping aside and letting Jon walk over to the sofa. He laid down on it, turning on his side to face Elias’ desk. His suspicions were correct—it wasn’t particularly comfortable, but it was more than okay, especially with the cozy blanket.

Elias sat back down at his desk and continued to work, typing away. Jon wasn’t falling back asleep anytime soon, so he watched him. It was oddly soothing, watching him work.

As his heartbeat settled, his hand crept towards his mouth, the pad of his thumb resting on his lower lip.

Somehow, inexplicably, he knew Elias wouldn’t mind, the knowledge feeling solid and certain in his mind. Elias wasn’t paying attention to him anyway, focused on the screen in front of him.

Jon put his thumb in his mouth and continued to watch Elias work. If Elias noticed, he didn’t react.

After a few minutes of silence, Elias looked at him and smiled. He stood up from the desk and walked over to the couch, kneeling in front of Jon.

Jon's heartbeat picked back up again, the uncertainty of the situation unnerving him. Elias reached out and pushed the hair from his eyes, stroking it back and petting it softly.

"Sweet boy," Elias said, low and gently. Jon's breath hitched. Jon stayed still and silent, afraid to break the spell. His thumb was still resting on his lip, and Elias was still smiling at him.

"You said you've been having nightmares?" Elias asked, gently stroking Jon's hair.

"Sometimes," Jon muttered, removing his thumb from his mouth to draw the blanket tighter around himself. The soft fuzziness of a different headspace was present, but he was still in that awkward in-between state, unwilling to completely let go. The rational, adult part of his brain that questioned Elias's intentions, that told him he should be mortified by this encounter, still gripped him.

But the deep, buried part of him that craved the soft touches and words overwhelmed him, and it was too tempting to simply accept the comfort offered.

No one else had ever seen him like this. And inexplicably, he Knew, somehow, that he could trust Elias with this—at least, he knew Elias wouldn't mock him or find him pathetic.

Elias had initiated it, after all; he seemed to know what was going on. He wouldn't continue to entertain him otherwise, would he?

Jon felt himself slip a bit more.

"Do you want to talk about your nightmare?"

Jon shook his head immediately, tightening the blanket around himself.

"That's alright," Elias said. He didn't sound surprised. "What makes you feel better after a nightmare, then?"

Jon nibbled at the pad of his thumb. He stayed silent for a few moments, but Elias waited patiently.

"I get scared when I'm alone," Jon said, quietly. "I have a—I have a lamb."

"A lamb?" Elias asked, gently.

Elias's eyes were wide, all of his attention focused on Jon, drinking in every word he said like it was the most important thing he had ever heard. It made Jon nervous.

"She's a little—a little stuffed animal. This big," Jon said, untangling his hands from the blankets to measure out about 8 inches. "I dunno, it—it's stupid..." he mumbled, burying his hands back under the blankets.

"I don't think it's stupid," Elias said, sounding almost chiding. He continued to stroke Jon's hair. "It makes you feel better, doesn't it?"

Jon nodded, hiding part of his face under the blanket.

"That's good," Elias said. "Do you ever take your lamb here?"

Jon shook his head. "Don't wanna lose her."

“What makes you think you’d lose her?”

“Just scared.”

Elias hummed. “What if we kept her nice and safe in my office? Then you could come get her when it’s bedtime.”

Jon considered it. He never planned his long nights in the archives, they just sort of *happened*. Having to bring his lamb back and forth every day would increase the risk of her getting damaged or lost.

Besides, he wasn’t sure he trusted Elias enough to hold onto her. What if she got scared, left alone in a new, scary place without Jon?

Elias seemed to notice his mind wandering, and patted him on the shoulder.

“Just something to think about,” he whispered. “Are you ready to go back to bed?”

Jon thought about the dark expanse of the hallways and trembled.

“...I don’t want to go by myself.”

Elias smiled.

“Of course. Come on now, I’ll walk you down.”

Jon swung his legs over the side and Elias helped him up. He kept the blanket wrapped around his shoulders as he walked down the dark corridors of the institute, staying close to Elias's side. The stone floors were cold on Jon’s bare feet.

When they arrived back at the familiar room in the back of the archives, Jon’s heart sank a bit as he realized Elias was going to leave. He sat on the bed and looked up at him a bit pleadingly, not sure what he was asking for, exactly. He knew Elias couldn't stay with him.

Elias smiled at him, then stepped forward to brush the hair out of Jon’s eyes. “You can keep the blanket, of course.”

Jon wrapped the blanket around himself tighter. He liked it—it was warm and soft, and the plush texture felt good against his skin.

“Thank you.”

“Of course,” Elias said. “Would you like me to tuck you in?”

Jon’s adult mind balked at the question—but he nodded anyway, moving the covers out of the way so he could slip underneath and lie down.

Elias pulled the sheets up to Jon’s chest, then spread the blanket out on top of him, patting around the sides so he was tucked in tight.

“Goodnight, Jon,” Elias whispered.

“Goodnight, Elias.”

Elias gave Jon one last smile and turned to leave. Jon watched him exit the room, the door creaking softly as it closed.

It took several minutes for Jon to fall back asleep—but when he did; his sleep was dreamless.



Chapter End Notes

(full res for image [here](#))

Lamb

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next few days were a brief return to normality, or at least to routine. Elias continued to pretend like nothing had happened, remaining as hands-off towards the Archive staff as he had ever been. The barely organized mess of the Archives continued to keep Jon busy, taking his mind off of Elias, mortified as he was.

He hadn't had a long night in a while—at least, not long enough that he had to spend the night at work again. He tried to be more vigilant about going home before dark. If Elias found him passed out at his desk again, Jon thought he might actually die of embarrassment.

When he woke up in the middle of the night at home, though, he could only ever imagine Elias's voice, calming him and stroking his hair. It seemed Elias had permanently replaced the faceless caregiver in his mind.

As much as he disliked spending nights in the Archives, he realized with some frustration that he was starting to miss those strange moments with him.

He couldn't continue to entertain these thoughts. Elias was his boss, and even though he had been kind to him the first... three times, no one's patience was infinite.

Jon wondered, not for the first time, if he was actually remembering the events of those nights accurately. There was no way his boss would ever stroke his hair or call him *sweet*. The stress must be getting to him, messing with his head.

The next morning, he slipped his lamb into his bag, reasoning with himself that it was just in case he had to spend the night. That way, he wouldn't need to run to Elias's office for comfort if he woke up from a nightmare. *Again*.

His lamb stayed secure in his crossbody bag. He checked on her several times on the tube ride over, making sure she hadn't fallen out or disappeared, somehow. As pathetic as he felt, it was almost a bit exciting; like they were on an adventure together. His lamb hadn't been outside of his flat since Jon had last moved.

He reached his right hand into his bag and held her, his other hand gripping the strap at the top of the car.

Jon arrived at work early, as he typically did. He set his bag by his desk and tried to forget about it, deciding to spend the day organizing the discredited statements that were piling up next to his desk. He didn't know if he felt up to recording that day.

He got to work, but anxiety continued to prickle at the back of his mind, urging him to check his bag. There was no way the thing would vanish in the five minutes since he last looked, but the irrational fear wouldn't leave him.

“This is ridiculous,” Jon muttered, taking the lamb out of the bag and staring at it. After a moment of consideration, he slipped it into his jacket pocket. The subtle weight was comforting, and reaching inside his pocket was much easier than checking his bag every five minutes.

It was a good solution. He could put it out of mind and focus on work. Organization was a soothing, meditative task for him—Jon barely noticed the hours passing until his stomach growled in discontent.

He sighed in annoyance. He'd forgotten to pack lunch that day, but was pretty sure he had some instant noodles stashed away somewhere in the break room.

It was well after the typical lunch time, so the break room was empty, which Jon appreciated. He was searching through the cabinets when the door opened.

“Heya, boss.”

It was Sasha. Jon's face felt warm, and he resisted the urge to adjust his jacket. The lamb was still in his pocket. He hadn't wanted to leave her—leave *it* in the office, alone.

“Oh! Uh—hey,” he stuttered out.

There was no reason for him to be so nervous. Sasha didn't have x-ray vision, as far as he knew. The lump in his pocket was conspicuous, though. What if she noticed, what if she asked what was —

Sasha stepped past him to get to the fridge, pulling out a little container of yogurt and a spoon. Jon rifled through the cabinets a bit more urgently. Where the hell was the—

“By the way!” Sasha said, gesturing with the spoon. “I got the hospital records from St. Thomas for that one statement, um—”

“Seraki?”

“Seraki! Yeah, the nurse. Even got ahold of the CCTV footage.”

“That's—that's great Sasha, thank you.”

“Are you alright?” Sasha asked, sounding equal parts amused and concerned.

“I'm fine!” Jon snapped. “Just, uh,” Jon gave up in his search and grabbed a partially-smashed granola bar. “Just needed a—excuse me,” Jon muttered, making his way out of the break room in a hurry. Sasha stared at him as he shuffled awkwardly out of the break room.

Jon shut the office door behind him and sat down, unwrapping his granola bar with a bit more force than was necessary. He shouldn't have brought the stupid thing. He was 29 for God's sake. He shouldn't be sneaking toys to work.

Was it that bad, though? A timid voice in the back of his mind asked. He had been a bit startled by Sasha, but he had gotten lots of work done so far. Keeping it in his pocket helped ground him without being distracted.

The two sides of him struggled as he tried to rationalize it.

If he had to spend the night in the Archives again, and the lamb helped him sleep better, then it was worth it, right? Plus, the weight of it in his pocket was strangely comforting. Something innocent and familiar among all the... terror that surrounded him.

It was fine. He was *fine*. He needed to get over it.

He pushed it out of his mind as best he could—he had been doing that a lot lately—and tried to focus on filing.

Eventually, Jon glanced at his phone and noticed it was well past 5:00. The others would be heading home soon, if they hadn't left already.

He ought to head out as well. The filing wasn't urgent—he only really stayed late when he got caught up in research, and for whatever reason, he'd decided to tackle something mundane today.

He took the lamb out of his pocket. It had an almost Pavlovian effect on him: just holding her made him feel... smaller.

It seemed like a waste to bring her all the way here when he wasn't even spending the night. She'd been rather cramped in his pocket all day, and that wasn't fair. He smoothed out the matted faux fur with his thumb.

Just because he wasn't spending the night didn't mean he couldn't go see Elias. Yes, bringing the lamb was a plan conceived so that he could *avoid* Elias, but... He spun gently back and forth in his chair as he considered this. Elias was nice to him. He said his lamb wasn't stupid. Maybe he'd want to meet her.

It was a bad idea. The part of him that obsessively re-visited the memory of Elias stroking his hair each night said to do it anyway.

It was a hard position to defend from his adult mindset, but the logic of "*he's your boss*" and "*you are 29 years old*" seemed weak in the face of the simple fact that he *really wanted to show Elias his lamb*.

He noticed his thumb creeping towards his mouth and pushed it down, curling it into a fist. Right. He wasn't winning this battle with himself. Might as well go see Elias before his adult sensibilities completely failed him.

He slipped the lamb back into his pocket and patted it once for good measure, then slung his bag over his shoulder and headed out.

He exited his office and nearly hit Martin with the door.

"*Jesus!* Oh, sorry, Jon, you scared me," Martin said.

"Ah, sorry," Jon said. "Just, uh—" he motioned towards the exit.

"Heading out?" Martin asked. Jon nodded.

"That's good! I mean—sorry, that came out wrong," Martin said with a self-conscious laugh. "I know you've been busy lately. Just, uh, good to get some rest."

“Thank you, Martin,” Jon said, brushing past him.

“Have a good night!” Martin called after him after a brief pause.

Jon ignored him and made his way up the stairs towards Elias’ office, in the opposite direction of the exit.

Jon knocked on the door. Elias opened it soon after, a look of polite surprise on his face.

“Jon! How nice to see you. Come on in,” he said, stepping aside. His voice sounded lighter, kinder than his usual cadence.

Jon nodded, not trusting himself to speak just yet. He stepped into the office, and Elias shut the door behind him.

Jon set his bag on the floor next to the sofa, then pulled the lamb from his jacket pocket. He silently held it up to show Elias.

Elias’s eyes widened with interest.

“Oh my. Is this your lamb?” Elias asked, his voice dropping lower like they were sharing a secret together. Jon supposed that wasn’t inaccurate. Elias outstretched his hand, asking permission.

Jon nodded and carefully handed her to Elias, who held up the lamb to get a better look at her.

“Oh, isn’t she darling,” Elias said, playing with the frayed ribbon around her neck. Jon watched him cautiously, even as he felt an odd tinge of something warm in his chest.

“Did she keep you company today?” Elias asked, handing the lamb back to Jon.

Jon nodded. At the same time, his stomach growled, and he felt his cheeks warm with embarrassment.

“Oh dear,” Elias laughed. “Did you eat at all today?”

Jon shrugged. “Just a granola bar,” he muttered, avoiding Elias’s eyes.

“Let’s find you something to eat then, hmm?” Elias said, patting him on the shoulder.

Jon nodded. He wished he had remembered to eat before coming up here, but he couldn't deny he was hungry.

Elias stood and led him to a door towards the back of the office. Jon had never noticed it before; it was partially hidden by one of the large bookshelves that lined the walls of the room.

Through it was a small room with a kitchenette, somewhat like the break room downstairs, though much nicer. There was a small wooden table with a few chairs, and a second door towards the back of the room.

Elias gestured for Jon to sit down and opened the cabinet above the sink—conspicuously empty save for a few bottles of wine, some dishes, and an unopened loaf of bread. He pulled out the loaf

of bread and a plate, then opened the fridge to retrieve a jar of jam and a fancy-looking bottle of mineral water.

“Is a jam sandwich alright?” Elias asked, opening the jar with a soft *pop*. Jon nodded, then realizing Elias had his back turned, mumbled a soft “yeah.”

Jon put the lamb on the table, next to a small pile of napkins. He watched Elias anxiously and wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers. He still wasn’t sure what to expect from this encounter.

“I have quite a few late nights myself,” Elias said after a few moments of silence, spreading the jam over the bread. “It helps to have somewhere to rest.”

Elias had sleeping quarters in the institute too, then? That explained why he was always working in the middle of the night. If the kitchen area was any sign, however, it was probably much nicer than the cot shoved into old document storage.

Elias turned around and placed the sandwich and water bottle in front of Jon, then sat down across from him.

“Thank you,” Jon said. He hadn’t had a jam sandwich in years, not since he’d lived with his grandmother. He took a bite. It was good, better than good. It probably would have been unremarkable on a normal day, but he was so hungry that it tasted incredible.

Elias was smiling at him. Jon looked away, embarrassed.

“How was your day?” Elias asked.

“It was fine,” Jon said, taking another bite. “I was gonna—I saw Sasha in the break room. And I was scared she was gonna see my lamb, but she didn’t.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Elias said.

“Sorry,” Jon said, grabbing a napkin and dabbing his mouth with it.

“She stayed in my pocket all day—my lamb did, not Sasha,” Jon clarified. “I was worried it might be cramped, but I think she’s okay,” he said, glancing at her as he took another bite. He took care to swallow before continuing.

“I liked having her.”

Elias reached over and adjusted his lamb so she was sitting up instead of toppled over on the table. “You were scared Sasha and the others might see?”

“Mhmm,” Jon said, mouth full of jam.

“What do you think would happen if they did?”

“Dunno,” Jon said. “They’d make fun of me, I guess.”

“Mm,” Elias said. “I think it’s probably best to keep it from them. I doubt they’d understand.”

Jon was silent for a few moments. “But you do?”

Elias smiled. "Yes, Jon, I do."

Jon smiled shyly into the last bits of his sandwich. He shoved the rest into his mouth, satisfied.

Elias clicked his tongue, reaching for the napkin and wiping Jon's face. Jon scrunched his face, reminded of his grandmother.

"Why don't you go wash your hands?" Elias suggested. "You wouldn't want to get your lamb all sticky."

Jon nodded and stood up, happily going to wash his hands. He felt much better after eating. Elias was so nice to him.

He dried his hands with the towel, and Elias brushed past him to place the plate in the sink and the lamb on the counter next to Jon.

"Would you like to come keep me company while I finish up some work?" Elias asked.

Jon considered it, picking up his lamb once his hands were dry. He certainly wasn't getting any more work done tonight, and he enjoyed spending time with Elias. He might get bored just sitting there, but it's not like Elias was forcing him to stay.

"Alright," he said.

Elias led him back into the office, flicking the light switch as he exited. "Would you like something to read?" Elias asked.

Jon perked up. "Yes, please."

"Alright then, go sit down. I have something in mind you might like."

Jon obeyed, sitting down on the sofa and watching Elias, curious. He was standing in front of the bookshelf, his finger scanning the spines.

"Ah, here we are," Elias said.

He pulled out a red, old-looking hardcover from the shelf, then walked over to Jon.

"I think you'll enjoy this one. Feel free to pick out another, though, if you'd prefer," Elias said, handing him the book.

"Thank you," Jon said, taking the book from him. He was picky about his reading material, but he would at least give it a shot.

Elias walked back to the desk and resumed his work, paying no further mind to Jon at the moment.

Jon turned the book over in his hands and studied it. It looked to be at least several decades old; the gold ink of the title was fading, and Jon could just make out the words "fairy tales".

Jon raised an eyebrow. Did Elias really think he would be interested in fairy tales? He opened the front cover; the spine making a soft crack as it opened. It would be rude to return it to the bookshelf without even trying it, he figured.

He glanced at Elias, who was already absorbed in his work.

He reluctantly turned the pages, skipping past the table of contents to the first chapter, and began to read.

The age of the book showed in the delicate pages as well as the words printed onto them. The stories were simple enough to follow, but he found himself occasionally re-reading a line of dialogue or description that sounded a bit archaic. It would be easier to follow if someone were reading out loud, he thought.

The stories were short but engaging, still enjoyable, Jon admitted to himself once he was a few pages in. He was familiar with many of them, but they still kept his interest.

He didn't even notice he was lost in the book until his eyes began to droop and his head sagged onto his chest. He fought against the urge, wanting to finish the story he had just started. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to just rest his eyes for a moment. He'd been so tired, lately...

A hand on his shoulder startled him awake.

"Enjoying the book?" Elias asked, sounding amused.

"It's—it's alright," Jon said, sitting up.

"Time for bed?" Elias asked with a slight tilt of his head.

"No!" Jon said, clutching the book to his chest. "I want to finish this story."

"You can barely keep your eyes open, dear."

"Then you read it," Jon grumbled, pushing the book into Elias's hands.

Elias sighed dramatically and sat down next to him. "Alright, if you insist." Jon settled in next to him, satisfied.

Elias cleared his throat.

"But round about the castle there began to grow a hedge of thorns, which every year became higher..."

Jon closed his eyes and listened to Elias read, his voice low and soothing. He could spend hours listening to him, Jon thought.

The story was short, however, and Elias finished just a few minutes later, closing the book and setting it aside.

Jon's eyes were closed, and he was leaning against Elias. It was a good place to be, he thought. Elias felt warm and solid against him, the fabric of his sleeves rubbing against his cheek. He smelled nice, the soft scent of sandalwood mixed with his natural odor comforted Jon.

"Ready for bed, now?" Elias asked.

Jon grumbled and kept his eyes closed, sinking further into the couch. Maybe Elias would just let him stay there.

“No, Jon, you don’t want to sleep there,” Elias said with a chuckle, standing up. “Your back won’t be happy tomorrow.”

Jon’s adult mind reluctantly agreed with him. He sat up and stretched, yawning. Elias outstretched a hand and helped him up, patting him on the back.

"What time is it, anyway? I shouldn't go to bed yet, it's too early..." Jon said, rubbing his eyes.

"Late enough that everyone else has gone home for the day. If you're tired, you should rest. Come on, now."

Jon couldn't argue with that.

Elias walked him downstairs to the Archives and put him to bed (though Jon insisted on at least undressing himself this time). Elias tucked him in, a routine that was becoming disturbingly familiar. Three times was a habit, four times was...?

He felt a strange pang in his chest as he watched Elias leave, shutting the door softly behind him. But when he rolled over, drawing the blanket close to him and holding his lamb tightly to his chest, he felt safe.

Chapter End Notes

Some fun visual refs:

1. Here's a [floor plan of Elias' office](#)
2. And [the book](#)
3. And [Jon's lamb](#)

thanks!

The Meeting

Chapter Notes

► Chapter warnings (minor)

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

When Jon awoke the next morning, curled into the corner of the now-familiar cot with his lamb clutched tightly to his chest, he immediately shut his eyes and tried to fall back asleep. It didn't work.

This was becoming a bizarre routine: waking up, realizing where he was, then going hot with shame as he remembered whatever new way he'd embarrassed himself the night before.

He stroked the fur of his lamb with his thumb. Despite everything, it was still comforting to have her near.

After accepting that he wasn't falling back asleep anytime soon, he rolled over and grabbed his phone from the nightstand. It was 6:04 AM, almost a full hour before his alarm, but he felt well-rested and alert.

He wasn't sure exactly when Elias had put him to bed, but it must have been early—there was no way he'd been reading in Elias's office until midnight. He'd gotten there at... it was only about 6:00, wasn't it?

He could've gotten more work done, Jon thought to himself, putting his phone back down on the nightstand. Could have finished the pile of discredited statements he was in the middle of filing, could have recorded another statement, even. Instead, he had gone and distracted his boss because he wanted attention.

He had tried to convince himself yesterday that indulging himself would help him be more productive, but it was a weak lie. He just wanted this.

And what was Elias getting out of this? Why did he seem so... okay with everything? Jon couldn't sense any kind of ulterior motive, nor could he imagine what anyone could get out of babying him. Unless Elias was just pitying him.

Thinking about it just made his head spin. He climbed out of bed with a sense of tired resolution, hoping again that the day's work would be enough to distract him.

It was always peaceful in the mornings. No assistants chatting right outside his door, no sounds of footsteps from the floor above him, and no one barging into his office unannounced. The walls in the building tended to echo, and sound carried easily through the doors. It made concentrating a nightmare, and recording even more so.

So, after brushing his teeth and changing into a fresh set of clothes, Jon got right to work, determined to make the most of the early morning. He started by finishing the pile of discredited

statements that sat on his desk—there were far more to go through, of course, but he couldn't tackle all of them at once. Throughout it, his lamb stayed in his jacket pocket, both a comfort and an embarrassing reminder of the previous night's events.

It took longer than he expected to organize the last of the pile. When he finally finished, his desk was clear save for a single statement file and a tape recorder. He'd get this recording done, then take a break.

His finger was on the record button when he heard a soft knock at the door. Jon sighed and leaned back. "Come in."

The door opened with a soft creak. "Morning, Jon," Martin said with a smile. "Thought you might like some tea."

"Mm. Thank you," Jon said. Martin walked up to him, setting the chipped mug of Earl Grey on the stained old coaster that seemed an almost permanent fixture of Jon's desk.

"About to head out to Archway to check out Carlos Vittery's old apartment," Martin said. "See what we can find out."

"Good," said John, pretending to read the statement in front of him.

"Right, well," Martin said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Probably won't be back by the end of the day, so... see you on Monday?"

"Right."

Martin gave him a sort of awkward half-smile, then turned around and left. Jon's eyes flicked up to glare at the door as it closed.

He didn't like Martin. He wasn't sure why—well, there was the obvious: he was a poor assistant, poor researcher, and generally seemed way out of his depth—but usually, Jon could ignore a lousy subordinate. Something about Martin, specifically, irked him.

Martin clearly had some sort of caretaking instinct, or at least a desperate need to feel appreciated. He brought Jon tea every morning, asked if he was getting enough sleep, if he needed anything, offered to bring him lunch or more tea. Jon always saw a bit of hurt in Martin's eyes when he brushed him off and told him to get back to work.

It wasn't just Jon, though; Martin gave Tim and Sasha the same treatment. Perhaps even more so, as Tim and Sasha were more tolerant of it than him. One time, when Sasha had cut her hand quite badly with a dull box cutter, Jon had watched Martin go full mother-hen over her. He'd insisted on cleaning and bandaging the cut himself, fumbling through the first aid box and seeming genuinely more distressed than Sasha herself was.

Sasha thought it was sweet, but Jon thought it was unbecoming of him.

Jon didn't want Martin's attention, he wanted him to *do his job*. Maybe the others tolerated it, but Jon didn't need Martin hovering over him, and he especially didn't need Martin looking like a kicked puppy whenever Jon expressed this.

He still wasn't sure why it bothered him as much as it did.

He turned back to the statement in his hands, about to reach over to turn on the recorder, when the barely used landline that sat on the far corner of his desk started ringing.

Jon slammed the statement back down on his desk. Who the hell was calling his office phone, anyway? His assistants always texted or emailed him. He reached over to pick it up, annoyed.

“Hello?” His voice was short and clipped.

“Hello, Jon.” It was Elias.

“Oh! Uh, hello Elias,” Jon said, then cleared his throat. This was especially weird—Elias never called him.

“Could you meet me in my office in fifteen minutes?” His tone was polite and professional.

Jon frowned. He considered stretching the truth, claiming he was in the middle of recording, but it was pointless.

“I—” Jon swallowed. His fingers drummed on the desk. “Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Great,” Elias said. “I’ll see you then.”

Jon heard a click and a dial tone.

Jon hung up the phone a bit forcefully. The bastard. Of course he had to call fifteen minutes in advance—far too short for him to start anything productive, just long enough for him to wallow in his anxiety while he waited.

He knew what this was about. If it were anything else, Elias would have just walked into his office without warning, like he always did. Was he about to be fired?

Jon took a sip of tea, wincing as it scalded his tongue.

He set the statement aside, trying to find something to occupy himself for the next fifteen minutes. He sipped his too-hot tea, organized all the pens in his drawer, half-heartedly moved some files around, sipped some more tea, then checked the time. It had only been nine minutes. Close enough.

He stood up, then hesitated, feeling the weight in his pocket.

He still didn’t like the idea of leaving his lamb alone in his office. Too many weird things happened here. But Elias would know immediately if he saw the odd-shaped lump in his jacket pocket.

After a moment of consideration, he grabbed his bag from the floor and put her in there. Bringing his bag wouldn’t be strange—it had his laptop in it, after all. A laptop was a normal thing to bring to a meeting.

Mind made up, he headed towards Elias’s office.

Elias took an infuriatingly long time to answer Jon’s knock on the door.

“You’re early,” he noted, holding the door open for Jon. It was a neutral statement, not scolding, but Jon muttered “sorry” as he brushed past him.

Elias watched with amusement as Jon sat his bag on the floor next to the sofa. Jon paused for a moment, not sure where to sit: on the sofa, or in one of the chairs in front of Elias's desk.

"The sofa is fine," Elias said, grabbing a chair and placing it closer to the coffee table. A decanter of wine sat in the middle of the table alongside two glasses.

Jon sat down, feeling stiff and awkward, his hands balled into fists in his lap. Elias sat down in the chair in front of him: another uncomfortable-looking wood and velvet antiquity that looked like it belonged in a museum.

"I thought it might be prudent to have a conversation with you while you're... fully present," Elias said once he was seated.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know what it means, Jon," Elias said, pouring himself a glass. "Would you like a drink?"

Jon swallowed, his throat dry. "It's noon," he said, flatly.

"I thought it might help," Elias said with a shrug.

"...Fine, pour me one," Jon relented. He'd rather not be sober for this conversation.

"With pleasure," Elias replied, filling up a glass and handing it to him.

Jon took a sip. It was drier than he preferred, but he wasn't accepting a glass of wine on an empty stomach at noon to savor any subtle notes of flavor.

"Now," Elias said, leaning back. "I'm sure you can guess what this meeting is about?"

"Just get on with it." Jon gripped the glass tightly, his arms crossed.

"Don't mistake this for a disciplinary meeting, Jon," Elias said, looking relaxed. "I've enjoyed our time together, but I'm sure you can agree we're overdue for a frank conversation about it."

Jon felt sick. The wine sat at the bottom of his stomach like a weight. He took another sip.

"What is there to talk about?"

"Plenty. Upfront communication is the best way to avoid any misunderstandings between us. I have some questions for you, and I'm sure you have some for me as well."

Jon certainly had a question: *Would you get the hell on with it already?* But he held his tongue.

"Fine," he said. "You first, then."

Elias nodded.

"I first want to make sure my understanding of the situation is correct. You have a tendency to... when particularly tired or stressed, take on the mannerisms of a small child. You suck your thumb while you sleep and carry around a plush toy. Is this correct?"

Jon gripped the glass tighter, feeling lightheaded, all the blood rushing to his face. He hadn't expected Elias to be so forthright about it. Still, nothing he said was untrue.

He nodded. "I... suppose that's accurate," he said, the words feeling strained.

"How would you describe it in your own words, then?"

Elias looked relaxed in his chair, his head tilted slightly to the side and eyes staring directly at Jon, a certain glint in his eyes, a half-smile, almost like he was enjoying this.

No, he was imagining things. This couldn't be an easy conversation for either of them. Elias was just better at controlling himself.

"I mean—I'm still myself, I'm not—" Jon groaned, covering his face with his free hand. But Elias remained silent, encouraging him to continue.

"It's just relaxing to... pretend, I guess," Jon said, taking another sip. "It was just a thing to help me sleep at first. Pretending I don't have any, uh, responsibilities. Imagining someone... someone taking care of me."

He muttered the last part, regretting the words as soon as they passed his lips. Something about Elias made Jon want to spill all of his secrets in front of him.

"Then it's at least somewhat voluntary," Elias said. "You can control it?"

Jon hesitated, but nodded. It didn't always feel voluntary. He hadn't meant to slip so far last night. He wasn't sure which was worse though: being unable to control himself, or being able to and deciding to act like this anyway.

"Again, don't mistake this for disapproval, Jon. I'm not reprimanding you. If I were, that would certainly bring my own actions into question, wouldn't it?" He said with a slight smile.

"I guess," Jon muttered into his glass.

"Next question. Does anyone else know?"

Jon shook his head. "No. You're the first to... pick up on it."

Elias considered this, drumming his fingers on his thigh. "I have no problem with you pursuing whatever form of stress relief you need, but I think it would be... unwise for your assistants to know."

Jon sputtered around the glass in his mouth and sat it on the table. "I had—" He laughed briefly, "*no* intention of—*trust me*. You were just—you were an accident."

"That's why I wanted to make sure it's voluntary. We wouldn't want anyone else to find you in such a state," Elias said, picking up the decanter and topping off Jon's glass.

"If you hadn't come to me yesterday, I would have assumed it was something you preferred to practice alone and left it at that. Last week would have been an understandable exception, after experiencing a night terror."

Jon took another sip of wine, ignoring the way the ears grew hot at the memory.

“However. Your appearance in my office last night leads me to believe otherwise.”

“So, you’re...” Jon sighed. He felt exhausted, suddenly. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I don’t mind it, Jon, and I want to encourage you to seek me out whenever you feel... small, shall we say.”

Jon stared at him, bewildered.

“You don’t...” Jon trailed off, his brow wrinkling. There were too many emotions overtaking him at once: confusion, suspicion, giddiness, uncertainty.

“You don’t think it’s strange?” He finally asked, softly.

Elias rolled his eyes and waved his hand dismissively.

“Strange is what we do here, Jon. Certainly, it’s a bit odd. But I don’t find it repulsive.”

“I was worried you’d think I’m mentally unwell and try to—I don’t know, fire me? Or—institutionalize me or something,” Jon said to the table.

Elias scoffed.

“It’s not *that* bizarre. Besides, I have no interest in psychoanalyzing you. You’ve given me your word that you can control it, and it seems to help you. So I see no reason not to indulge it.”

“I have a question, then,” Jon said, setting his glass on the table.

“Go ahead.”

“What are you getting out of this?” Jon said, meeting Elias’s eyes.

Elias smiled. He paused for a moment, considering it.

“You’re more important than you realize, Jon,” Elias said. “Head archivist is an incredibly... *stressful* position, so your mental health is of great concern to me. Forgive me for the assumption, but you don’t seem like the kind of man who seeks out help willingly.”

Jon was silent.

“Secondly,” Elias said. “I prefer you come to me rather than someone else. I know, I know, you weren’t planning on it—” Elias said, holding up a hand, “It’s just a concern.”

He paused.

“And finally, I like you, Jon. I enjoy your company,” he said, crossing his legs. “I think caring for you in that way could be fulfilling for both of us.”

Jon swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Why are you so adamant that no one else find out?” Jon asked softly, after a moment of consideration. “I don’t *want* anyone else to know, but you keep bringing up my assistants and... it

would be unprofessional, right, but isn't..." Jon gestured between the two of them, to the half-empty decanter. " *this* unprofessional? You're my boss."

Elias shrugged.

"No, it's not exactly professional. I'm not forcing you to do anything, though, and it doesn't need to affect our *nine-to-five* lives, so to speak. You're free to leave and we can pretend like this conversation never happened, and nothing will change. I'll give you my word."

"And regarding your assistants... I just think it's a bad idea. I only point them out specifically because you've been spending so much time here, and I find it unlikely they'd be as..." Elias grimaced, "*understanding* as I am. I do think you need an outlet for this, however. I just want to make sure it's in an intelligent way."

Jon exhaled shakily and stared at the table, trying to comprehend everything Elias had just told him. He had never let himself imagine another person in his fantasy before, not seriously. The next question slipped out before he could properly think about it.

"When you say caring for me...?"

Elias smiled.

"Well, that's up to you, isn't it? I'm always happy to tuck you into bed, or read to you, but anything further than that... it depends on what you want."

Elias had turned the question back on him, then. Honestly, he wasn't sure what he wanted. He just liked being near Elias, enjoyed being the object of his attention and affection.

Jon shrugged, still curled into himself.

"Well, we don't have to figure out everything all at once," Elias said. "It's not an easy conversation, I know. I'm sure I've given you plenty to think about."

Jon nodded, feeling a little faint.

"Now," Elias said, reaching to his side, retrieving the familiar red book from where it lay on the end table. Jon hadn't even noticed it. "How about another story?"

"I have work to do," Jon protested, his eyes feeling heavy. Even with Elias's assurance that he wanted to 'take care of him', it was still the middle of the workday. He didn't feel *small* right now either, and he wasn't sure if he'd still enjoy it outside of that... mindset.

"I'm sure your boss won't mind," Elias said, amused.

Jon rubbed his eyes and sighed. "...Fine. Just one."

Elias sat next to him on the sofa and opened the page where they had left off. Jon tried to make himself relax, still on-edge from their conversation.

Elias cleared his throat and began to read to him. His voice was soothing, and even though Jon felt like an adult right now, he still enjoyed it.

After a few minutes, Jon closed his eyes and scooted in closer to Elias. He was beginning to calm down—he felt sleepy and pleasantly warm. He could almost feel Elias’s words as vibrations in his chest as he read them aloud.

He wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that. Elias read a few more stories, and Jon felt dangerously close to falling asleep.

Elias closed the book.

“Falling asleep on me?” Elias asked, amused.

“You’re the one that gave me alcohol in the middle of the day,” Jon grumbled. Of course, Elias seemed totally unaffected. Jon had always been a lightweight.

Elias laughed. “Fair enough. Why don’t you head home for the day?”

“Wait—really?” Jon sat up and looked at him, brow furrowed. “It’s not even—what time is it?”

“Don’t worry about it, Jon. You’ve been working hard. You deserve a break.”

Jon was conflicted. He had more work he wanted to get done today, but he was in no state to do any of it. The comfort of his flat was tempting.

“If you—” Jon yawned. “If you insist.”

“I do,” Elias said, patting him on the shoulder. “Get some rest, Jon.”

Chapter End Notes

Hoping to have weekly updates going forward— tsym for reading!

Pastels

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Elias was right. Jon needed a break.

The weekend gave him time to step back and process everything that had happened, for better or for worse. Not that he planned on taking the opportunity. Jon was the type to throw himself into work instead of dealing with his emotions; he wished he'd thought to bring some statements home.

Still, he avoided thinking about it at first, occupying himself with laundry and other chores. He kept the TV on in the background, playing a show he'd seen a thousand times before, just interesting enough to keep his thoughts from drifting too far.

That worked well enough until he laid down for bed, with nothing to distract him from his thoughts. He couldn't exactly use his normal methods to fall asleep, either.

Jon rolled over with a groan, burying his head in his pillow. He couldn't keep this up forever. He needed to deal with it; needed to confront his own emotions: primarily, his embarrassment. Shame engulfed all his other thoughts like a thick fog, making it difficult to think about for more than a few seconds.

He had to, though, if he wanted to go into work Monday with a clear head.

It just felt like an admission of failure. He shouldn't be in this situation in the first place. Plenty of other people had stressful jobs and managed just fine; why did he find himself so drawn to such a pitiful habit?

What bothered him the most, aside from the obvious, was the question of Elias's motives. He seemed extraordinarily comfortable with the whole thing, never giving any indication that he was annoyed or put off by Jon's behavior. He had to be getting *something* out of it, but what reason could he have for wanting to baby his 29-year-old employee?

He didn't believe Elias's explanation that he was simply looking out for him. Elias was far from a selfless man; simple altruism was out of the question. Besides, someone who truly cared about his well-being would probably just refer him to a therapist.

Was it a sex thing? Jon frowned. He wasn't naïve; he knew some people were into that, but... he didn't think that was the case with Elias. His interactions with him had never shown any hint of anything untoward. Elias was affectionate but chaste, almost paternal.

Was that it, then? Elias wasn't married, had no children as far as Jon knew. Was Elias using him as a stand-in for whatever long-dormant paternal instincts he felt desperate to satisfy? It's not like Jon could judge, anyway. He was essentially doing the same thing, just from the opposite perspective.

Occam's razor, Jon supposed. It was the simplest explanation, the one which made the most sense.

The tension in his shoulders relaxed a little. Elias wasn't out to humiliate him, he just... needed an outlet. Just like Jon.

Jon rubbed his eyes and sighed as a wave of exhaustion hit him. He couldn't avoid the topic, but was too tired to think it through any further tonight. Something inside him had given in, like his body had a finite supply of embarrassment, and he had just used up the last of it.

So he rolled over, retrieving his lamb from his bedside table. He held her close to his chest, only feeling slightly guilty when he imagined Elias laying behind him, holding Jon the same way.

By the time Monday rolled around, the thick cloud of shame and self-loathing had condensed down to simple anxiety. It was somehow lighter than before, different from the deep-seated dread that sat in his stomach all last week.

The phrase “butterflies in his stomach” came to mind. Jon had never liked insects.

He got to work early Monday morning, enjoying the first rays of sunrise and the cool morning air as he unlocked the heavy wooden door of the Institute. He was rarely the *first* to get there—plenty of the admin staff were early risers as well, but the doors stayed locked to the public until 9:00 AM.

The Institute was an impressive building, Jon had to admit. There were two grand staircases on either side of the vast entrance hall, and a balcony that towered overhead. The stairs to the basement were further towards the back, and he made his way towards them, enjoying the way his footsteps echoed out in the near-empty building.

It was a pleasant morning. He checked his email and looked over his schedule: he had his weekly meeting with his assistants in a few hours, just a regular progress update.

He could probably squeeze in a recording before then, he thought, glancing over to the tape recorder. The statement he had meant to read on Friday was sitting right next to it.

He reached over to place the statement in front of him, cleared his throat, and pressed the record button.

He hit the button to stop the recording, somewhat relieved to have finished it with no interruptions. His assistants would be getting in soon—what time was it? He picked up his phone and saw he had a notification: a text from Martin.

Off sick, stomach problems. Might be a few days, sorry.

Jon frowned at his phone. It would be wrong of him to feel glad that Martin was sick, but, well... at least it would keep him out of his hair for a few days. He texted back a brief reply.

Ok. Keep me updated.

It did mean he had to make his own tea, however. He swallowed, his throat dry after speaking for almost a half-hour. Yes, tea sounded nice right now.

Jon sat in one of the cheap plastic chairs in the break room, fingers drumming on the equally cheap plastic table as he waited for his tea to steep. Left alone, his mind inevitably drifted to Elias, and he let it. He would go see him when he finished work today. Maybe Elias would read to him again, would let him lean against him on that ugly green sofa.

“Whatcha thinkin’ bout?” came a voice behind him. Jon frowned instinctively and turned around.

It was Tim, walking in with a backpack and an infuriating grin. He must have just arrived.

“Nothing,” Jon said, turning back around.

“Oh, come on, you were smiling about something,” Tim said, walking towards the fridge into Jon’s line of sight.

“I was thinking about tea,” Jon snapped.

Tim gave him a look, but shrugged.

“Martin out today, then?” he asked, gesturing to the cup of tea on the table.

“Oh, yeah,” Jon answered, frowning at the beverage. “Stomach flu or something”.

That was probably long enough, Jon thought, removing the little infuser and setting it on a napkin.

Tim clicked his tongue. “Poor thing. Well, I hope he feels better. Are we still meeting today?”

“Yes, please. I know Martin was going to give his report on Welbeck House, but we can handle that later.” He tried to avoid assigning anything too important to Martin, anyway.

“Righto,” Tim said. “See you around.”

“Right.”

It was an utterly average Monday all around, minus Martin’s absence. The meeting went well. Tim and Sasha seemed concerned about Martin, but truthfully, Jon just missed his tea. It never tasted quite right when Jon made it himself.

He worked a few hours after Tim and Sasha left for the night, then scarfed down a microwavable dinner in the now-empty break room. A few weeks ago, he would’ve gone home at this point; it wasn’t nearly late enough to justify spending the night.

Today, though, he collected his bag and headed up the stairs of the Institute. His stomach turned with anxiety, but he didn’t even consider turning around. The motions felt inevitable; this encounter was going to happen eventually. It might as well be now.

Jon swallowed and knocked on the old wooden door. A few moments later, Elias opened the door with a smile, and Jon’s shoulders dropped with something like relief.

“Good to see you again, Jon,” Elias said, letting him in. “How was your day?”

“It was—good,” Jon said, stepping past him and sitting down on the sofa. He felt uncomfortably... *adult*, sitting there. He thought the shift would come more naturally once he reached Elias’s office.

“Will you read to me?” he asked, picking at the skin around his thumb and avoiding Elias’s gaze.

“Not right now,” Elias said, not unkindly, walking back to his desk. “I have work to do.”

"But it—it's eight o'clock," Jon protested, cringing at his words the moment they passed his lips. He felt too awkward, too anxious to sit and read by himself right now. He wanted Elias's attention, wanted him to guide things, to make this feel right.

Elias looked amused, sitting down behind the desk. "You're hardly one to judge. I won't be long, I promise."

Jon stared at this lap, starting to regret his decision. He had no idea what to do now.

"I *did* bring something to keep you occupied, though, if you're interested," Elias said.

Jon wasn't thrilled, but he couldn't deny his curiosity. "What is it?"

Elias opened a desk drawer and started rummaging through it. Jon strained his neck, trying to see what he was taking out.

He didn't have to wait long. Elias stood up and walked towards him, holding a clipboard. He set it on the coffee table- there were several sheets of thick white paper clipped inside, and a long, thin, plain-looking box sitting on top that Jon hadn't noticed.

Elias took the top off of the box. Inside were what looked like thick, fancy-looking crayons, the brown wrappers and the compartments they sat in smudged with colorful residue. They looked expensive.

"These are oil pastels", Elias explained, picking one up. "You can use them like crayons." He handed it to Jon.

Jon frowned at it. It looked odd: the end was stubby, not like the fine point of a pencil or crayon. It felt a bit awkward in his hands.

He pushed the box aside to try the pastel on the paper. He was immediately intrigued: the line it made was vivid and smooth, and the color seemed to glide underneath his hands. He wanted to try the other colors—he reached for the box, but Elias put a hand on top of his, pausing him.

"Jon," Elias said. Jon met his eyes.

"Do *not* get them on the furniture," Elias said, looking serious. "Do I make myself clear?"

Jon swallowed, nodded.

Elias's expression softened into a smile, and he ruffled Jon's hair. "Good. I'll be done in just a bit, and then we can read together."

Jon smiled shyly at him.

He climbed down from the couch to the floor, so that he could reach the coffee table without bending over, then turned his attention back to the paper. He didn't feel like drawing anything in particular, but the experience of putting them on the paper was fun, and he wanted to try all the different colors.

So, he made swirls and shapes with the different colors until he had used every crayon—*pastel*, whatever—in the box. The colors were pretty, he thought, but he could do better than random scribbles. He tapped his tool on the paper as he considered what to draw next.

Jon wasn't sure how long it'd been before Elias sat on the couch behind him. He hadn't noticed him walking over, too absorbed in his drawing.

"Oh! Hey," Jon said, turning around to look at him. He was somewhat conflicted—he still wanted Elias to read to him, but he was also very into his latest drawing, and didn't want to leave it unfinished. Several pieces of paper lay scattered on the table alongside the pastels.

"Looks like you've been busy," Elias said. "Want to show me what you drew?"

Jon hesitated a bit before putting the pastel down. He could always finish his drawing later. He didn't want to be rude.

"This is—um," Jon paused as he picked up one of the completed drawings. He felt a bit self-conscious about them now. They were kind of weird.

"A vampire," he said, handing the paper to Elias.

More of the idea of one, anyway. It was mostly just lots of sharp teeth and smeared blood.

"Very nice!" Elias said. "This is its victim, then?"

Jon shrugged. "I guess." He handed him the second drawing.

"Ah, the house on Hill Top Road?"

"It's, um, bleeding," Jon said, pointing to the tree in the picture. That was the main point of it; Jon hadn't been able to get the image of a bleeding tree out of his mind. Behind it was a generic-looking house and a black sky.

"I see. You like illustrating the statements you've read, then?"

"I dunno. I don't wanna talk about it," Jon muttered, turning back to his drawing. Drawing the pictures had felt cathartic in a way, but he was a bit embarrassed about Elias seeing them.

"And what's this one you're working on now?" Elias said, looking over Jon's shoulder.

"It's a cat," Jon said proudly, holding it up. This one was his favorite.

"I see."

"Are you gonna read to me now?" Jon asked, putting the paper down.

"We can, or you can keep drawing. I do love seeing what you come up with." Elias's voice was soft, gentle.

"Will you draw with me?" Jon asked after a moment of consideration.

He was curious if the pastels were Elias's. They looked slightly used, as if someone had tried them once or twice and not touched them since.

"Oh, I'm no good at it. I prefer seeing your artwork."

"Please?" Jon asked, curious. He wanted to see what Elias would draw.

Elias sighed a bit dramatically. "Well, if you insist. Hand me the clipboard then, I'm too old to sit on the floor."

Jon detached the page he was working on and handed the clipboard to Elias, turning his attention back to his drawing. Elias reached over Jon's shoulder to pick out a few colors from the table.

A few minutes later, Jon was satisfied, and he put the pastel down. "Done," he said, and held up the page so that Elias could see it.

It was an orange cat: a stray Jon sometimes saw on his way to work. He had drawn a bowl of food and water next to her, and a blue sky behind her. Then he added some grass and flowers, because he thought it looked nice and the green and pink pastels were so pretty and vibrant. It wasn't very good, Jon thought, but he had fun drawing it.

"Oh, very nice," Elias said, looking at it as he set the clipboard on the table. Jon looked at it: on it was a colorful, almost uncomfortably realistic rendition of an eye.

"I didn't know you could draw," Jon said, still looking at the eye. He felt a little self-conscious about his scribbles now.

Elias chuckled. "Oh, it's not much. Just a little doodle. I like yours better, anyway."

Jon didn't believe him, but it didn't matter. "Will you read to me now?" he asked, turning around to look at Elias.

Elias's eyes flicked towards the coffee table, and he frowned. "Not quite yet. Let's clean these up, okay?"

Jon nodded and started putting the pastels back in the box. Elias reached around him and started stacking up the papers, then put the lid back on the box. Jon started to stand up, but Elias grabbed his wrist.

"One more thing—come here."

Jon followed him, curious. Elias led him to the door towards the back, into the adjacent kitchen, then to the sink.

Jon took the hint and started to wash his hands, but Elias took his hand and started washing it for him, scrubbing each finger methodically.

This annoyed Jon—he wasn't *that* young, he knew how to wash his own hands, but he didn't protest.

"There we go," Elias said, turning off the tap and drying Jon's hands with a towel. It made Jon's chest feel oddly warm. "*Now* we can go read."

Elias led him back to the sofa, pausing to pick up the book from where it sat on the shelf, then sat down on the gaudy green sofa. Jon sat next to him, his hands curled in his lap.

He wanted to be closer, wanted Elias to hold him—as impossible as that felt with two grown men sharing a couch. He had cuddled up to him before, but then he had the excuse of being tipsy, half-

asleep, or both.

“Um—Elias?” Jon asked softly.

“Yes?” Elias looked at him, setting the book on his lap. Jon’s eyes flicked away from him.

“Can I, um—can I sit like...” he leaned against Elias a bit to demonstrate.

Elias chuckled. “You want to cuddle?”

Jon nodded, heat rising in his cheek.

“Come here,” he said, putting an arm around Jon and pulling him in close. He was slightly turned towards Elias, his weight leaning against his side. Jon squirmed a bit and adjusted, bringing his feet up so that they were almost on the couch, then leaned his head on Elias’s shoulder. Elias kissed his forehead, and Jon’s heart fluttered.

“How’s that?” Elias asked. Jon nodded and closed his eyes. He didn’t trust himself not to say something stupid.

Jon tried to pay attention to the words that Elias was reading, he really did. But Elias was so warm and Jon was so comfortable, curled up against him. He drifted in and out pleasantly as Elias read to him. He felt so safe, like this was where he belonged.

When Jon awoke, eyes blinking open, it was dark. He was being carried, his legs wrapped around Elias’s waist.

“Wh—Elias,” Jon muttered, squirming in his grasp. He wasn’t a large man, but he was still surprised that Elias could carry him. More pressing, though, was the fact that they were in the middle of the hallway, not in the privacy of Elias’s office.

“Someone—Someone’s gonna—” Jon protested half-heartedly.

“No one’s going to see, dear. They’ve all gone home for the night.”

It seemed to be true; the hallways were nearly pitch black. He buried his face into the crook of Elias’s neck and shut his eyes tight.

“Will you tuck me in?” Jon asked, muffled against Elias’s shirt.

Elias paused and kissed his cheek.

“Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Jon is not a reliable narrator. Elias practiced art for 200 years and only ever figured out how to draw one thing.

thanks for reading!

Worms

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

And so, a routine began to form. Two or three nights a week, Jon worked late, emerging from his office well after his assistants had clocked out for the night. He would eat dinner in the empty break room, usually a microwavable meal stashed away in the back of the shared freezer. Then he would gather his things, turn off the lights, and climb the two flights of stairs to Elias's office. Jon would take a steadying breath before knocking on the heavy wooden door, and Elias would open it with a reassuring smile.

Elias usually had work to finish, so Jon would entertain himself for the first hour or so. There was a certain cabinet under one of the bookcases, indistinguishable from the rest, that Elias had started referring to as Jon's.

It held a small stack of books, including the one Elias often read to him. Jon was free to peruse the many bookshelves that lined the office, but he found Elias was surprisingly skilled at picking out books Jon would enjoy.

The books weren't alone in the cabinet: a few jigsaw puzzles, a box of wooden blocks, and other similar, simple toys were stacked up neatly on the shelf. They all looked decades old; Jon wondered occasionally why Elias had them in the first place. Collector's items, maybe?

Besides the toys, there was a decent collection of creative supplies: the now-familiar box of oil pastels, a variety of drawing tools, and a small basket of craft supplies that didn't threaten to stain the furniture, like origami paper and pipe cleaners. Elias always loved seeing what Jon made with these. A small pipe-cleaner rose sat on the corner of his desk, placed discreetly behind a pile of books.

Whenever Jon visited, he would find something new in the cabinet: a small toy, or a sweet. The first time, it was a collection of tiny magnets he could rearrange into different shapes, something Jon recognized as a common desk toy. The second time, it was a bar of chocolate. The third time, a small wooden puzzle, and so on.

Jon would read, play, or draw for about an hour, then Elias would finish his work and spend time with him, which was always Jon's favorite part. Sometimes he would read to him, work a puzzle with him, or just sit close and listen to Jon talk about his day.

Jon loved his company. It satisfied needs he never consciously acknowledged: the desire to be heard, for example. Elias always listened to him with rapt attention, nodding his head and asking questions, even when Jon was going off on random tangents he knew Elias couldn't possibly care about. Jon was used to being tuned out when he wasn't talking about work; he knew he wasn't a particularly pleasant person to be around. But Elias drank in every word he spoke like it was vital.

Jon was the same with Elias. His voice, his gentle encouragement and praises felt like a blessed drink of water in the middle of a desert, starved for affection as he was.

Elias was never off-put by his... *quirks*, either, whether they were the little motions he'd worked so hard to suppress as an adult (humming, drumming his fingers on the table, rocking back and forth,

flapping his hands), or the impulses he only felt when he was in this softer state of mind: quietly muttering nonsense words to himself, or slipping his thumb into his mouth. Elias never brought any attention to it.

Sometimes, after Elias had tucked him in at night, Jon even imagined sucking on a pacifier. He could hardly acknowledge the thought without cringing with embarrassment outside the comforting shield of his blankets, though. He was small, but he wasn't a *baby*.

Even though he was certain Elias would be happy to provide one for him, if he were to ask.

Elias *had* given him a sippy cup, which Jon had balked at. It was adult-sized and made of pale blue plastic with a spout on the top, no garish decorations or anything that made it overtly childish.

"It's just so you don't spill anything on the furniture, dear," Elias told him after Jon protested. "Humor me, alright?"

After a few sips, he had to admit he preferred it to a mug or glass.

When it grew late, Elias would bring him downstairs and put him to bed. This was usually after Jon tired himself out, nodding off on the couch. Elias did go home occasionally, though, which would call for an early end to their session.

Elias would walk him down the stairs with a steadying hand on his back, or even carry him if Jon had fallen asleep. Then, he would tuck Jon into the cot, pull the fluffy blue blanket over his chest, smooth his hair back from his forehead and say goodnight.

Jon lost count of the number of times Elias had tucked him into that cot, but he knew it had been exactly two weeks since they developed this routine: two weeks since their *discussion*.

Two weeks since he had last seen Martin as well, Jon thought. He was still out sick, and hadn't responded to any of Jon's calls, only sending him texts sporadically. Sasha and Tim seemed concerned; apparently he wasn't responding to them, either.

He wondered if it was something he should bring up with Elias; two weeks was hardly a trivial amount of time to be absent with almost no communication. Jon was putting it off. He hated the administrative parts of his job; trying to wrangle employees was not his forte. So, he decided if he didn't hear anything by Monday, he would send Tim or Sasha to go check up on him.

Then, just a few hours later, Martin burst into his office while he was recording, slamming a jar full of silver worms onto his desk.

"...Statement ends." Jon paused, taking a moment to process everything. "You're sure about all of this, Martin?"

"Look, I'm not going to lie to you about something like this, Jon." Martin was looking at him with that same kicked-puppy expression, though he looked more tired, more exasperated. "I... like my job. Most of the time."

"Very well," Jon said, staring at the tape recorder. "In which case... there's a room in the Archives I use to sleep when working late. I suggest you stay there for now."

It was the only reasonable solution, Jon thought. He didn't like it, but his assistant's safety was more important than his own indulgences. Jon rambled on a bit about the security and climate control of the Archives and Martin thanked him, confused and flustered.

Jon continued, telling him about the messages he had received from Martin's phone. When he was interrupted by a new one, the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Martin seemed similarly affected, sitting across from him, his face a pale mix of fear and exhaustion.

He really needed to speak to Elias as soon as possible.

"...Recording ends."

"Is it really okay for me to stay here?" Martin asked after an uncomfortable beat of silence. "I didn't bring anything, I don't have a change of clothes, I don't—I don't know if it's safe to go back and get anything or—"

"We'll send a team to recover some of your things," Jon answered. "We can get some toiletries and clothes for you in the meantime, see if we can make this place a bit more liveable... but yes, it's definitely okay. Your safety is worth more than a change of clothes."

Martin exhaled and rubbed his eyes, his shoulders slumping. "If it's not too much trouble, could I go... lay down? I haven't exactly gotten much sleep," he said, laughing humorlessly.

"Yes, of course. It's just back here," Jon said, standing up. Martin followed him.

"Not the most comfortable bed in the world but, uh—" He hesitated. "Actually... could you wait here for a minute?" he asked, glancing back at Martin.

"Oh—alright?" Martin furrowed his brow but stopped where he was, beside Jon's desk.

"There are some things I need to—just a moment," Jon said, hurrying to the door, embarrassed.

There was something he didn't want Martin to see: the blanket that Elias had given him. Not because it was embarrassing or particularly childish, but because he felt guilty about taking it. The thin sheets on the cot weren't really adequate, given how cold it got at night. He'd go buy another blanket for Martin or something, but... this one was his.

He made quick work of clearing his things from the room. It didn't take long; his clothes and toiletries were already stashed in a duffel bag under the cot, which he shoved the blanket into as well.

He re-entered the office, throwing the duffel bag on the ground to deal with later. "Sorry about that. Room's ready now."

He looked up. Martin was standing behind his desk where Jon had left him, holding Jon's lamb and grinning despite the heavy bags under his eyes.

All the color drained from Jon's face, then rushed back in so quickly it made him dizzy.

Martin's expression faltered a bit, but he held onto a nervous smile.

"Oh, great, thanks! I got distracted, sorry." Martin laughed, sounding nervous. He played with the ribbon around the lamb's neck. "He's so cute! Does he have a name?"

Jon suddenly remembered how to use his legs and hurried over, snatching the toy from Martin's hands.

"None of your damn business," he snapped. Then, after a moment, "and it's a *she*," he said, shoving her in his jacket pocket.

"Sorry, sorry," Martin said, wringing his hands and staring at Jon's shoes, his face beet-red. "Didn't mean to make you upset. Just thought she was cute, that's all."

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. He'd gotten used to hiding the toy behind his monitor stand while Martin was out. It wasn't visible from the other side, and only *Martin* would be so bold as to snoop around his desk. Now, he'd just made it worse by over-reacting.

Martin continued talking, the way he often did when he was anxious.

"Nothing to be embarrassed about, really. I have a little teddy bear myself," he said with a slight smile. "Course—he's in the flat..." his face dampened again. "I didn't think to grab anything as I ran out, it'd be nice to have him here. It gets pretty, y'know, spooky at—"

"Martin, I don't *care*!" Jon snapped, and Martin looked genuinely hurt. Jon immediately regretted the words.

"Look, I'm sorry, I just," Jon rubbed his face and sighed. "Don't touch my things without asking, okay? Just... forget I said anything, forget you saw anything," Jon said, cringing at himself. God, he was making this so much worse. "Sorry."

"It's—it's alright?" Martin said, looking uncomfortable.

"I'm going to go talk to Elias," Jon said, the words tumbling from his lips. He slung his bag over his shoulder and scrambled out the door, feeling Martin's eyes on his back the entire time.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the short chapter! I ended up breaking this one into two and whittling it down a lot.

(I do have a "bonus chapter"/interlude with Jon & Elias that takes place between this chapter and the last, that I may post before next Friday if there's enough interest? It would be as a separate fic in the same collection.)

Thanks for reading!

Arrangements

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jon took a deep, steadying breath and knocked on the door.

He tried to avoid Elias's office during work hours. The room had a specific connotation to him now, and it caused a predictable shift in his headspace whenever he entered. Not a sudden one; more like a persistent pressure, but it was distracting enough that Jon preferred to avoid it.

So, most of their communication was by phone or email. If they had to meet in person, Jon would suggest his own office or a conference room. It wasn't often that something was so urgent that Jon needed to see him immediately.

This was different.

Elias opened the door. He didn't look surprised to see him.

"Oh, Jon," he said, stepping aside. "Good to see you—"

Jon brushed past him and into the office, eager to get out of the hallway where someone was likely to see his oncoming anxiety attack. He closed his eyes and took another deep breath, holding his head in his hands.

"Is something wrong?" Elias asked, closing the door behind him. Damn it, Elias looked so concerned.

Jon paced and shook out his hands like he was drying them, as if he could rid them of them trembling in them. He'd meant to see Elias as an adult, as Head Archivist, to talk to his boss about the safety of his assistants, not to have a panic attack in front of him.

He tried to pull himself together. He took deep breaths and exhaled from his nose, trying to remember the technique from the "Breathing for Anxiety" video he'd watched years ago at 2x speed.

Elias waited silently for Jon to speak, putting a steadying hand on Jon's back. It took an embarrassingly long time before he felt ready.

"Martin—" was all he got out before his voice cracked. God, this was humiliating.

"Oh, Jon, come here," Elias said, and pulled him into a hug. Jon pushed and half-heartedly squirmed against him, not wanting to be held, not wanting to be small right now. Elias just held him tighter, and Jon relented, burying his face into the crook of Elias's neck.

He didn't even know why he was so upset. What happened to Martin was awful, yes, and so were the text messages...but he worked at the Magnus Institute. He read stories like this every day, had been a researcher for *years*. Nothing had ever threatened him directly before, though, he certainly hadn't been expecting *that*. It frightened him more than he wanted to admit.

Jon couldn't remember the last time he'd properly hugged someone. Despite everything, the arms around him felt warm and safe. He breathed in Elias's scent: subtle and masculine, a hint of a cologne that wasn't overpowering, a smell that meant comfort to him, now.

"Can you tell me what happened, Jon?" Elias asked.

Sometimes, Jon imagined a metaphorical switch. When it was flipped upward, he was his regular, adult self: Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute. When it was flipped the other way, he was in that softer, simpler headspace. It was a comical oversimplification, but the visualization was useful.

Right now, he imagined himself holding the switch upwards as it strained against him, wanting desperately to flip the other way on its own.

Jon sighed and took a step back, drawing back from the embrace. Elias let him, giving him a pat on the back as he released him.

"Martin came back," Jon said, scratching at his arms, agitated.

"Did he upset you?"

"No, no," Jon sighed. Well, yes, but Jon didn't want to talk about that. "He had an encounter with Jane Prentiss."

Elias sat down, gesturing to the chair across from him, inviting Jon to do the same.

Jon sat down and explained everything that had happened in the last hour: how Martin had barged into his office after being "sick" for two weeks, how Jon had offered him the storage room to sleep in, and the strange, threatening texts they'd received.

"And then I came up here to speak with you," Jon said, leaving out the details of his last interaction with Martin.

"Hm," Elias said, looking thoughtfully concerned, leaning back in his chair. He was silent for a few moments before speaking.

"I agree; I think it's best for Martin to stay here for the time being. We can look into getting extra security for the Archives, and I trust you to search for anything we may have regarding Jane Prentiss."

Jon nodded. "Of course. The Archives should be well-sealed, but—"

"We can discuss all of that *later*, however," Elias said, cutting him off. "For now, let's discuss your own arrangements."

Jon frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you think you ought to stay here as well?" Elias asked with a slight tilt of his head. "She directly threatened you, after all."

"I suppose so, but—where am I meant to stay?"

Hopefully, Elias didn't expect him to share a room with Martin. If *Martin* saw him sucking his thumb in his sleep, Jon would die on the spot of mortification.

In lieu of answering, Elias stood up and motioned for Jon to follow him. Jon did so, curious. They walked through the kitchen, towards the door Jon had never entered. Right, didn't Elias say he had his own sleeping area here?

Elias opened the door into what looked like an expensive, though outdated, hotel room. There was a small seating area directly in front of them, with an armchair, loveseat and coffee table. A half-wall separated the rest of the room, which held a king-size bed and a nightstand. Like everything else Elias owned, the bed looked about a hundred years old, carved out of dark mahogany.

"Like I said, lots of late nights," Elias explained, "I live a bit farther away, so it's not feasible to drive home every night."

Elias walked over to the bed, resting his hand on one of the bedposts.

"We can get another bed in here for you, something better than that dreadful little cot. I would have offered it to you sooner, but," Elias sighed, "I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, of course. But if it's a matter of your safety..."

Elias didn't expect him to share a bed with him, then. He wasn't sure if the thought disappointed or relieved him. Jon swallowed and nodded, eyes flicking up to Elias's.

Elias met his eyes and smiled; that warm, paternal, knowing smile, eyes that made Jon feel like he was seeing right through him, into every crack and crevice of him. A gaze that read, *I know you; I know what's best for you.*

Jon felt the switch slip between his metaphorical fingers.

"Th-thank you," he sputtered out. He patted his pocket for his lamb and pulled her out, playing with the ribbon around her neck. Elias was going to take care of everything. Elias knew what to do.

Elias's grin grew wider. "Of course."

There was a hand on Jon's back now, and suddenly, he felt *very* small, even more so than usual. He moved his lamb to his left hand and chewed on his thumb, wordlessly going where Elias led him.

It was all going to be okay. Elias was going to take care of him, take care of everything. Jon didn't want to think about worms or monsters or door locks anymore. He wanted to curl up in his blue blanket and take a nap while Elias stroked his hair and read him a book.

Jon went straight to the couch, sitting down and looking at Elias expectantly, eyes flicking between him and the cabinet that held his favorite book.

If Elias noticed, he didn't comment. Instead, he stood where he was and checked his watch.

"Now, I know you have some toiletries here, but I think it would be best if you went home and packed a bag. You could be staying here for quite a while."

Jon frowned. This wasn't right. "Right now?"

"Yes, Jon, right now. The sooner the better."

“But...” Jon started. He didn’t want to go home. Riding the underground sounded scary. He rode it every day, but the idea of being around a bunch of strange people and crowds and loud noises right now made him tremble. Besides...

“What if the worms are there?”

“They won’t be. Not yet, anyhow, that’s why I suggest you get going. You were fine with going home a few minutes ago.”

“Yeah, but...” Jon wrung his hands. He hadn’t felt this small a few minutes ago. “Will you go with me?”

Elias sighed. “Jon, I have work to do. You’re a big boy; you can ride the train by yourself, can’t you?”

“But...” he said, his voice wavering. “I’m scared.”

“Oh, Jon,” Elias said, bending over to tuck a bit of hair behind his ear, smoothing it back. “Daddy has a lot of work to do, I’m sorry. I’ll call a cab for you, how does that sound?”

Jon nodded. He really didn’t want to be alone right now, but Elias wasn’t giving him much of a choice.

“You have my phone number. You call me if you run into trouble, okay?”

“Okay,” Jon whispered, defeated.

“Good lad.”

The cab ride over was uneventful—Jon tried desperately to get a grip on himself as the streets of London passed through the window. He wasn’t in Elias’s office anymore; he needed to act like an adult.

It felt a bit like being thrown in cold water. He usually fell asleep in this state; he had never needed to force himself back to an adult mindset so suddenly before. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he resented Elias for it, throwing him out like this.

He shook his head, rejecting the thought. It wasn’t Elias’s fault he had regressed so suddenly—it was still the middle of the workday. Elias had work to do: for Jon, Martin, and the rest of the Institute. Jon couldn’t expect him to escort him around. He had even paid for the cab—it was a selfish thought.

The cab driver, unaware of his internal crisis, simply parked in front of his apartment.

“Could you wait for me?” Jon asked, unbuckling his seatbelt. The driver grunted an affirmative, glancing at the meter.

“Great. Alright. This shouldn’t take long.”

There was no musty smell inside his apartment, no worms or monsters waiting for him around the corner. Part of him wanted to just curl up under his covers and pretend the day had never happened,

but of course he couldn't. That's how they'd trapped Martin.

So, he got to work. He had to stand on his toes to grab the rarely used suitcase—a battered old thing with one broken wheel he'd used since University—from the top shelf of his closet. He packed the contents of his closet near-indiscriminately, shoving in all the boring button-ups, slacks, socks and underwear he could fit. The rest of his toiletries fit in a neat little bag, which threw on top of the clothes. Was that everything?

Jon ran down a mental list of things to pack, but couldn't think of anything else. There was nothing sentimental he wanted to take except for his lamb, which was safely in his pocket.

He looked around his bedroom, eyes landing on a blanket folded up at the foot of the bed. Right, he was going to bring something for Martin. He shoved it into his suitcase along with any other blankets he could find, then laid on the suitcase to force the zipper close.

Alright. He ought to throw out all the food in the fridge, lest he come home a month later to his house smelling like spoiled milk. Turn out all the lights, take out the garbage, lock the door... adult things. It didn't take long, and within a few minutes he was hefting the over-packed suitcase into the trunk of the cab, and riding back to the Institute.

The sun was setting by the time he arrived back; rush hour had made the return drive significantly longer. His limbs felt heavy, and the sound of the suitcase half-rolling, half-scraping against the floor was loud, echoing off the high ceilings and empty halls. He hefted it up each step, glad that almost everyone had gone home for the day, and no one was present to see his embarrassing struggle.

Finally, he made it up the stairs, down the hall, and to Elias's office. The door was partially ajar and he pushed it open. Elias stood up as Jon entered.

"Did it go alright?" Elias asked, walking over to him, taking his suitcase and setting it aside. Jon nodded. He was just relieved to be back.

Elias pulled him into a hug. Jon allowed it this time, letting his eyes slide shut as Elias rubbed his back.

"I was worried about you," Elias said, his voice a low, soothing timbre. "You were so brave for me, going there by yourself."

Jon felt that familiar feeling in his chest, like he was being filled up to bursting, like he was about to cry, but not from sadness. He buried his head in Elias's neck and tried not to.

"Such a good boy," Elias whispered. "Such a good, sweet boy for me."

He withdrew after a few moments and kissed Jon's cheek.

"You look about ready to collapse," Elias said. "It's been a hard day, hasn't it?"

Jon nodded. He'd slept little the night before. He had gone home that night and woken up with a nightmare, unable to fall back asleep afterwards. It was well before his usual bedtime right now, but he didn't doubt he'd be able to fall asleep if he were to lie down.

Elias smiled at him.

“Come on. I had some food delivered for you—I take you still like Chinese?”

Jon nodded.

Several weeks ago, on his birthday, his assistants had made him choose something to order. Flustered, he'd said the first thing he thought of, Chinese takeout, but it ended up being delicious.

Elias picked up his suitcase and led him to the kitchen. The takeout was on the table, a plastic bag tied at the top around two styrofoam containers. Jon's stomach audibly growled. Elias chuckled.

“I'll put your things in the suite. You eat up,” Elias said, picking up his suitcase. He disappeared through the door that led to the bedroom. Jon watched him exit, then looked back at the takeout on the table.

This was all so much. The food, the gifts, Elias letting him stay in what was presumably his private living quarters... Jon didn't deserve this. His uneasiness regarding Elias's motivations continued to linger in the back of his mind.

Maybe he was a fool for accepting this treatment. No matter how he thought about it, it just wasn't possible that anyone would genuinely like him enough to treat him this way.

His stomach flipped uneasily as he tepidly ate bites of chicken and broccoli. Physically, he was hungry, but the anxiety had sapped his appetite. He boxed up the rest, tied the bag at the top and put it in the fridge, which he noticed was empty save for a bottle of wine. Elias must eat out a lot, he thought.

When Elias stepped back into the kitchen, he had dressed down to a sweater and slacks, and his hair was slightly damp. Jon guessed he had taken a shower while he was eating.

Elias smiled at him. “Was it good?”

Jon nodded. Despite his lingering fear, he felt better after eating. Elias's presence was soothing and he could already feel the fleeting doubt ebbing away. He wanted to curl up next to Elias and fall asleep, safe and protected.

“Ready for bed?”

Jon nodded again, and Elias led him back into the... he supposed “suite” was the right word.

“You can take the bed, for now,” Elias said, leading him to where he'd put Jon's suitcase.

“I'm going home for the night. We'll get you your own bed in here soon. I'm sorry I don't have a separate room for you.”

Jon stopped and frowned. He didn't like that. He didn't want Elias to leave, didn't want a separate room, either. But Elias had his own life, his own things he needed to do. He'd already done so much for Jon.

“The bathroom is right through there, if you'd like to bathe,” Elias said, gesturing to the door.

“Are you going to leave?” Jon asked, quietly.

“Not yet. I have more work to do, but I'll tuck you into bed when you're ready, alright?”

Jon nodded, feeling anxiety churning in his stomach.

“Do you need help getting ready for bed?”

Jon shook his head, cheeks growing hot. Sometimes Elias would help him, if Jon was feeling very small or very tired: taking his shoes off like he had those first few nights, helping him undress, combing his hair... He didn't feel that small right now, though. He could get changed by himself.

“Alright. Come and get me when you're ready, then.”

Elias left him alone after that, and Jon began unpacking his suitcase. He put the blankets aside, then grabbed his toiletry bag and a large t-shirt he liked to sleep in.

Jon went through the motions of getting ready for bed: washing his face, brushing his teeth. The bathroom was nice, and even included a tub, something Jon didn't even have in his flat. He wondered if Elias would let him use it.

He walked back into the bedroom, wearing just his oversized t-shirt and briefs. It was so cold in here. No matter the weather outside, the Institute always seemed to be freezing.

He grabbed a blanket from his suitcase and wrapped it around himself. He would've preferred his blue blanket, the one Elias had given him, but it was downstairs in his office, in the duffel bag he'd forgotten to bring with him.

He walked back to Elias's office; the blanket dragging on the floor behind him like a cape. He opened the door and stared at him, silent.

“Ready for bed, dearest?” Elias asked. Jon liked it when he called him that. He nodded.

Elias walked him back to bed, and Jon climbed into it. The mattress was firm but comfortable, and the blankets were thick and cozy. Elias pulled the covers over him.

“You did very well today, Jon. I'm very proud of you,” Elias said, brushing a bit of hair off his forehead.

Jon wasn't sure that made sense. All he had done was go to his flat and pack a suitcase. But the words still filled him with a pleasant warmth, the same feeling he had when Elias had told he was brave after coming home.

“Do you think Martin is gonna be okay?” He asked, playing with his lamb's ribbon. He felt guilty, being tucked into a king-size bed while Martin was laying alone in a cot downstairs, probably cold and miserable.

“Martin will be just fine,” Elias said. He rested his hand on Jon's cheek. “The Archives are very safe.”

“Yeah, but...” Jon frowned. “Martin doesn't have a good blanket. Or his teddy. It's scary down there,” he said, the words coming with a softer, more vulnerable tone as he felt his adult mindset ebb away.

“It's very kind of you to be concerned for him. But I'm sure he feels a lot better not being stuck in his flat, don't you think?”

Jon frowned. Better didn't mean ideal. "I guess."

"Would you like me to go check on him?"

Jon frowned. He didn't. As awful as it made him feel, he didn't want to share Elias. The idea of Elias "checking on him", perhaps tucking him into bed the same way he did Jon...

Jon shook his head.

"If you say so," Elias said. "Goodnight then, dear," he said, with a small pat on the cheek.

Jon watched him turn and walk away. Panic rose in his stomach and escaped as words:

"D—Elias?"

"Yes, dear?" Elias answered, his voice soft and level. Jon stared at him a moment, the words stuck in his throat.

"Stay with me?" Jon pleaded, voice cracking a bit on the last word. He felt so small, so pathetic, begging Elias to stay with him.

"Oh, Jon," Elias sighed, fondness heavy in his words. He walked back towards the bed.

"I don't wanna be alone," Jon said. He'd felt so off-balance today, going to his apartment alone. Seeing Elias again had felt like taking a breath after being underwater, and he didn't want him to leave.

Elias smiled, silently running his fingers through Jon's hair.

"Elias?" Jon asked, the words high and breathy, pleading.

"I'm sorry, Jon," Elias said, the words bringing with them an air of finality. Tears stung in his eyes.

"Why not?" he asked, his voice high and watery.

"I still have work to do, both here and at home. You were so brave for me today, Jon. I need you to keep being brave, alright?"

Jon sniffed and wiped his eyes. He didn't feel brave. He felt small and alone and scared, swallowed by the huge bed. He didn't know what to say, so he was silent.

"Sweet dreams, Jon," Elias whispered, and kissed him on the forehead.

Jon closed his eyes and kept them closed, even as Elias drew back from him. Maybe if he didn't see Elias leave, he could imagine he was still next to him.

He could hear the pad of his footsteps on the carpet growing softer. Jon let out another soft, involuntary noise, but there was no response. He rolled over, burying his face in his lamb's matted fur.

He heard the latch of the door closing and held back a sob, alone.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and.... sorry :')

Saturday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was a note taped to the door.

“Jon,” it read, in Elias’s thin, cursive script. Jon had to take it down to read it.

“I will be out for the day, returning at midday tomorrow.

I’ve left my card on the kitchen table. Please buy yourself something to eat, as well as anything that would make your stay here more comfortable.

Make yourself at home and do not hesitate to call me if you need anything.

Take care of yourself. I’ll see you soon.

Elias.”

Jon read the note a second time, then carefully folded it and slipped it into his pocket.

He was in the kitchen area, currently; the note had been taped to the door that led back into the office. Sure enough, when he turned to look at the table, there was a black credit card standing out starkly against the light wood grain.

Jon walked over and picked it up. It felt heavy in his hand: literally; it was made of metal.

He didn’t know how to feel; hadn’t known how to feel since he had woken up that morning, alone and with no messages from Elias. It felt a bit like abandonment—did Elias not want him around anymore? Was Jon too much trouble to take care of, too needy and emotionally unstable, so Elias had decided to avoid him and keep him placated with money?

No, that was ridiculous. Elias had his own life, his own problems to take care of. He felt a little reassured by the note. At least Elias hadn’t left without saying anything, but the credit card on the table felt... odd. It felt outside of the bounds of... whatever it was between them.

He slipped the card into his breast pocket, figuring he could at least take him up on his offer of breakfast, if nothing else. Elias would be back tomorrow, and then everything would be alright. No sense worrying about it until then.

First things first, though. He needed to check on Martin, make sure he hadn’t been... eaten by worms in his sleep or whatever.

He bent down to collect the stack of blankets on the floor—he had set it down to read the note. It was a tall, unwieldy pile; he could barely see over the stack while holding it. Miraculously, he made his way out of the office, down two flights of stairs, and into the basement without running into anything.

The lights in the Archives were on, which meant Martin was probably up and around somewhere. Jon checked the break room—there was evidence of tea-making: the electric kettle on the counter

and the box of tea leaves next to it, but the man himself was nowhere to be found. Maybe he was at his desk?

Jon exited the break room, turned the corner, and nearly ran into him.

“Ah! What the— *Jon*? Jesus, Jon, you scared the hell out of me! It’s Saturday, what are you doing here?”

Oh, right. Martin had no idea Jon had stayed overnight as well.

“Sorry,” Jon said, peeking over the blankets. “I spent the night here as well, thought it might be wise, uh—I brought you some blankets,” he said, pushing the stack into Martin’s hands.

“Oh, uh, thank you!” Martin said, blinking. His eyes were red rimmed and his glasses slightly askew, and he reached up with one hand to adjust them. He was wearing the same clothes he was the night before, Jon noted, though it looked like he had cleaned himself up as best he could.

“I know it gets cold down here at night,” Jon said. “Thought you would appreciate the extra warmth.”

“Thanks Jon, that’s... kind of you, actually,” Martin said with a nervous chuckle, like he was surprised by it. “I’ll put these in the storage room.”

“Of course.”

Jon followed Martin as he walked away—Martin glanced behind him, like he hadn’t expected Jon to come with him.

“Also wanted to check in with you, make sure everything is alright. No worms?” Jon asked.

“Nope, no worms. Everything’s fine, far as I can tell. So far, anyway.”

“Good. Sleep well?” Jon asked, opening the office door for Martin when they reached it.

“Not really, but,” Martin sighed, “It’s okay. I’ll get used to it. Was a little cold, but I think you solved that problem,” he said with a chuckle, setting the tower of blankets by the door to the storage room.

Jon bristled and crossed his arms. “Just thought you would appreciate a selection.”

“No, I do! I appreciate it, really. Thank you, Jon.”

Jon shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. Martin smiled at him.

“I was, um. Just going to grab something to eat, if you wanted to...” Martin scratched the back of his neck.

“If I wanted to, what?”

“Go with me?” Martin said, wincing.

“Oh! Yes, to eat.” Jon said. Elias had told him to get himself something to eat, and he *was* pretty hungry. Going out together was probably the safest option, if they had to leave the Institute.

“That would be... nice, actually,” he said with a nod.

Martin smiled; a big, happy grin that took Jon off-guard.

“Okay! Uh, great, there’s this little cafe right down the street open for brunch—just general breakfast fare, they have really good biscuits—does that sound alright?”

“Yeah, I suppose?” Jon said.

“Great, then!” Martin ran a hand through his hair. “Are you ready to go? We can wait, of course, if you need to—”

“I’m ready,” Jon said.

“Nice. Alright, um, after you!”

Martin looked far too cheery given the circumstances, sitting across from him, tapping his fingers on the table and humming as he read the menu. Jon averted his eyes, picking at a piece of flaking rust on the surface of the patio table.

“Thanks for coming with me,” Martin said, looking up at him. “It’s nice to be outdoors, finally—feels good.”

“Of course,” Jon said. He hadn’t been outside much, either, and fresh air and sunshine felt pleasant. Best to enjoy it as much as he could, he thought, if they were going to be moving into the Institute.

“So,” Martin said, frowning a bit. He took a sip of water. “Um, I also wanted to apologize for last night. I should’ve asked before touching your—”

“It’s fine,” Jon snapped. He didn’t want to talk about this. Martin nodded.

“Right. Sorry. Uh—you’re going to be staying in the Institute as well, then?”

“For the time being, yes. Elias thought it would be wise, given the threats we received. I don’t know what *‘the Archivist’s crimson fate’* is, but it can’t be anything good.”

Martin nodded, looking less cheerful. “Yeah.”

They were silent for a moment. Jon took a sip of water.

“Where’d you sleep, then?” Martin asked, eyes flicking up.

“Pardon?”

“I mean, I took the cot so—where’d you sleep?”

“Oh. Elias had a spare room I could use. We’re... working on getting a bed set up.” It wasn’t a lie.

“Oh, good. So Elias is really okay with both of us... staying there?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Mm. Good. I really—” Martin chuckled, humorlessly. “I don’t want to go back to my flat. I’ll start looking for a new place when all this is over.”

“I wouldn’t blame you.”

The waiter came by at the moment. Jon ordered a simple eggs benedict and a black coffee. Martin ordered strawberry french toast with whipped cream, blushing a bit as he read it off the menu. If it were anyone else, Jon might have called it endearing.

They sat in silence for a few moments after the waiter left.

“We should pick up some toiletries for you as well,” Jon said, breaking the silence. “And some extra clothes, just enough to get you through the week before while we coordinate an Artifact retrieval team to collect your things.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. I need to get a new phone, too. Was just going to do all that after we ate, I can meet you back at the Institute.”

Jon frowned. “No, I’m going with you. Not a good idea for either of us to be on our own right now. Besides, I’m paying.”

“You’re—what?” Martin looked at him like he had three heads.

“Well, the Institute is paying.” Again, not technically a lie. Elias told him he could buy “whatever made his stay more comfortable”. Not having to share an office with an unwashed man probably counted.

“I...I can pay for my own stuff, it’s fine,” Martin said, shaking his head.

Jon frowned at him. “No,” he said, leaving no room for argument. “An extra change of clothes isn’t going to hurt the Institute’s budget.

“Well—if you’re sure it’s alright. I just—”

“You just what?”

“I don’t want to be a burden, I guess?”

“You *will* be a burden if I have to share an office with you unwashed and wearing the same clothes for an entire week.”

Martin took a sip of water. It did little to disguise how red his face was.

“We’ll see if we can get some sort of portable shower set up as well. I know bathing in a sink is... unpleasant.”

“Yeah, it’s—that would be nice. Thank you,” Martin said.

Their food was brought out soon after, and they made polite conversation for the rest of the meal. The plate in front of Martin held a monstrous tower of french toast, sugar, strawberries and syrup. Martin noticed him staring at it and offered him a bite—Jon almost gagged, it was so rich. He couldn’t tell if he loved or hated it. He expressed this to Martin, who laughed.

“Yeah, it’s usually too much for me, too. Been living off of canned goods for two weeks, though, so I figured... might as well,” Martin laughed. “Still don’t think I’ll be able to finish all of it, if you want some more.”

Jon took him up on his offer, taking a few more small bites throughout the meal. It was... surprisingly nice. Jon didn’t mind being around Martin as much as he thought he would. He still didn’t *like* him per se, but he was... tolerable, outside of work.

When it came time to pay, Martin started to pull out his wallet, but put it away after a hard look from Jon.

“Institute funds,” Jon said, tucking the card into the receipt holder. “Were you seriously about to pay for my food?” He asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I invited you, thought it was only polite,” Martin said, face red again. He sure was blushing a lot today, Jon thought.

They went to Tesco afterwards, at Jon’s insistence. Martin headed to the toiletries aisle, while Jon picked out some groceries, trying not to feel guilty as he filled up his basket. This was okay, right? Elias had told him to get something to eat, and left the rest up to his discretion. Surely he would be okay with buying some things for Martin as well, given the nature of his attack.

He could pay Elias back later, if he needed to. He’d forgotten his wallet back in Elias’s suite, so he couldn’t use his own card. He just hoped Elias didn’t think he was taking advantage of him.

Martin met him at the front with a small basket of groceries, some trial-size toiletries, a pack of underwear, and one shirt. Jon sent him back, repeating that he was *not* going to share an archive with a man wearing unwashed clothes, and that Martin wasn’t going to pay for it, either. Martin came back with two more shirts, a pack of socks, and a pair of sweatpants. Jon figured that was good enough.

The whole situation was strangely domestic. If they weren’t here to stock up on supplies after being threatened by a hive of flesh-eating worms, Jon could almost pretend that he was hanging out with a friend, doing errands together. Not that Martin was his *friend*, but... he was pleasant enough company when work wasn’t the subject.

They hauled their shopping bags back to the Institute and stocked the break room fridge with the groceries. Martin went to go get a new phone, and Jon reluctantly let him go alone—admitting it probably wasn’t too large of a risk for him to go to the store by himself in the middle of the day.

In the meantime, Jon returned to the Archive shelves, searching for anything relating to Jane Prentiss, worms, parasites... he wasn’t having much luck. Everything was such a mess, he essentially had to go through the files one-by-one to see if they were relevant. He had collected a large stack of files piled up next to his desk and was methodically making his way through them.

Martin checked in with Jon when he got back like he asked, and gave him his new phone number. He disappeared after that—Jon stayed absorbed in his work, getting more and more frustrated at the lack of...anything.

He didn’t know how long it had been before Martin came back into his office, presumably on his way back to the storage room.

“...Jon?”

“Yes, Martin?” Jon asked, not looking up from the file he was reading.

“Have you... moved from this spot since I last saw you?”

Jon glanced at him. Martin had an eyebrow raised.

“Yes.” He had gone to get another stack of files an hour ago.

“Okay.... you know it’s a Saturday, right?”

“Yes, of course,” Jon said, a bit affronted. “But we *need* to find out more about Jane Prentiss—I know we have a statement from her somewhere, I just... have no idea where it might be,” he sighed.

Martin paused like he was considering what to say. “I know it’s important, but... give yourself some time to rest. You’re here late every night as it is.”

Jon’s eye twitched. Of course *Martin* would say that.

“Given the circumstances, I think a bit of overtime is hardly our greatest concern,” Jon said.

“You’re going to burn out if you don’t give yourself a break, Jon. It won’t be pretty.”

Martin did have a point. Jon sighed and put the file back on his desk. It hadn’t even been long, and everything was starting to blur together. There was no use doing this if he couldn’t pay attention, he could risk missing something. Plus, he could feel a particularly nasty headache coming on.

“Besides, have you had anything to eat today?”

“Martin, we just went to brunch together, you saw me eat.”

“I mean *after* ten AM.”

“Well, I mean...” Jon frowned. “What time is it?”

“Six PM.”

Jon sighed, setting the folder down on the desk.

“Fine, I’ll... I need to finish this stack, but... then I suppose I’ll take a break and get something to eat.” He paused. “I don’t know what else to do, though—I mean, I’m here, I might as well work,” he said, making a vague hand gesture to the office.

“Well, what do you usually do on the weekends?” Martin asked.

“Chores, I guess,” Jon said with a shrug. “Watch TV. I don’t lead a particularly exciting life.”

Martin shifted from foot to foot. “Do you want to watch some TV with me while you eat, then? Take your mind off things? I could make us some tea,” he said, after a moment of consideration.

Jon supposed he had nothing better to do, if he wasn’t working. Maybe he could just humor Martin until his headache cleared up.

“...Fine,” He sighed, rubbing his eyes.

Martin smiled. “Great! You know what, I’ll order pizza, is that alright?”

Jon blinked. “Well, yes, but—”

“You paid for everything else, let me do this. I’ll make some tea, get everything set up, and we can use my laptop.” Martin started walking towards the door, but stopped, spinning around. “Or, actually—you know what, you finish that up, I’ll be a few minutes.”

Martin half-ran to the break room. Jon watched him go, bewildered. If only Martin was this passionate about work.

He appreciated the extra time to finish up, though. He could admit he got too absorbed in his work, sometimes, but he could never just stop what he was doing without warning. He needed to at least come to a stopping point and put everything away.

After a few minutes, Martin exited the storage room and ran back out of the office, giving Jon a thumbs up. Jon nodded at him.

Then, another few minutes later, the door to the office opened again. Jon saw Martin struggling with the door—entering with his elbow on the handle, balancing two cups of tea on top of a pizza box. Jon had just put the last of the files away, and hurried over to help Martin.

“That was fast,” Jon said, taking the tea cups off of the box.

“There’s a place down the road,” Martin said. “Super quick. I just got pepperoni, hope that’s fine?”

Jon nodded. “Pepperoni’s great.”

“Great! Okay, well, I got everything set up, come look,” Martin said, looking unusually pleased with himself. Jon followed him, curious.

Martin opened the door and grinned. Jon took in the sight before him.

“...Where did you get a projector?” Jon asked, bewildered.

There was a sofa against the wall—that wasn’t new; it had been shoved in here along with the cot. There were two small wooden crates in front of it acting as a makeshift table: Martin’s laptop was on top, along with a small projector that it was plugged into.

“It was in one of the boxes, with a bunch of other old electronics. Probably some of Gertrude’s equipment,” Martin said, setting the pizza box on one of the crates.

Jon believed him. The room had originally been intended to store some of their more fragile documents, but ever since the humidity control had gone down, it had turned into a bit of a general-use storage room. Then the cot and the sofa had been added, and any hope of it being used for its original purpose was lost. Things like old laptops and office supplies were shoved into crates and boxes alongside piles of unorganized statements and documents.

Jon handed Martin one of the cups and sat down, pulling a blanket over his lap. Martin’s laptop screen was projected against the opposite wall, and Jon had to admit it was a clever solution. Martin sat down and pulled his laptop closer, opening his web browser.

“What do you want to watch?” He asked, looking at Jon.

“How about a documentary?” Jon asked. Those were usually a safe bet.

“Sure, uh...” Martin turned back to the screen. “What... kind of documentary?” he asked, voice going high on the last word.

Jon shrugged. “Anything’s fine with me.”

“Oookkaay,” Martin said. Jon watched him pull up Google and type in “good documentaries”. He clicked on the first article that came up and scrolled through it. *Incredible research skills, Martin.*

“Oh! How about this one? It’s about cats.”

Jon leaned in to read the description, then shrugged. “Eh.” He liked cats well enough, but the description sounded dull.

Martin sighed. You just said “*anything’s fine.*”

“Well, we can find something better.”

“Alright... How about this one?”

Jon skimmed the description, saw the words “religious cult”, “biopic” and “miniseries” and shrugged. Before he started this job, he may have been interested, but now he knew enough about cults that watching it would just feel like work.

“See what else they have.”

One suggestion after another was met with dismissal from Jon as Martin read off documentary titles. Finally, Martin slammed the mouse down in exasperation. "Do you want to just watch Star Trek?"

“Yes.”

They watched Star Trek.

Martin had all of the episodes downloaded, thankfully. ...Wasn’t this his work laptop? Well, he’d yell at him about it later. Jon couldn’t find it in himself to care right now.

He adjusted the blanket in his lap, settling in as the familiar intro started. The old sofa was comfortable in that beat-in way, the old cushions sinking in to envelop him. It reminded him of his college days.

It was nice. So was the pizza... and the tea. Surprisingly so. Normal, almost. Martin seemed to enjoy himself too, sipping his tea and watching the screen, eyes occasionally flicking over to Jon.

Jon had only planned to watch one episode with him, but the next one was one of his favorites, and... he ended up watching it with Martin for hours, long after the pizza lay cold on their makeshift table. Jon leaned back on the sofa, playing with the fibers of the blanket under his hands. The only light in the room was the glow of the projector.

He found himself missing his lamb, even though he wasn't small at the moment. Would Martin really mind? Jon had panicked when Martin touched her, but thinking back on it, Jon didn't get the impression Martin thought it was *weird*. He claimed to sleep with a teddy bear, after all.

Jon pushed the thought aside. Even if he didn't think sleeping with a stuffed toy was weird, there was no way Martin wouldn't be turned away by... the rest of it.

Glancing over, Jon noticed Martin dozing off, head tilted back and mouth slightly agape. Jon shook him gently.

Martin startled slightly. "Oh! Jon—sorry, didn't mean to..." Martin lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I dozed off, I guess."

"It's alright," Jon said. "Thought you'd want to spare your back from falling asleep like that, though."

Martin chuckled. "You'd be right." He lifted his arms and stretched with a yawn. "I should probably go to bed, but... thank you, Jon. This was nice. Especially just... being around another person again."

Jon smiled at him. Even this morning, he wouldn't have imagined he would spend the day hanging out with Martin of all people. It just sort of happened, but... he didn't regret it. He yawned and stood up.

"Yeah, it was," he said, picking up the empty pizza box to throw away. "I'll, uh, see you tomorrow, then. Goodnight," he said, making his way to the door.

"Oh—Uh, Jon?" Martin asked, still sitting on the couch.

"Mm?"

"I just wanted to say... you can take the cot, if you'd like." Martin said, twisting the blanket under his hands. "I know you said you're staying here too and haven't got a bed set up yet so... I could sleep on the couch or—the break room couch if that'd make you more comfortable? Not sure what kind of situation you have going on up there."

"Oh, um, no, it's fine, I..." Jon said, his hand resting on the door handle.

He had a thought, suddenly. The bed upstairs was king-sized, it could easily fit both of them. It was clear neither of them wanted to be alone in the Institute at night, maybe Martin could...

He couldn't, though. It was Elias's bed, he'd be betraying his trust by letting someone else in. And if Jon had a nightmare...

"Jon?"

He was snapped out of his thoughts, suddenly, and blinked.

"It's nothing—um. No, I'm fine, thank you. Goodnight, Martin," he said, exiting quickly and shutting the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading! ❤️ (btw, I don't use tumblr super regularly, but I've been collecting visual references and other fun stuff @ gronlandic-edit.tumblr.com)

The Bed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The bed was too big.

That was Jon's first thought when he woke up. It was far too big for one person; the huge, thick comforter seemed to swallow him. Did Elias really sleep in this?

He fished around for his lamb, making sure she hadn't been lost in the covers, then rolled over to check his phone. He had two messages.

MARTIN: *Hey! Just stepped out to take a walk. Just wanted to let you know in case you can't find me.*

ELIAS: *How is everything?*

He tapped on Elias's message and typed out a reply.

Everything's well. Thank you for the food. Martin is doing alright as well.

The reply came quickly.

Good.

He watched the dots on the screen as Elias typed.

I'll be back at the Institute around noon. Would you like to go out for lunch?

Yes, please. That sounds nice, Jon typed back.

The next reply came just as quickly.

Excellent. I'll pick you up out front at 12:00.

That left him a few hours to make himself presentable, then. He had slept in pretty late, but he had plenty of time to take a shower and drink a cup of coffee.

Okay, thank you. I'll see you then, he sent.

He texted Martin back a brief reply as well, letting him know he'd be leaving at noon to get some food and that Elias would be coming in around midday as well. He just hoped Martin didn't ask any questions about them coming back together.

True to Elias's word, a cab pulled up outside the institute at exactly 12:00. Jon climbed into the back, and Elias smiled at him. Jon smiled back, avoiding his eyes—Elias's gaze always intimidated him. He buckled his seatbelt.

“To the corner of King’s and Beaufort, please,” Elias said to the driver. The driver grunted an affirmative.

“You haven’t told me where we’re going,” Jon said.

“Just a local cafe. You’ll enjoy it,” Elias said. It was a very typical Elias answer, vague and reassuring but mostly useless. “How are you settling in?”

“It’s been alright. Spent most of the day yesterday trying to find Prentiss’s statement, or at least anything... worm-related. Haven’t had much luck.”

Elias smiled at him. “You know you’re allowed to take a day off, Jon.”

“Martin said the same thing, but I’m literally living at work,” Jon said with a shrug. “What else am I supposed to do?”

“Well, I can’t exactly blame you; I’m much the same way,” Elias said. “Don’t get me wrong, Jon, I’m very proud of your dedication,” he said, looking pointedly at him, and Jon once again had the feeling of being uncomfortably seen.

“You’re special, Jon. It’s difficult for others to understand people like us, our drive. Our need to *know*.”

Elias nodded, almost to himself.

“I have high hopes for you, Jon.”

Jon coughed slightly, embarrassed. He had just been trying to make small talk. “Thank you?”

Elias shrugged. “I’m only saying what’s true.”

The drive was short, and the driver dropped them off outside an unassuming black shopfront, neatly nestled among the other restaurants and stores that lined the busy street.

It was fancier than Jon expected: certainly not what Jon had been imagining when Elias said “cafe”. They were seated quickly—apparently they had a reservation—and were shown to their table inside the dimly lit restaurant. The menu was a single page with small italic text, and Jon’s eyebrows rose at the prices.

“I recommend the roasted duck breast,” Elias said, looking over his own menu. “Very good.”

Jon put the menu down immediately. “Alright.”

Sure, whatever. If Elias hadn’t picked him up, he would’ve eaten a handful of dry cereal for lunch, so roasted duck breast seemed like an acceptable alternative. Elias continued reading the menu, and they sat in silence for a few moments.

“Are you sure all of this is... okay?” Jon gestured to the menu, to the table.

“What do you mean?” Elias asked, looking up at him.

“This is so expensive, I don’t know if I feel comfortable with, um—that reminds me, actually, I need to give you back your card,” Jon said, digging into his pocket.

Elias waved dismissively.

“I’d rather you hold onto it for now. And I understand, but I thought you deserved something nice. I know the past few days have been difficult.”

“Martin was trapped in his apartment for two weeks; you didn’t invite him,” Jon pointed out.

“Jon,” Elias said, putting his fork down. “Remember what I told you in the cab?”

Jon didn’t see where he was going with this.

“What happened to Martin was unfortunate,” Elias elaborated. “I’m not without pity for him, it’s why I’m allowing him to stay in the Archives in the first place. But unlike you,” Elias looked at him pointedly, “I don’t see Martin working himself to death over it. It’s why I try to afford you these breaks when I can, before you run yourself ragged.”

Jon swallowed. “Well, I... I certainly appreciate it.”

He’d never had anyone in his life look after him like this, to this extent. Georgie had tried, but she was understandably exasperated when Jon continued to miss sleep, neglect his own health, and generally ignore all of her advice. Elias seemed to have infinite patience for him.

“That reminds me, though,” Jon said. “Don’t you think Tim and Sasha ought to stay at the Institute as well?”

“Not necessarily. Why?”

“Well, Martin and I are, that’s already half of us. If she went after Martin, don’t you think the rest of them are at risk as well?”

Elias shrugged.

“Martin was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Letting him stay in the Archives is mostly for the state of his mental health. It’s you she’s after, I believe.”

Jon swallowed. “Me?”

“Remember the message you received? *The Archivist’s crimson fate*?” Elias said. “It seemed clear that you were her real target.”

“*Why*, though?” Why did the flesh hive have to have it out for him, specifically?

“I can’t say. But I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

Jon didn’t know what to say. ‘Thank you’ didn’t seem like it would cut it.

Thankfully, the waiter came by at that exact moment. Jon kept his head down while Elias ordered for him, eyes glued to the table, thinking about their conversation.

The roasted duck was delicious—of course it was. He just tried not to think about how much it cost.

They took another cab back to the institute, each returning to their respective offices after a brief conversation.

“Can I assume I’ll see you at our regular time?” Elias asked, and Jon nodded.

“Excellent. Do me proud, Jon,” Elias had said, and patted Jon’s shoulder before ascending the stairs to his office.

Currently, Jon was sitting at his desk with piles of statements surrounding him after hours of searching, feeling at the end of his rope. The more statements he combed through, the more useless his efforts felt; the sheer volume of it all overwhelmed him.

He put his head down on his desk. He didn’t know how much longer he could keep this up—searching in the dark, hoping to find something. He had pulled a few statements that seemed like they might be relevant, but they were obviously false, recording onto his laptop with no distortion.

Despite the raw hours he was putting in, he felt dreadfully unproductive. He wanted Elias to be proud of him. But as a boss, he was infuriatingly hands-off, and often Jon felt he didn’t even know what he wanted from him as Head Archivist.

There was a soft knock at the door.

“Come in,” Jon sighed, lifting his head up. It was Martin, of course, holding a mug of tea.

Jon expected to be berated for working on a Sunday, but Martin just put the mug on his desk, on the same old, stained coaster.

“I know I won’t have much luck convincing you to stop working for the day, but.. I can at least lend a hand if you need it?” Martin said.

Jon frowned. Martin was offering to do extra work?

He wasn’t sure he trusted Martin with this, to be honest. Though, maybe he had been too hard on him. It wasn’t Martin’s fault most of the statements led to dead ends. Still, though.

“You don’t mind?” Jon asked.

Martin shrugged. “Like you said, not much else to do around here. Gets boring after a while.”

Jon drummed his finger on the desk and looked at the growing stack of files he had already gone through. Hopefully, filing was a simple enough task; it’s not like Martin could make it any worse than it *had* been.

“Well, if you could help me put these files back in their proper places, that would be a big help. These should be mostly mid-2000’s, but there are plenty of misfiled statements in there, so you’ll need to go through and put those in the correct cabinets.”

“Got it,” Martin said, picking up the stack and moving it closer to the other end of the desk. There was another chair across from Jon, and Martin sat in it as he started organizing the stack by date.

It was a comfortable sort of silence. Filing and organizing was simple yet tedious work, but Martin didn’t seem to mind it. Jon ended up helping him, deciding it was better to get everything put away before he brought out any more. After about an hour of this, Jon’s phone vibrated against the desk.

Could you come up here when you have a moment? I have something to show you, the message read. From Elias, of course.

Jon glanced at the clock. It was already 7:00—leaving the rest for the morning wouldn't hurt.

He rolled his chair back and sighed, standing up. Martin looked at him curiously.

"Elias just texted me," Jon explained. "Wants to talk to me in his office." Not technically a lie.

Martin raised an eyebrow. "It's Sunday, why is he even here? He ought to leave you alone."

Jon felt a flash of annoyance at that. He couldn't blame Martin for not knowing the nature of the relationship between him and Elias, but even if he did, he would never understand.

Jon shrugged with a forced sort of casualness. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"If you say so," Martin said. "Want me to finish up this stack?"

"Just leave them," Jon answered. "We'll pick up where we left off tomorrow."

"Alright. Well, goodnight Jon."

"Goodnight, Martin."

Elias smiled when Jon entered, opening the door for him after he knocked. Jon felt relieved, though he wasn't sure why, didn't know what he had been expecting, really. He smiled back.

"Good to see you, Jon," Elias said, closing the door behind him. "Any new leads?"

"Unfortunately not," Jon said. "I'll need to check with Tim and Sasha tomorrow, see if they have any ideas," he said, fiddling anxiously with the end of his sleeve.

"Well, I'm sure there's answers out there. Enough work talk. I said I had something to show you, didn't I?"

"Mhm."

Elias put a hand on Jon's back, leading him to the bedroom. He felt himself relaxing, the touch familiar and reassuring. He normally wasn't the kind of person who enjoyed physical touch—cringing away from relatives who tried to hug him or over-familiar colleagues who would pat him on the shoulder. But it felt natural with Elias.

Elias opened the door to the bedroom suite, and Jon had to take a moment to take everything in.

The former seating area had been removed; in its place was a large daybed, framed on three sides by tall wooden slats, the recessed appearance made appear almost crib-like. The quilt was a deep, dark blue with matching pillows, and leaned against them at the head of the bed was a large, dark blue teddy bear.

Jon swallowed. "This is..."

Elias rubbed his back. "What do you think?"

Jon wasn't sure what he thought, truthfully. It was nice; the bed looked extraordinarily comfortable and welcoming. It was just so... *much*. The adult part of Jon's mind wanted to tell Elias this was extravagant, that he didn't need all of this. He felt vaguely alarmed at how quickly things were progressing, how willing Elias was to spend money on him.

The smaller part of him wanted to ask why he couldn't sleep in Daddy's bed.

Instead, he asked softly, "You got me a teddy bear?"

"What do you think?" Elias asked, stepping in front of him to retrieve the stuffed toy and hand it to him. It was large, though not massive, just big enough for him to hug comfortably and bury his face into. It was incredibly soft and clearly high-quality, not like the cheap stuffed bears he saw in supermarkets. Jon stroked its fur.

"I like him," Jon said, unconvincingly.

Elias raised an eyebrow.

"...I just don't want my lamb to be jealous," Jon admitted after a moment. What if she thought Jon was trying to replace her? He felt awful—Elias had bought all these nice things for him, and he was being ungrateful.

"Oh, I'm sure she'll understand," Elias said. "I wouldn't dream of replacing her, I just thought you might appreciate having something a bit bigger to snuggle up to at night."

Jon supposed that made sense. He'd introduce the two later, maybe they'd get along and be friends.

He nodded. "Thank you."

Elias hugged him, and Jon shifted the bear to one arm so he could properly embrace him.

"I know you've been having a tough time of it, lately. I hope this helps."

Jon nodded, despite the knot in his stomach.

The rest of the night followed their typical routine. Jon played with his new teddy bear and his lamb, introducing them to each other. They got along fine, Jon decided: His lamb liked that Teddy was big and good for cuddles, she could sit in the bear's lap easily.

He felt like reading afterwards, so he grabbed a book out of the cabinet and settled in next to his new bear, his lamb cradled in the crook of his arm. Elias joined him soon after, sitting next to him and reading his own book in comfortable silence.

Jon liked it when Elias read to him, but sometimes this was preferable, when Jon was particularly absorbed in a book and didn't want to put it down. He enjoyed Elias's quiet affection—the way a hand would occasionally rest on his leg or brush through his hair.

It was a short book, and Jon was able to finish it in one sitting. Rather than get up, he watched Elias for a bit. He looked so peaceful, so absorbed in what he was reading. Jon closed his own book and snuggled further into Elias's side, suddenly extraordinarily grateful for his presence.

It still didn't make sense to him: why Elias had taken such an interest in him, why he spent so much time and money on him, indulging him in his stupid little habits and coping mechanisms, why he never seemed put off by Jon's childish behavior. No matter how many times Elias assured him, it still made no sense to him. He felt like he was missing something.

Elias leaned over and kissed him on the head.

"I love you," Jon mumbled without thinking.

He froze. What had he—he hadn't even said that to Georgie.

Elias just smiled into his hair.

"I love you too, Jon."

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the short chapter—I'm expecting next week to be a big one, though. 🙄🙄

Crumbling

Chapter Notes

► Chapter warnings

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

The next few weeks were difficult.

The worms had started showing up at the Institute. Jon saw them outside whenever he had cause to actually leave the building, wriggling against the sidewalk and crawling towards the door. He always stomped on them, feeling them pop underneath his shoe with a sense of sick satisfaction.

That was only the beginning. They were appearing within the Archives itself, now, which was incredibly worrying; Jon couldn't figure out how they were getting inside.

Sasha's encounter only complicated matters. At least they had a defense against the worms, now—Elias had provided them with plenty of CO2 fire extinguishers—but until the source was eradicated, they'd just keep coming back. They, of course, could find no leads on Prentiss's current whereabouts.

All Jon could do was read more statements, go over the same files, and wait for something to happen, and that was the most upsetting part. They'd called exterminators, investigated the Archives for places they might be coming in—but no matter what they sprayed or how many cracks they filled, the worms kept squirming in, little by little, and there was nothing they could do to stop them.

He'd found Prentiss's statement, but it didn't shed new light on anything. All it managed to do was disturb him even more. Elias wasn't much help—just told Jon he was 'keeping an eye on things', and for Jon to focus on his work.

Not being able to leave the Institute only exacerbated his stress. There were no windows in the Archives, and sometimes entire days passed with Jon only getting up from his desk a handful of times, barely noticing the hours passing.

Martin had to be going through the same thing. Jon could see the stress and exhaustion in his sunken eyes, saw it in the way he held his head in his hands when he thought no one was looking. But he was holding on remarkably well, all things considered. He still got his work done, still brought Jon tea every day, still fretted over him and Tim and Sasha like a mother hen. Jon wasn't sure he'd call him a "friend", but he found himself saying "thank you" for the tea a little more sincerely each time.

His visits with Elias did help, breaking up the routine of dread and exhaustion that was becoming so familiar. He visited him almost every night now, except for the rare occasions Elias had to leave to go home or take care of something outside the Institute.

He didn't always feel... "little" when he visited him. Sometimes he was so tired he'd just go to bed immediately, or in a bad enough mood that he didn't want to talk to anyone else, even Elias. But

when he did, it was immensely comforting to forget about everything for a little bit, to pretend he had no responsibilities—that his biggest concern was over the quality of his drawings or what book he was going to read.

The nightmares were back, though, and getting worse. He never remembered them in any detail, just woke up gasping for air and fighting with the sheets, sick with terror, vague mental impressions of worms and decay and *rot*. He never had the courage to leave his bed and seek out Elias for comfort—somehow certain that if he were to actually check the king-sized bed on the other side of the room, it would be empty.

Elias gave him a variety of excuses why they couldn't sleep together; apparently Elias's sleeping habits were "erratic" and he "didn't want to disturb him". Plus, Elias wasn't there every night, so he didn't want Jon to become reliant on him. It was far from a satisfying explanation, but Jon wouldn't push him.

Jon had gotten used to handling his nightmares by himself—until he woke up one night to a hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake.

Jon woke, gasping, feeling his shirt stuck to his chest with sweat, wet tears on his cheeks.

"W—what?" Jon asked, disoriented. He blinked rapidly, eyes adjusting to the dim light. Elias was standing above him, hand still on his shoulder.

"I heard you crying and came to check on you," Elias said, speaking softly. "You need to get up and get clean."

And then Jon felt it. The mattress was damp underneath him, the soaked sheets sticking to his thighs.

Oh, *no*.

Jon didn't think he'd ever been more mortified in his life—he felt dizzy with it, tears clouding his vision and tightening his throat.

"I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to—" Jon choked out. He looked for his stuffed animals—and felt a small amount of relief that he hadn't gotten them wet.

"Hush, Jon, it's alright. Just get up, and we'll get these washed."

Jon obeyed, sniffing as he sat up and pushed the blankets back. The sensation was vile. He'd never had an accident like this as an adult, and the fact that it had happened in the new bed Elias had bought for him only made it worse.

"Come now, it's alright," Elias said, patient as always, helping him out of bed. "Accidents happen. Go clean yourself up and I'll change the sheets, alright?"

Jon nodded and rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands. His legs shook as he stood up, and the cool air against his wet skin disgusted him.

Once he was alone in the bathroom, he took a moment to sit on the floor and feel sorry for himself, sobbing into his hands. How had he screwed things up this badly, pissing all over his boss's brand-new bed? What the hell was *wrong with him*?

Eventually, the unpleasant, chilly dampness in his lap became the more pressing issue, and he reluctantly got to his feet. He stripped off his clothes and threw his soaked underwear in the trash with a bit of guilt—he couldn't bring himself to wash them in the sink, the thought made him feel ill. Finally, he stepped into the shower, taking a bit of comfort in the hot water against his skin.

Clean but miserable, he changed into fresh clothes and splashed some water on his face. He caught sight of himself in the mirror and cringed as a fresh wave of self-loathing hit him. His reflection looked pathetic, repulsive: sweat-soaked hair sticking up in multiple directions, face swollen, eyes red and puffy. He cringed and looked away quickly.

Forcing it back down, he turned away from the mirror and reluctantly exited the bathroom, half-expecting Elias to be gone. He was there, though, waiting for him with an expression of concern and pity that Jon hated.

Elias opened his arms just a bit and Jon took the invitation, embracing him tightly, grateful that Elias still wanted to hug him.

He was in an odd state, mentally. He didn't feel... small, exactly. He was more in that strange, in-between state where everything felt fuzzy and undefined. He felt too self-conscious to fully regress, but the comfort of Elias's arms always made him feel smaller.

"I'm sorry I ruined the bed," he muttered against Elias's shoulder.

Elias chuckled. "You didn't ruin the bed, dearest. It's alright."

Jon lifted his head to glance at it. The sheets had been taken off the bed—Jon wasn't sure what Elias had done with them—and there was a plastic protector surrounding the mattress. Had that always been there? He didn't know if that made things better or worse.

"Accidents happen," Elias said, rubbing his back. "It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I've never—" The words wavered slightly. He sniffed "This has never happened before."

"Incontinence can be a symptom of prolonged stress," Elias said, his voice low and comforting. "It's not uncommon."

Jon didn't know what to say to that.

"Do you have another set of sheets?"

"I don't, unfortunately. You can sleep in my bed instead—just for tonight, understood?" Elias said.

Jon nodded. He would never ask to sleep in Elias's bed again. If Elias had the foresight to install a mattress protector, clearly he suspected something like this would happen, that Jon wasn't even adult enough to keep dry throughout the night.

"Alright," Elias said with a pat on the back, stepping back from him. "Come on then, let's get some rest."

His lamb and teddy were waiting for him on the right side of the bed—Elias must have put them there when he was taking off the sheets. Jon climbed up next to them, watching Elias settle on the opposite side.

It occurred to Jon that this was the first time he had seen Elias actually occupy the bed. Jon would sometimes see him enter or leave the room in the middle of the night, but the other bed was always empty by the time Jon got up.

Elias turned around to face him. Jon stared at him over the head of his teddy bear.

“Were you having a nightmare before I woke up?” Elias asked softly. Jon nodded, feeling a small stab of residual fear at the reminder.

“Would you tell me about it?”

Jon didn’t want to. He did anyway.

It had been a strange dream. There were no worms or monsters, no statement-givers or things lurking in the dark, yet it had unnerved him far more than a normal night terror. The humiliation of wetting himself had distracted him temporarily, but now the memory sat at the forefront of his mind, raw and terrifying.

“I was in my office,” Jon started, his grip tightening around the stuffed bear. “The walls were all glass, though I didn’t find that odd for some reason. Like it had always been that way. Martin... brought me a cup of tea, like he always does, but it was in the cup you gave me. The blue one.”

The sippy cup. In the dream, Martin had set it on his desk like there was nothing unusual about it.

“I asked him if it was his idea of a *joke* and he just... didn’t respond. Then I looked up and noticed Tim and Sasha were there too, standing in the doorway and staring at me with that same... unreadable expression. Just... watching me.”

“Martin told me to drink it and I remember getting angry. I threw the cup at him and told him to get out and he didn’t even flinch. Just picked it back up, walked over to me and told me that if I was going to *be fussy*, then...” Jon took a breath.

“He just put the cup to my lips and made me drink it. It tasted so *awful*. I started retching, spitting it back up. I looked up, and... Martin was still standing there, and—I noticed... people around the office. Starting to gather outside, staring in through the glass walls. Not saying anything, just... watching.”

Elias shuddered almost imperceptibly.

“I don’t know why, but it terrified me,” Jon whispered. “They all *knew*, they were all watching, and... you woke me up after that.”

He didn’t feel any better after talking about it. Elias watched him silently.

“You’ll learn to master your fear,” Elias said after a long moment. “Until then, I’ll be there to guide you.”

“I don’t understand,” Jon whispered, the words strained. Tears pricked in the corners of his eyes.

“You will, one day.”

“I just don’t want to have nightmares anymore.” He felt himself slipping again, back to that smaller, simpler headspace.

“I know,” Elias said, his eyes full of knowing pity.

Jon wanted to be close to him, wanted to be held again. He wouldn’t risk another accident, though, and the thought of rejection—of Elias pushing him away, terrified him even more than the nightmare did. Jon just stared at him, not knowing what to say.

When Jon didn’t respond, Elias turned around to flick off the lamp on the nightstand, then leaned over to kiss Jon on the forehead.

“I’ll be right here if you need me. Sleep well, Jon.”

He didn’t.

Needless to say, Jon was on edge.

It had been a few days since the... incident, and it was like nothing had happened. The sheets were washed and replaced the next night, and Jon went back to sleeping in his own bed. The effect on his mental state was pronounced, though—he was sleeping worse than ever, tossing and turning all night, now afraid he was going to wake up wet on top of everything else.

He’d barely gotten any sleep last night. Three cups of coffee and a cup of tea hadn’t helped, just made him feel like a live wire sitting at his desk, staring at a tape recorder and trying to will himself to focus.

He felt bad. Very bad. There were more and more worms every day. His assistants were cracking as well—even Tim and Sasha were showing signs of weariness—and no one had any idea what to do. He was reaching a breaking point.

He’d re-watched the “Breathing for Anxiety” video recently. Eyes closed. Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out. Hold. He couldn’t keep the seconds straight in his head, though. Was he going too fast? Too slow? His heartbeat was so fast, it felt like it was going to burst out of his chest, but why? Nothing was happening. He was just sitting there.

He wanted his lamb. He’d started keeping her on his desk again, not wanting to let her out of his sight. Martin had already seen her; the damage was done and he didn’t care anymore—as long as he didn’t pry or try to touch her again.

He opened his eyes, looking for her. She was right where he left her, placed carefully in front of his monitor stand.

And a fat, silver worm was about to crawl up her leg.

Jon broke.

Martin was getting ready for a nap.

That was the good thing about living at the Institute, he supposed: it gave him a chance to lie down during his lunch breaks. Even if he never actually slept—just laid there with his eyes closed, corkscrew in one hand and his teddy bear in the other—it was a welcome break.

Jon had coordinated an artefact retrieval team fairly quickly, which Martin was immensely grateful for. He had most of his clothes, his headphones, toiletries, and other essentials, which made living here... at least tolerable. It wasn't everything; the rest was being held in a storage unit. Jon asked if Martin wanted the apartment cleared out and vacated, and Martin didn't hesitate to say yes. He never wanted to see that place again.

Everything he'd requested had been left for him in a large cardboard box outside the storage room one morning. Buried amongst old t-shirts and notebooks was his teddy bear. It was an old, tattered thing, all primary colors and atrociously 90s.

He hadn't officially requested it, but Jon must have remembered him mentioning it and thought to include it. The thought made the tips of his ears burn red, in a good way. Jon had been surprisingly thoughtful the past few weeks, only making Martin's unfortunate crush on him worse.

He daydreamed about him sometimes, laying there in the cot, about Jon taking him up on his offer and sharing the storage room with him. In his fantasy, the bed was much bigger, and they had to share it, of course.

He wondered if Jon snored. He didn't think he'd mind if he did. Was fantasizing about sharing a bed with his boss creepy? Probably; he did feel a little guilty about it. They were being stalked by a hive of flesh-eating worms, though; he needed a daydream to escape to if he was going to stay sane.

He was in the middle of one such daydream when he heard Jon scream.

His eyes shot open and he reacted instantly, scrambling out of the cot and almost tripping over himself. There were more sounds now, something banging against wood. He got himself up and rushed into Jon's office, throwing the door open, corkscrew in hand, looking frantically for the fire extinguisher.

"Jon! Where's the—"

Jon was cowering against the filing cabinets, clutching something in his hand. He pointed weakly at the desk.

Martin ran over to it. On it were the exploded remains of what must have been a particularly large worm, black slime splattered across the desk. The landline phone was off its hook—it looked like Jon had used it to bash the worm.

Martin breathed a little, still on edge, but glad that the only worm in the room he could see had been thoroughly annihilated.

"Looks like you got it," Martin said, voice shaking slightly. "Are you bit? Are there—are there any more?"

Jon didn't answer, sliding down the wall of cabinets until he was sitting on the floor. He drew his knees to his chest, hiding his face.

"Jon?" Martin asked, voice wavering even more. Seeing Jon like this disturbed him more than the worms did.

Jon still didn't respond, didn't give any indication that he had even heard him. Martin walked over and kneeled next to him.

"Jon. I need you to talk to me, okay? Can you talk?"

Jon made a short, strained sound, like he was trying to respond but couldn't. He shook his head. His breaths were ragged and short, every inhale sounding like a gasp.

"Okay, that's okay, um." Martin bit his lip. "Yes or no questions? Can you shake your head yes or no?"

Jon nodded. Martin breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good! Good, okay. Were you bitten?"

Jon shook his head.

"Okay, good. Did you see any other worms?"

Jon shook his head again.

Martin breathed a bigger sigh of relief. Thank God. It had just been the one, then.

"Alright, good. Are you—are you hurt?"

Jon sniffed, then lifted his head, not meeting Martin's eyes. He looked so scared, eyes sunken and glassy. He was clutching the lamb against his chest, the little toy he'd gotten so angry at Martin about. His free arm remained wrapped tightly around his legs, drawn up against his body.

Jon hesitated, shrugged, then shook his head. His entire body trembled, breaths still raspy and short, getting faster and shallower.

"Okay. Okay, can you breathe for me? Deep breaths?" He wanted to hold Jon's hand, comfort him and guide him, but he knew Jon didn't like being touched. He fidgeted with the sleeve of his hoodie instead, twisting it back and forth.

He guided Jon through a few deep breaths. Martin didn't know if there was a specific technique or something he should be referencing, he just tried to encourage Jon to take long, deep breaths. Jon stared at the opposite wall, not looking at Martin. He eventually settled down, breaths still raspy but no longer hyperventilating.

"Good!" Martin said "That was good. I think you had a panic attack, which—is understandable... given, well, everything. But, uh—"

Martin swallowed. He wanted to say "you're safe" or "it's going to be okay", but it felt like a lie. He was terrified, too. They all were. But Jon was still trembling like a leaf, and Martin wanted so badly to comfort him.

"I'll protect you," was what he ended up saying, far more confidence in the words than was probably warranted. Heat rose in his cheeks as soon as the words left his lips. If Jon was in his right mind, Martin was sure he'd scowl and say he didn't need his "*protection*". Maybe that was true. Martin had no idea how he was supposed to protect him from a swarm of supernatural, flesh-hungry parasites. But he had to *try*.

This was his fault, after all.

Jon just stared ahead of him, gently rocking on his heels. He shifted the arm around his knees, and before Martin realized what he was doing, Jon brought his arm up to his mouth and bit down hard on his wrist, teeth sinking into the skin where his sleeve was rolled up.

“*Jon!* Jon, no, don’t do that!” Martin yelled, grabbing his arm. Jon let go, startled, and Martin examined his wrist. He hadn’t drawn blood, but the angry imprints of teeth marks were clearly visible, already turning red. Jon had put a lot of force into that bite.

Martin looked at him. Jon looked like he was about to cry, and Martin hated himself.

“Shit, I’m sorry, I just—” Martin let go of his hand. “Don’t hurt yourself, alright?”

He was mentally kicking himself after every word. He knew this wasn’t the right way to respond, he’d just been startled and probably just upset Jon even more by yelling at him. Jon just stared past him miserably, clutching his toy with white knuckles.

Martin opened his mouth to speak—he didn’t know what he was going to say, probably something stupid—but at just that moment, the door opened.

It was Elias. Martin panicked for a moment—there was no way this could end well. But to his surprise, Jon scrambled up, running to him without giving Martin another look.

Martin couldn’t help the pang of hurt that welled up inside him.

“I heard a commotion,” Elias said, glancing between the two of them. “Is everything alright?”

He had a hand on Jon’s shoulder, and Jon wasn’t flinching away from it like Martin would have expected. He was usually so averse to physical contact, cringing whenever Tim patted him on the back or someone tried to shake his hand. But Jon seemed to be almost leaning into Elias’s touch.

“It’s just—a worm got in,” Martin said, the words feeling strained. “It’s dead now.”

Elias clicked his tongue.

“Oh dear. I’m terribly sorry—they really aren’t letting up, are they?” Elias tilted his head, looking sympathetic.

Martin shook his head.

“Well, keep me informed of any new developments. I think I’ll take Jon upstairs to lie down, he seems rather shaken.”

Jon didn’t respond to his name being spoken. Martin couldn’t see his face, but he was hugging his lamb to his chest and rocking back and forth on his heels slightly. Elias didn’t seem bothered at all by Jon’s odd behavior.

Elias looked at Martin kindly. “Why don’t you take the rest of the day off as well?”

“O—okay.”

“Thank you, Martin.”

Elias led Jon out of the office. Martin watched as the door closed and rose to his feet, wiping away tears he hadn't realized were there.

He needed to lie down as well.



Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading!

programming note: I may take a break next week and/or change the posting schedule from once a week to once every 10 days or so, as graduate school is starting soon and I'm not sure what my free time will look like.

If I do take a break next week, I'll try to get that interlude chapter posted instead, likely as a separate fic.

Collapse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You should feel it in your chest. Deep breath—follow my count. One, two, three, four. There’s a good boy.”

Why was breathing so hard?

Jon held his breath for four counts, then released, as Elias instructed. There was a hand on his shoulder, steadying him.

He’d feel ashamed, later, that Elias had to instruct him how to *breathe*. At the moment, however, there was only enough oxygen in his brain to keep him standing upright. He wasn’t sure how long he stood there, following Elias’s count, before his breath finally evened. He still felt lightheaded, swaying gently.

“Come here,” Elias said, pulling him into a hug. Jon stumbled a bit as he embraced him. His head was filled with static—not the pleasant fuzziness he associated with a different headspace, but a cold numbness that left him feeling foreign in his own body.

“It’s going to be okay,” Elias said, rubbing his back. Jon barely felt it.

Jon shook his head.

“It’s not, though,” he whispered, feeling a bitter certainty in his words. He finally felt something through the cloud of emotional static and latched onto it: anger.

“It’s *not* okay,” Jon repeated, trembling slightly. “You keep saying everything’s going to be okay and it’s *not!*”

Elias opened his mouth to respond, but Jon interrupted.

“There are more worms every day, nothing we do helps and you keep—you keep saying everything’s going to be okay and I don’t even know what the hell I’m supposed to *do!*” Jon said, his voice rising to a yell.

“Jon,” Elias said, a warning in his voice.

“You won’t *do* anything!” Jon yelled, pushing away from him, out of his embrace. Elias took a step back. “Martin and I have been telling you for *months*, Jane Prentiss is hunting us and you haven’t done a damn thing!” Jon yelled, his hands curled into fists at his sides. “You got us more fire extinguishers, I’ll give you that, but why won’t you *take this seriously* for once?”

Jon was trembling, now, not from fear but from anger. He didn’t want Elias to comfort him, he wanted him to *fix* things.

“Jon,” Elias said, voice cold. The intensity of his gaze made Jon shrink into himself. “Do you need some time in time-out to calm down?”

The effect of the words was immediate, turning the fire in Jon's blood to ice so quickly it left him dizzy.

"No," Jon said, quietly, his gaze flicking to Elias's shoes. He didn't want to be left alone, couldn't be alone right now. Couldn't stand Elias's disapproval, either, no matter how angry he was at him.

"Good," Elias said. He put a hand on Jon's shoulder. What had once felt comforting and stabilizing now felt like a weight, trapping and holding him down.

"I'm here to help, but I won't be shouted at, understood?" Elias said.

Jon hadn't felt *small* before, not necessarily. He'd slipped a little in his office, but once Elias came and got him, he'd tried to keep himself together. He couldn't let himself regress every time something went wrong. But Elias's tone—the way he was looking at him, his disapproval cutting through him like a knife—made him unravel.

Jon nodded. He tried to meet Elias's eyes, but his gaze was so intense that he immediately looked away, staring at his shoes again. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just—"

"Tell me you understand, Jonathan."

"...yes, I understand."

Elias pulled him back into a hug.

"I'm just really scared," Jon whispered. He started to tremble again. "I don't wanna be big right now. I can't. I'm sorry."

He thought again about the metaphorical switch in his mind, and how it wasn't quite accurate. More and more, he found himself caught between two headspaces, not quite regressed but not quite "*big*" either.

It was more like descending down a cliff, into a ravine, he supposed. Typically, he would lower himself down into the comforting darkness, safely harnessed to his adult mindset until he reached the bottom and could let go.

Lately, however, it felt like his tether had been cut. He found himself desperately clinging to the rocks, his grip growing weaker and weaker. He couldn't climb out without great effort, and the siren call of the darkness only grew louder, urging him to fall.

"It's okay," Elias said. "You don't have to be big right now."

Jon whimpered, trembling against him.

"Daddy's got you. Just let it out."

Jon let go.

He cried, finally, properly, his body shaking with the force of his sobs as he buried his face in Elias's shoulder. He didn't know how long it'd been since he'd cried like this. He usually choked down his tears and tried to remain silent—but this time he let it come, releasing the torrent of fear

and tension that had been building inside of him for months. His sobs turned to wails as Elias continued to hold him tightly, rubbing his back and mumbling reassurances.

“It’s alright,” Elias whispered. “Everything will be alright.” Jon only cried harder.

He didn’t know how long he spent like that, sobbing in Elias’s embrace, until he felt empty, drained, emotionally and physically, as if he’d run out of tears. Eventually, there was silence, and time seemed to pause as Elias gently rocked him back and forth on his feet.

“I’m so scared,” Jon whispered.

“I know,” Elias said.

Jon shifted, bringing his thumb to his mouth for comfort. Elias took a step back, releasing him for a moment.

Before Jon realized what he was doing, Elias had his wrist in his hand, gently pulling his arm away from his mouth. He saw a brief flash of real concern on Elias’s face—quickly turning to something like relief after he turned his wrist to examine the mark more closely.

“What’s this?” Elias asked, still holding his arm.

“It’s not a worm,” Jon said, trying to pull his arm back. “It’s nothing.” Elias held onto it.

“Did you bite yourself, Jon?”

“No.”

Elias raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe?” Jon said, hesitantly.

“Why?”

“I—I don’t know.”

It wasn’t quite true; he knew exactly why he did it. He’d wanted to suck his thumb for comfort in front of Martin, and ended up biting himself to repress the urge. He didn’t know how to explain that to Elias without sounding ridiculous.

Elias leaned in to kiss the bite mark, then released his arm. Jon held it to his chest.

“It hurts me to see you hurt yourself, Jon. Let’s not have any more of this, alright?” Elias said, voice soft.

Jon nodded, feeling ashamed. He thought he was out of tears, but they pricked at his eyes anyway. He sniffed and wiped at his face.

“Good,” Elias said, and patted him on the shoulder. “Now, I think someone could use a nap, don’t you? Let’s go wash your face, too, I’m sure you’ll feel better once you’re cleaned up.”

Jon nodded, and let Elias guide him to the bathroom, thumb in his mouth. A nap sounded nice.

Martin stared at the ceiling.

He was laying on the cot, trying to process everything that had just happened. He'd just sent Jon a text—he wasn't expecting a reply immediately, but he knew the worry was going to nag at him until he knew that Jon was fine.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” he sighed—then, remembering the room was soundproof—got up to open it.

Tim was on the other side, anxiously shifting from foot to foot.

“Hey, Martin! Can we... talk?” Tim asked before Martin could get a word out.

“About what?” Martin asked, tired.

“About what the fuck just happened back there?” Tim said, pointing a thumb over his shoulder.

Martin frowned. “You saw that?”

“Not everything, but, well.” Tim scratched his head. “I was at my desk—I heard Jon scream and ran over, but by the time I got over and looked through the window it looked like you were... handling it?”

Martin nodded.

“It looked like Jon was having some sort of episode and I thought barging in with a fire extinguisher would just make things worse, so I backed off. But a minute later I saw Elias rush down the stairs and go straight to Jon’s office so I... may have eavesdropped a bit, after that.”

“There was a worm, I think Jon just... had a panic attack, y’know, but. Wait,” Martin said, brow furrowing. “You said Elias came down the stairs and ran straight to Jon’s office?”

“Yeah?”

“He said he *‘heard a commotion’* and came to check, how the hell did he hear anything from upstairs?”

Tim paused. “That’s... a good question. I mean, I think accounting is right above us? Maybe he heard it from up there?”

“Maybe, but... it’s just *weird*.”

“I mean, that has to be it, right? Unless he has cameras in Jon’s office or something,” Tim chuckled nervously, like he wasn’t sure if he was making a joke or not. “But, that’s beside the point. There’s *definitely* something up with those two, right?”

“Elias and Jon?” Martin asked.

“Yeah, I mean... I’m not crazy, right?”

Martin shook his head. “No. I’ve noticed it too.”

If Martin wasn’t living at the Institute, he could have ignored it. Ignored them going out to lunch on the weekends, spending almost every evening together. Jon would go straight up to the third floor when he finished his work, turning down almost every offer to spend time with Martin, muttering vague excuses and leaving in a hurry. He’d once told Martin he “needed to file his laundry”. Honestly, it’d be more believable if he just told Martin he was tired and left it at that.

Martin also noticed the way Jon looked at Elias, whenever the head of the institute saw fit to actually grace the Archives with his presence. Jon was always flustered, wide-eyed and eager to please him. If Jon was trying to be subtle, he was doing a terrible job of it.

“I mean, HR nightmare aside, it’s just *weird*, right?” Tim said. “That whole interaction just... creeped me out.”

Martin nodded, glad he wasn’t the only one that felt something was off. He’d half-assumed his jealousy was clouding his judgment.

“It was just... it was almost like he was *expecting* it, or something,” Martin said. “He just didn’t seem surprised or bothered at all, and I’ve never seen Jon act like that around *anyone*. I know none of us are exactly in our right minds right now but, still.”

Tim nodded. “Like, you’d think you’d have a more compassionate response to your employee—boyfriend, *whatever*—having a mental breakdown than *oh that’s quite unfortunate*,” he said, mocking Elias’s voice. “Jon looked damn near catatonic when they were leaving.”

Martin sighed, rubbing his eyes.

“I’m just... worried about him,” Martin said. “I don’t think he’s been sleeping very much, whatever’s going on with Elias... isn’t helping and, I don’t know,” Martin sighed. “I feel weird talking about him like this.”

“Yeah, I get that. Sorry, I just—” Tim sighed. “It’s just so goddamn weird, I don’t know. Thought you’d know more than I do, but.” Tim shook his head. “Yeah. Let’s drop it.”

“Where’s Sasha, by the way? Did she...?”

“Oh, no, she’s still out to lunch. I’ll... keep it between us. Don’t think Jon would want the whole office knowing, uh. Y’know.”

Martin didn’t know if he was referring to Jon’s panic attack or whatever was between him and Elias, but it was true either way. He nodded.

“Right,” Tim said, emphasizing the ‘t’. “Well... let me know when you hear from him, alright?”

“I will. Thanks, Tim.”

Several hours later, Martin still hadn’t heard anything from Jon. He knew he was probably just asleep, but that didn’t help the anxiety simmering in his chest.

He was lying on the cot, hugging a pillow to his chest, listening to a podcast and only half paying attention to it, trying in vain to distract himself. When his phone vibrated against the makeshift nightstand he reacted immediately, scrambling to check it. It was already opened to his message history with Jon.

MARTIN, 12:34: are you okay?

MARTIN, 1:23: you don't have to talk to me if you don't want to but are you safe?

MARTIN, 1:36: jon?

MARTIN, 2:53: ???

JON, 4:57: Hi, Martin. I'm alright now, thank you. I had an adverse reaction to stress and needed to take a moment to step away. I apologize for worrying you. I will be back tomorrow morning as usual.

Martin sighed for a moment, closing his eyes. He was glad Jon seemed... back to normal, at least. He could practically see him on the other end, typing out the awkwardly formal message and agonizing over every word choice.

He was so worried about Jon. He hadn't been doing well—none of them had, but Jon seemed particularly affected. He guessed Jon saw the... *worm situation* as his responsibility, being their supervisor. He was spending more and more time at his desk, clearly neglecting his health, snapping at Martin and Tim and Sasha whenever they tried to half-heartedly suggest he take a break.

He knew Jon wouldn't learn anything from this. He'd just continue to work himself to another breakdown.

Or maybe Elias would take care of him, Martin thought bitterly. Doubtful, considering how dismissive he'd been of their concerns regarding Prentiss.

Martin picked up his phone and texted him back.

MARTIN, 4:58: hey! It's no problem, just glad to hear you're feeling better. is there anything I can do to help?

JON, 4:59: Just keep this between us, please.

MARTIN, 4:59: of course

Martin set his phone down and sighed.

The next morning, Jon was already at his desk when Martin stumbled out of the storage room, half-awake and rubbing at his eyes.

"Ah, Martin," Jon said, setting down a file and glancing at him. "Good to see you. I need you to cross-check the files for statement 0121911 today, and could you let Sasha know when you see her to check in with me regarding her research into Wiccan rituals?"

It sounded painfully rehearsed. Even Jon never bothered him about work before 9:00 AM. Martin sighed.

“Yeah, yeah of course, just gonna uh—get some breakfast, then I’ll be right on that.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Martin.”

The relief in his voice was obvious.

It’d been a few weeks since Jon’s breakdown, and both of them continued to pretend like nothing had happened. Just as Martin had feared, Jon’s physical and mental health were declining, and Jon himself seemed oblivious to it. Martin, Tim, and Sasha were always tense when they had to be in the same room as him, worried he would snap. None of them had any idea how to get through to him.

Martin had already gone to bed one night when he got up to use the bathroom and saw Jon still working at his desk. He checked the time on his phone in disbelief—it was almost midnight.

“Jon,” he sighed, walking up behind him. Jon flinched, startled.

“Martin!” he said, turning around in his chair. “I thought you went to bed already.”

“I *did*. And you should too.”

“I’m... I’m in the middle of something.” Jon said, glancing at the papers strewn across his desk.

“It’s almost midnight,” Martin said, tired.

“Well I’m not tired, there’s no reason to—”

“Jon!” Martin snapped. “You’ve been running yourself ragged, it’s—you can’t work nonstop! it’s not going to help anything.”

Jon scoffed at him, narrowing his eyes. “Of course *you’d* say that. There’s too much work to do, Martin, not all of us can afford to—just. Make tea all day.”

It wasn’t even a particularly effective insult, and Martin couldn’t even be offended, he was just worried.

“Have you even eaten today?” Martin asked.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“Because it’s affecting everyone around you, too! You’re snapping at everyone, people are afraid to even speak to you, and it’s—it’s not helping, Jon! You’re not going to organize the entire archive in one night!”

“Maybe not, but—” Jon started, less confidently. “But I have to—have to know, need to—there’s anything that will help us stop Prentiss, it’s in these files, somewhere, I just—”

“Jon,” Martin pleaded.

Silence, for a moment.

“You don’t understand,” Jon said, bitterly. “Any of it. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Just get some sleep, Jon.”

“...Fine,” Jon spat, and Martin sighed. “Just... let me finish this up and I’ll go to bed.”

“Okay,” Martin said, softly. “Do you want me to bring you anything?”

Jon shook his head. “No, but... thank you, Martin.”

Martin turned to leave, awkwardly pausing in the doorway for a moment as he considered whether or not to say anything else, to let Jon know that he cared and was worried about him. He couldn’t find the words, though.

“Goodnight, Jon,” Martin said, hoping he'd be gone by the time he returned.

“Goodnight, Martin.”

Not much changed after that. Jon's late nights continued, and Martin felt helpless watching him work himself to the brink. There was only so much that words could do, and Jon had clearly decided to firmly shut himself off from everyone around him.

The worms became a part of everyday life, and grabbing the fire extinguisher or stomping on them became as much a part of their routine as anything else. They’d given up on trying to find the source or calling exterminators. In the back of his mind, Martin hoped they’d just go away, give up and disappear as they had from his flat. He hoped that Jon would listen to his assistants, come to them for help, take time for himself and stop running himself ragged, then maybe things would get better.

Neither of those things would happen, of course. It was all just a slow build to the breaking point.

When the shelf finally collapsed, it felt like an inevitability.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies about last week- I made a lot of progress, though, so we should be back to a weekly posting schedule now. Grad school is starting soon, however, so I'll let you all know if that changes.

I also posted a "bonus chapter" for this fic, check it out [here](#)

Thanks so much!

Aftermath

Chapter Notes

► Chapter warnings

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

“Statement of, uh...” the Archivist sighed, and rubbed at his eyes with a heavily bandaged hand. He looked about ready to collapse, only pure stubbornness keeping him upright. He had insisted on taking everyone's statements before they could leave, before he could rest.

Elias was so proud of him.

The second mark had gone beautifully, and his Archivist was already eager to sate the hunger he didn't know he had. Elias couldn't have asked for a better outcome.

Well, Gertrude's body being found had been an unexpected variable, one which Elias would have vastly preferred not to deal with. But these stumbling blocks were to be expected. It was nothing he couldn't deal with.

Right now, Elias was eager to take Jon home, but he couldn't deny the Archivist what was his nature. He would protest, though, of course—it would be odd if he didn't.

“Jon, as your boss, I'm telling you to go home,” Elias said, a trace of not-entirely-feigned pity in his eyes. The man did look dreadful.

“I'm fine,” Jon snapped, giving him a weak glare.

“You look like a mummy,” Elias said, gesturing to Jon's arms. He'd fetched Jon a t-shirt once the paramedics were finished with him—the thick bandages wouldn't have fit under the long sleeves of the button-up he'd been wearing. Almost every inch of exposed skin was covered in gauze.

“Our friends in the hazmat suits gave me a clean bill of health, bloody holes notwithstanding,” Jon argued. “And they seemed quite keen to quarantine anyone showing even the slightest sign of infection. It's just pain.”

They argued back and forth, Jon insisting that he was fine and just needed to take everyone's statements. Elias relented, after instructing Jon to go straight upstairs after he was finished. He wasn't eager to waste any time.

Admittedly, Elias was looking forward to comforting him.

He'd learned in his almost two hundred and forty years of life not to grow attached to people, especially not Archivists. But there was something special about Jon. Elias's affection for the boy was sincere, even if Jon had no idea what Elias had planned for him.

He'd learn to love it, though. When they created their new world together, the pains of this life would be inconsequential. He smiled to himself. To the man across from him, it read as polite and encouraging.

The Archivist shifted in his seat and cleared his throat.

“Statement of Elias Bouchard, Head of the Magnus Institute...”

Martin was the last to give his statement. He left the office, stepping gingerly over the fallen debris and piles of worm carcasses, and Jon was finally alone.

Jon took a moment to look around his office. It was almost unrecognizable, covered in drywall debris, dead worms... and an unidentifiable black sludge. He examined it with a grimace. It was covering many of the boxes of written statements—Martin had said he’d seen Prentiss... spewing it out. The thought made Jon queasy, and he turned away from the boxes.

Nothing else seemed to have been touched, at least as far as he was willing to check. He sat at his desk and resisted the urge to put his head down. Instead, he pulled the recorder closer, and began his own notes.

He took a deep breath and began, forgoing any introductions.

“Gertrude Robinson, the last Archivist at the Magnus Institute, and my predecessor, was murdered,” he started.

“There were no worms to infest her, no strange, ghostly apparitions to warp her mind, or caves to entomb her. She was killed, in the Archives, by someone who used a gun, and that scares me far more than any specter or twisted creature. Because that means someone here is a killer.”

Jon swallowed.

“The police will investigate thoroughly, I have no doubt, but... given their track record in this matter I am not optimistic.

There is something in these files, in these statements. I know that now, some deeper—”

His head snapped up at the sound of the door opening.

“Ah, Elias, good to, um—“

Elias was walking towards him, and he didn’t look happy. Jon cowered instinctively, his shoulders rising to his ears as he curled into himself slightly.

“I believe I told you to come upstairs after you were done taking everyone’s statement. Martin left fifteen minutes ago,” Elias said, stopping in front of Jon’s desk.

“I was just finishing up some things, I—it’ll be just be a minute, lots to—”

“No,” Elias said, walking around to the back of the desk. He grabbed Jon’s arm and hauled him up out of the chair, making Jon yelp in pain.

“You are in no state to be working, Jon, and I do not appreciate being disobeyed.”

“Alright! Alright, fine. Let me just—“

Jon struggled to reach over to press the button to stop the recording before Elias pulled him away from the desk, walking him out of the office.

Something about Jon's perception began to change as they walked up the stairs together. Everything felt far away, his head beginning to fill with uncomfortable static that blocked out the world around him. His legs worked on autopilot as they passed men in hazmat suits, who paid them no mind as Elias continued to lead him towards the office with a firm grip on his arm.

It made him feel smaller. Everything was so scary. He wanted his lamb—

Oh god, his lamb. He'd left her upstairs, right? *right?*

Elias finally released him to unlock the door to his office. Once it was open, Jon limped past him as fast as he could, heading through the kitchen and into the bedroom suite.

His lamb was sitting on his pillow, unharmed. Jon fell to his knees, a surge of relief washing over him as he scooped her up and pressed her against his cheek, feeling the soft, matted fur against his bandaged skin.

It was pure luck he'd left her upstairs that day. He'd gone back and forth between keeping her on his desk and leaving her upstairs—there were less worms on the top floor, but sometimes he needed her close to feel safe. The mere idea of losing his lamb made him tremble, and he curled in on himself, head nearly touching his knees.

There was a hand on his back, suddenly, and Jon flinched.

"Get up, Jon," Elias said, gently. "One of your bandages has come loose."

Jon uncurled himself and stood up on shaky legs, the motion taking tremendous effort. He turned to face Elias.

Jon normally felt comforted by Elias's presence. Now, his heart was beating quickly with fear—with the fact the man may have—No. He couldn't think about that right now.

But he couldn't trust Elias anymore. He couldn't trust anyone.

He already knew staying away from him would be impossible. He was in too deep, and despite himself, despite every survival instinct and rational thought telling him to run away, he still craved the comfort of the man in front of him. It was all he had.

He stared at Elias's chest, at the crisp white shirt he wore that had remained pristine throughout everything, and swayed slightly on his feet.

The static in his mind was growing louder, the primal defense mechanism making him feel separate from his body. The man in front of him was blurry. He wanted so badly to accept the comfort offered, but he couldn't. He couldn't.

Instead, Elias walked towards him and pulled him into his arms. Jon didn't move.

"I'm so sorry," Elias said, rubbing his back. "You must be in tremendous pain right now."

Nothing made sense. Elias said everything was going to be okay, and it wasn't. Elias may have killed—No.

No.

He let his mind drift, welcoming the dissociation that enveloped him like a thick fog. Elias's voice sounded like it was underwater.

"...fix your bandages, okay?" He heard him say, distantly.

Jon didn't react, but Elias led him back to the office and sat him down on the couch. He sat there numbly, his thumb in his mouth, as Elias fussed over his bandages, kneeling down to rewrap the one on his left arm. The world remained distant and hazy, a blur of meaningless shapes and sounds that meant nothing.

It was easier, like this, to let Elias take care of him. Everything was okay. He didn't have to worry about what to do or who killed—No.

Elias was changing his bandages. He wouldn't hurt him, he had Jon's best interests in mind, there was no way he could—No.

Elias was good.

Elias was smart. Elias told him what to do. Daddy told him what to do. Daddy took care of him. Daddy loved him.

Daddy was good.

He was only faintly aware of the voice speaking to him.

"...going to be closed for a while for repairs, and you'll of course need time off to recover. I'd like you to stay with me in the meantime. Does that sound okay?"

Jon stared into nothing.

"Jon? I need a response. *Jon*," Elias said, and Jon blinked.

"Huh?" Jon asked, pulling himself somewhat reluctantly from the fog of dissociation. "Wh—what's..."

"I'm going to take you home with me while you recover, okay?"

"...Okay," Jon muttered around his thumb. "Your house?"

"At my house, yes." Elias smiled. "It'll be like a vacation."

Jon nodded. That sounded okay. Daddy would take care of him there.

"Great," Elias said. "I'll pack up your things for you. How are you feeling right now?"

Too much. Too little. At least the physical sensations were easy to categorize.

"surts," Jon mumbled, and he did hurt. Every inch of him ached, and the bandages were uncomfortable and itchy. He was suddenly very aware of the gauze against his skin, and he hated it.

“You’re hurting?”

“Mmmm.”

Elias nodded and stood up.

“Just a minute,” he said, standing up. He watched Elias disappear into the kitchen and return a few moments later with a tiny medicine cup in hand.

“What’s that?” Jon asked, trying to get a better look at what he was holding. There was a small amount of red liquid in the cup that looked like cough syrup. Jon frowned.

“Pain medicine,” Elias said.

“It looks gross.”

“It’ll make you feel better.”

Jon made a noncommittal noise. He didn’t want to drink gross medicine.

Elias sighed. “I thought you might prefer this to an injection, but if you’d prefer—”

Jon reached for the cup immediately. Elias pulled his hand back, holding it slightly out of reach.

“Chin up,” Elias said. “Don’t want to spill it.”

Jon tipped his head back. Elias put the cup to his lip, pouring the icky-tasting medicine into his mouth. Jon swallowed and coughed, the foul aftertaste lingering on his tongue.

“Good boy,” Elias said, patting his thigh gently, and he put the cup on the table. “It’ll take about 30 minutes to take effect. Well, less, probably. You haven’t eaten much today, have you?”

Jon shrugged. He kind of wished Elias would stop talking, stop expecting him to respond. It was very hard to think about anything right now, much less try to speak. He wanted to go back to the fog, to the comfortable static.

Elias said something else that passed over Jon, uncomprehended, and Jon nodded automatically. Elias leaned down to kiss him on the forehead, then left the room.

Jon stared into nothing, barely moving, his thumb stroking up and down his lamb’s fur. When Elias came back, dragging Jon’s suitcase in one hand and holding the teddy bear and blanket in the other, Jon was in much the same position he’d been left in.

Elias left the suitcase near the desk and walked over to the couch.

“Time to go, dearest,” he said, and took Jon’s hand to help him up. Jon stumbled a bit, catching himself with a hand on Elias’s chest.

“Oh dear,” Elias said, putting his hand on Jon’s arm to stabilize him. “Looks like the medicine is kicking in.”

“Tired,” Jon said, swaying a bit.

“I know, dearest. We’ll be home soon and then you can sleep in a big, comfy bed, okay?”

Jon nodded.

“I thought you might like these for the ride over,” Elias said, unfolding the blanket and draping it over Jon’s shoulders. It felt nice, and he pulled it tighter around himself. Elias wordlessly handed him the bear too, and Jon held both toys close as he gripped the blanket securely around them.

Elias led him out of the office and down the familiar staircase. They passed the men in the lobby in big, scary yellow suits, and Jon hugged his toys a little tighter.

Everything was a bit of a blur once they left the Institute. Elias hailed a cab, and Jon climbed inside as Elias held the door open for him. Elias put the suitcase into the trunk and joined Jon a moment later, reaching over to buckle his seatbelt for him.

Elias said something to the driver that Jon didn’t hear. He pulled the blanket further around himself and rested his head on top of the large teddy bear. They started to move, and Jon watched the streets pass by through the window. Absentmindedly; he took one of the bear’s ears in his mouth and started to suck on the soft fur.

Elias gently pushed the bear’s head away from him.

“Oh, dearest, don’t do that. We really need to get you a dummy; don’t we?”

Jon barely comprehended the words, just whining in response and kicking his feet in frustration.

“I know, I know. We’ll be home quick. Do you want to hold my hand?”

Jon huffed into his bear. He considered saying no, since he was annoyed at him. He extended his hand anyway, and Elias took it, gently stroking his thumb over the bandaged skin.

At some point, Jon fell asleep. He woke up to Elias gently shaking his shoulder.

“Wh...” Jon slurred, rubbing his eyes. They were still in the cab, and it was dark now.

“We’re home now,” Elias said, reaching over to unbuckle his seatbelt. Jon yawned and put his head back down on his teddy. He didn’t want to get up.

“Come on, now,” Elias said, gently, guiding Jon out of the cab. Jon followed somewhat reluctantly, stumbling out of the vehicle while he waited for Elias to get his suitcase from the trunk.

Once he’d gotten Jon’s bag, Elias offered his free hand. Jon gripped it, and let Elias lead him up the driveway. He couldn’t quite make out the details in the dark, but it seemed like a nice house. They must be a ways out from London—he doubted even Elias could afford such a large place in the city itself.

Elias opened the front door and turned on the light in the narrow entrance hall. He put Jon’s suitcase by the stairs, along with the bear and blanket, which Jon handed to him. Jon kept his lamb in his pocket, though, unwilling to be separated from her again.

“It’s about dinnertime, isn’t it?” Elias said, leading him into the kitchen. It was spacious and incredibly well kept, but it felt empty, somehow.

“I can heat up some soup for you, how does that sound?”

“Not hungry,” Jon said, sitting down at the oak wood kitchen table. The worms had crawled inside his mouth when he screamed, and he’d woken up coughing them out. He didn’t feel up to eating anything.

“I insist,” Elias said, opening one of the cabinets and pulling out a can. “You need to have something in you with the pain medicine.”

Jon was about to protest, but his phone buzzed in his pocket and he took it out, curious.

MARTIN: hey, just wanted to check in with you. Are you doing alright?

Jon paused. He should text him back so Martin wouldn’t worry. He felt very small right now, though, and very sleepy. He was aware enough, at least, to recognize that texting like this was a bad idea.

But the idea of being an adult terrified him right now. He couldn’t, or he’d... he’d start thinking about things and... he couldn’t.

He could pretend, though. He could pretend to be big, and then Martin wouldn’t think anything was wrong.

He wrote a reply.

JON I’m okay.,

JON: I’m at Elias’s house

“I’ll get your room ready while this heats up,” Elias said, walking back towards the entrance hall. “I’ll be back in a moment.” Jon nodded, watching the dots on his screen animate as Martin typed.

MARTIN: you’re at Elias’s house?

Jon frowned. That’s what he just said. Could Martin not read?

JON: Yes

He watched the dots on his screen animate again, stopping and starting several times.

MARTIN: okay. i don’t know if you’ve heard from Tim and Sasha, but they’re both at home resting.

MARTIN: i’m okay too, staying at a hotel tonight since my apartment is vacated. still a little freaked out.

Jon frowned at the screen. Martin was staying at a hotel? Maybe he could come stay with Jon and Elias. Jon kicked his legs under the table, debating whether or not he should ask.

When Elias returned, walking back to the stove, Jon perked up. “Daddy?” He asked, cautiously.

“Yes, Jon?” Elias asked, giving the contents of the pot a quick stir.

“Can Martin stay with us?”

Elias paused.

“Why?”

“Because he’s sleeping in a hotel and doesn’t have an apartment anymore because of—because of the—you know.”

Elias sighed and shook his head.

“Tell Martin the Institute will pay for his hotel while he finds a new apartment.”

Jon frowned. That’s not what he wanted to hear. He needed a better way to convince Elias, then.

He turned back to his phone and typed out a new message.

JON: Are you lonely

It took a few moments to get a reply.

MARTIN: yeah, i guess, sorry. don’t mean to bother you

Jon looked up. “Martin says he’s lonely and wants to stay here.”

That was stretching it a bit, but he was sure Martin would agree. Elias’s house was nice, and it would be like a sleepover.

Elias sighed. “No, Jon. And put your phone down, the soup’s almost ready.”

Jon grumbled, but turned back to his phone to type out one last message.

JON: I have to go sorry bye

The reply came almost immediately.

MARTIN: okay check in with me tomorrow please? have a good night

He heard footsteps, Elias approaching the table with a bowl of soup. Jon turned his phone off and put it back in his pocket.

“I’m not hungry,” Jon muttered, staring at the bowl of chicken soup Elias had sat in front of him.

“I know, dearest, but try to eat something for me, okay?” Elias said, sitting down next to Jon.

Jon crossed his arms and looked away from him. Elias had already made him drink something gross today.

“Jon,” Elias sighed. “Don’t be fussy.”

“I’m not fussy.”

“Then eat for me, okay?”

When Jon didn't move, Elias took a spoonful of soup and brought it carefully to Jon's lips. Jon reluctantly opened his mouth to accept it. It didn't taste very good. Jon was a picky eater to begin with, even more so when he was little, and he hated the artificial-tasting lumps of chicken.

Still, Jon did his best to swallow a few spoonfuls. He managed to keep a few bites down before a noodle got stuck in his throat, and it reminded him so intensely of the worms that he coughed it up all over Elias's lap.

"Sorry," Jon mumbled, miserably. He was so exhausted, and he felt even less like eating now.

"It's alright," Elias said, grabbing a napkin from the table and wiping Jon's chin with it. "Let's try to eat some broth, okay?"

"No!" Jon yelled, kicking the table leg. He didn't want to eat, he wanted to go to bed! Why couldn't he understand that?

"Jon!" Elias said, narrowing his eyes. "We do not raise our voices or kick things in this house."

"I don't want to eat! I want to go to bed!" Jon protested, curling his hands into fists on his lap.

"The sooner you finish your broth, the sooner you can go to bed," Elias said, bringing up a spoon without any noodles or chicken. Jon glared at him, but opened his mouth and let Elias feed him in silence.

When Elias seemed satisfied that he'd had enough, he pushed the bowl aside.

"Let's get you to bed, dearest. You've had quite a day, haven't you?" he asked, helping Jon stand up.

Elias held his hand as they made their way up the stairs. He had a really nice house, Jon thought, noticing the dark hardwood under his feet, the rich green paint that coated the walls. Not like the peeling vinyl floors and the streaky, off-white paint job that covered his own flat.

When they reached the second floor, Elias took a turn and led him down another hallway. Jon assumed they were going towards the far end, where he thought the master bedroom might be, but Elias stopped at the very first door on the left.

"This is the spare bedroom. You'll be sleeping in here," Elias said, opening the door. Inside was a nondescript guest room, one that looked like it was rarely used. The only furniture was a large bed, nightstand, and dresser with a mirror. Jon's suitcase was by the dresser, and his teddy bear was sitting on the bed.

Jon's heart sank. He'd accepted that Elias wouldn't sleep in the same bed as him, but now he was going to make him sleep in a different room, too?

Jon looked at Elias, not sure what he was hoping to see. Elias looked at him curiously.

"I don't want to sleep in there," he muttered, eyes dropping to Elias's shoes.

"Why not?"

"...want to sleep with you."

Elias sighed. “Jon, we’ve talked about this—”

“Not—not in the same bed!” Jon pleaded, looking back up at him. “But I don’t want to be alone, it’s—it’s scary and—”

“Jon, you need to learn to sleep on your own. You can—”

“No!” Jon yelled, and stamped his foot on the ground. “I don’t want to!”

“Jon,” Elias said firmly. “You’ve just been through something very traumatic and I understand you’re upset—”

“No!” Jon yelled, kicking the wall with a loud *thud*.

“Jonathan!” Elias yelled, and before Jon knew what was happening, he was being dragged by his arm into the bedroom. Jon planted his feet and resisted him, but it made little difference. Elias pulled him up by his armpits and sat him on the bed with embarrassing ease. Even through the haze of the painkillers, it hurt like hell. Jon tried to bite him, but Elias pulled away his hand too quickly.

“This is the second time you have behaved badly, and I will *not* allow temper tantrums in my house,” Elias said, taking a step back. “You can stay in your room until you’ve calmed down.”

Jon glared at Elias’s knees.

“I’ll be in the next room when you feel like apologizing,” Elias said, and walked towards the door.

Jon grabbed a decorative pillow and threw it at him. It missed, and Elias didn’t react, leaving the room calmly and closing the door behind him.

Jon grabbed another pillow and screamed into it, kicking his legs. He was so *angry*. Daddy never listened to him, just told him that he *knew best* and made him eat gross food and made him sleep by himself, even when he had nightmares or was really scared and it wasn’t *fair*, it wasn’t *right*.

Jon grabbed the pillow and threw it at the wall, watching it fall down with an unsatisfying *thump*. Anger filled him like steam in a boiling kettle, and he had no idea what to do with it. Part of him wanted to start kicking the furniture, but Elias would definitely hear that and then he’d get into even worse trouble. He tried biting himself, but it was so painful that he couldn’t bear to.

He screamed into the pillows again and kicked his feet into the duvet. The bear was sitting next to him, and Jon shoved it off the bed, immediately feeling bad about it when he heard it hit the ground. It wasn’t the bear’s fault Elias was a jerk. But he didn’t want to see it right now.

He turned his head to the other side, still lying on his stomach, and huffed. He took his lamb from his pocket and held her to his chest, keeping his grip loose. He wouldn’t take his anger out on her.

He felt miserable. He was exhausted, angry, sad, and even though the medicine dulled the pain of his wounds, the gauze was itchy and uncomfortable and he hated it. Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes, but they wouldn’t fall.

He wanted to go back to Daddy and hug him, to let himself be held and comforted, but he wasn’t ready. He was still angry at him. Elias should apologize to *him*, he thought bitterly.

He rolled over with a huff, and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He'd talk to someone else instead.

He opened his conversation with Martin and typed out a new message.

JON: Hi Im back

A reply came quickly.

MARTIN: hey! how are you doing?

There was still a distant part of him that knew that talking to Martin was a *very bad* idea. But his heart was pounding in his ears and he wanted this small rebellion against Elias.

He just had to keep acting big, so Martin wouldn't suspect anything.

JON: Mad

MARTIN: why are you mad?

Jon paused. He couldn't exactly tell Martin the details of his argument with Elias. He just wanted to vent.

JON: Because Elias is mean

MARTIN: he's mean?

Martin was really bad at reading, Jon thought.

JON: Yes and he doesn't listen and made me sit by myself and I'm am now mad at him

JON: And he's bad at cooking

MARTIN: jon is everything okay? are you feeling alright?

He saw Martin continue to type, the animated dots starting and stopping several times

MARTIN: sorry I know you said you're upset so obviously not but do you feel safe right now? do you need someone to come and get you?

What a weird question, Jon thought. He was still scared, but both Martin and Daddy had said all the worms were dead, so he didn't need to worry.

JON: There aren't worms here

JON: Theyre gone remember

MARTIN: no no i know but like do you feel safe with elias?

MARTIN: sorry i just worry

Why would he be unsafe with Elias? Martin worried about strange things.

JON: Im okay I'm just mad

JON: I had to eat gross food

JON: My bandages are itchy and I want to take them off

MARTIN: sorry. you should keep your bandages on though :(

MARTIN: though it might be time to change them? i don't know what instructions the doctor gave you

Jon was far too tired for that, but he didn't say that. Another text came through a moment later.

MARTIN: what was elias not listening to you about?

Jon sent several texts in quick succession.

JON: Nothing

JON: Doesn't matter

JON: I was angry but now Im just tired

JON: I took medicine it made me tired

MARTIN: okay, please let me know if you need anything alright? try to get some sleep if you can

JON: Okay

JON: Bye

Jon put his phone down. He kept his head buried in the pillow for a few minutes longer. The medicine made his joints feel like lead, and now that he was laying down, he didn't want to get back up.

Talking to Martin had calmed him down a bit, even though he hadn't been able to go into details. He just felt exhausted, now. His energy had worn off and he wanted his Daddy to hold him so bad, it made his chest ache.

He sighed, playing with the ribbon on his lamb. He was going to have to apologize to Elias, there was no way around it. It was just a matter of how long he was going to drag it out. He still thought it was unfair that Elias wouldn't share a room with him, but Jon could admit that maybe kicking the wall hadn't been okay. Or trying to bite him.

He buried his head deeper in the pillow with shame. He hoped Elias would still want him here. Maybe he'd think he was ungrateful and not want to see him again. Jon felt the cold dread of anxiety on the back of his neck and decided to go and apologize before Elias decided to throw him out.

The door opposite the bedroom was closed, and Jon hesitated for a moment before knocking, his other hand still holding his lamb close.

There was a short pause. "Come in," said Elias.

Jon opened the door. It wasn't a bedroom, he realized, but a reading room. Tall bookshelves lined the walls behind Elias, who was seated at a dark red armchair, typing on a laptop. He didn't look up as Jon entered.

Jon waited for Elias to say something, but the other man stayed silent, not even acknowledging Jon's presence. Jon shifted from side to side, anxiety growing heavier in his stomach.

"Um," Jon started, shakily. "I wanted to say that—that I'm sorry."

"For what?" Elias asked, not taking his eyes from the screen.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you and—and kicking the wall and trying to bite you," Jon said. He tugged at one of his bandages with his free hand.

Elias closed his laptop and set it aside, then finally met Jon's eyes. His expression was unreadable, and it made Jon feel sick.

"Come here, Jon."

Jon stepped closer. He was shaking slightly, and he pulled more insistently at the bandage.

"That is not an appropriate way to behave, you understand?"

Jon nodded, feeling weak.

"If you're going to stay with me, you can't throw a tantrum every time you don't get your way."

Jon's heart was beating hard in his chest. Was Elias going to throw him out?

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Elias stood up. Jon took a step back, afraid, but Elias stepped forward and pulled him into a hug.

"I forgive you," Elias said, stroking his hair. The tension went out of Jon's body like strings being cut. He let Elias support his weight as he wrapped his arms around him.

"I know you've had a difficult day," Elias said. "I shouldn't be so hard."

"I don't want to talk about that," Jon whispered. His legs were still shaking.

Elias kissed the side of his head in response. Jon closed his eyes.

"I think it's time for bed, don't you think?" Elias said. "Seems you can barely stand."

Jon was exhausted, but he held onto Elias tighter at the suggestion.

"I'm scared," Jon whispered. "I don't want to be alone. I'm sorry, I can't."

Elias stroked his hair. "You can sit with me for a few minutes," he said. "But then you need to go to bed. I need to stay up and work. There's still... lots to take care of with the institute."

Jon hated it, but he nodded. He wouldn't throw another tantrum. He'd be good.

Elias sat down, and gently guided Jon to settle in his lap. Jon curled up against Elias's chest, nuzzling his face into the fabric of his shirt and taking a deep breath, comforted by the familiar scent. He felt safe here, he wanted to stay here forever. Bad things happened when Elias wasn't nearby to protect him.

Daddy would make everything okay. It wasn't Elias's fault that the worms...Jon gripped Elias's shirt with his free hand. As long as he was next to him, nothing bad could happen.

After a few minutes, Elias patted him on the shoulder, guiding him to climb out of his lap. "Time for bed, dearest. I'll tuck you in, okay?"

Jon nodded reluctantly, and let Elias walk him back to what he supposed was his room, now. Jon climbed straight onto the bed, and Elias laughed softly.

"Let's get you into some clean pajamas, okay?" he said, and Jon nodded. He stripped down to his boxers while Elias opened his suitcase, pulling out a large t-shirt that he knew Jon liked to sleep in. Jon raised his arms up and let Elias pull it over his head. He liked it when Daddy helped him get ready for bed. It made him feel small and taken care of.

Jon climbed back into bed, pulling the covers over himself. Elias walked around to the other side of bed, retrieving the fallen teddy bear and handing it to him. He reached over to smooth the covers around Jon, then kissed on the forehead.

"I'll be across the hall if you need me, okay?" Elias whispered. "I have more work to do."

He *did* need Elias. He needed to be near him. Needed him to not leave him alone with his thoughts and his nightmares.

Saying that was unlikely to change anything, so he just nodded.

"Good boy," Elias whispered, and smiled. "Sweet dreams."

And all too soon, Elias was gone, leaving Jon alone in his new room.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay. I'll probably be moving to bi-weekly chapter updates, with grad school starting. Updates should remain consistent, though!

Good news though: I've added an [illustration for chapter 10](#), and I'll be adding more for other chapters in the future. I post all my art on my [tumblr](#) as well.

Thank you so much! Comments motivate me a ton, I appreciate every reaction.

Stay

Waking up was a gradual process. Jon had only gotten a few hours of solid sleep before he'd started tossing and turning, fading in and out of semi-consciousness before daylight began to stream in through the bedside window.

Jon buried his head under the blankets, trying to manage a few more minutes of sleep, but it was in vain. He kicked the blankets off in irritation after a few minutes, coming to terms with the fact that he was awake now.

He'd sweat a lot during the night, leaving him feeling disgusting and miserable. The pain medication had long worn off and he *ached*. He spent a few minutes just laying on his back, staring up at the ceiling, trying to summon the strength to get on with the day.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand. He reached over and picked it up, forcing his aching limbs to cooperate. He had a message from Martin.

Oh God, *Martin*.

Jon closed his eyes and groaned. He only half-remembered what he'd said to him last night, but he remembered enough to know he'd made an idiot of himself.

He opened the conversation and started scrolling through his message history, cringing intensely at himself. Fuck, he sounded ridiculous. He'd thought he was doing a great job last night pretending to be "big".

He scrolled back down to read the latest message.

MARTIN: hey, just wanted to check in with you. still doing okay? are you still at elias's?

Jon typed his response.

Martin,

I'm incredibly sorry for my inappropriate texts last night. I believe I had an adverse reaction to the pain medication I was given. It won't happen again.

Elias allowed me to stay in his spare bedroom last night, as I was rather incapacitated with the medication. I'll be heading home in a few hours.

Again, I apologize. Thank you for your concern.

Jon hit "send". After a few moments, he saw Martin begin to type.

MARTIN: *it's okay? nothing you said was unprofessional or anything. just worried about you.*

MARTIN: *how are you doing now?*

Jon glared at his phone. Of course Martin would say that. He had no sense of professionalism.

JON: *I'm fine.*

MARTIN: *okay, good to hear. things okay with Elias? you mentioned being angry with him.*

Jon's face might as well have been a furnace. He still couldn't believe he'd texted *Martin* of all people when he was upset last night.

JON: *Yes, we had a small argument. Everything's okay now. Again, the pain medication was making me behave irrationally. I shouldn't have brought you into it.*

MARTIN: *no it's okay I just wanted to make sure everything's good now!*

MARTIN: *glad to hear everything's okay :)*

Jon put his phone down on the bed. He was still mortified, but he'd done all he could. There was no sense in dwelling on it.

Instead, he tried to think through his plan for the day. First, he needed to get out of his bandages—they'd come partially unraveled during the night—and take a shower. He'd pack up his things, go downstairs, and politely but firmly tell Elias that he was going home.

He couldn't stay here. Not after what happened. Not when Elias could have... could have murdered his predecessor. Not when there were too many questions unanswered, mysteries unsolved. Elias was hiding *something* from him, he knew that much.

It wasn't that he was concerned that Elias was going to hurt him. If Elias wanted to kill him, he could have done so a long time ago. No, Jon was simply... too easily affected by him.

The weaker part of himself wanted so badly to stay, to let Elias care for him. To forget about Gertrude and fall into that comforting headspace where he didn't have to worry about anything. But he couldn't. He needed to stay level-headed and rational while he investigated, and he needed to do it as far away from Elias's influence as possible.

Hopefully, he'd discover that Elias was innocent, and nothing would have to change. But until Jon knew for sure, he couldn't trust him. He couldn't trust anyone.

His phone buzzed again—another text from Martin.

MARTIN:

i think i'm gonna go by the institute today, i left some stuff in the storage room. Rosie said they're starting repairs and locking everything down tomorrow morning, so if we need to get anything to go ahead and do it today and she'll let me in. do you want me to pick anything up for you?

Jon tapped his finger on the side of his phone. Interesting. Was there a reason Martin was offering this, other than simple goodwill? Did he want a chance to snoop around in Jon's things?

Admittedly, Martin was the least likely of Jon's suspects, but he couldn't rule anyone out. Perhaps Martin was just trying to get on his good side to divert his suspicion.

He could use Martin's help, though. Jon hadn't taken anything from the Institute except his suitcase—which meant his laptop bag was still in his office. Getting back to his flat would be a full-day task in itself. There was no way he'd have the energy to make it to the Institute before morning.

He sent his response.

Yes, if you're going by the Institute, please pick up my laptop bag if you could. Brown leather satchel, should be leaning against the desk.

Martin's reply came quickly.

Ok will do! I'll keep you updated.

With that taken care of, Jon put his phone back down on the nightstand. Right. Shower.

He crawled out of bed, almost falling over as he tried to stand on his feet. He was unprepared for how badly he *hurt*. The jagged wound in his leg where Martin had removed a worm with the corkscrew was the worst, a bright spot of pain standing out against the general ache and burning that covered every inch of him.

He groaned and forced himself to stand up, then limped his way to the bathroom. He took off his sweat-damp clothes and tossed them into the corner, then began peeling off his bandages.

There was a certain amount of relief in it, in his skin finally being exposed to fresh air—as long as he avoided looking in the mirror for too long. It was the first time he'd really been able to look at himself since the attack. He'd been too out of it in the aftermath to process anything.

Some of the larger wounds had been stitched close, where there was enough skin left intact to do so. There were dozens of smaller, open wounds, though—neat little holes that went deep into his skin. His arms and neck had gotten the worst of it, being uncovered skin, but there were plenty on his legs as well.

He gathered up the wad of soaked gauze and medical tape and threw them in the bin. He turned to the shower and twisted the knob, making sure it was a decent temperature before cautiously stepping in—then hissed in pain and immediately stepped back. The water *hurt*.

He tried again, gritting his teeth and bearing through it. He needed to get clean. He could handle this.

He acclimated to the water until the pain became a background sensation, then brought the bar of soap to his worm-eaten arm. White-hot agony shot through him instantly as it touched his open wounds, and Jon barely maintained his composure long enough to rinse the soap from his wounds until the pain turned into a dull, burning ache.

After a few seconds, he turned off the water and sat down on the shower floor, clutching his arm and squeezing his eyes shut. It hurt so badly, and it felt so unfair that he couldn't even wash himself.

...It was fine. At least he'd been able to rinse himself off. He'd go home, take some ibuprofen, and try again.

He didn't have bandages with him, either. He couldn't remember if the paramedics had given him any, everything was such a blur. That was fine, though. He just had to manage until he could get back to his flat. Then he'd figure something out.

He gritted his teeth as he very carefully toweled himself off and put on a fresh set of clothes from his suitcase. The sensation was miserable, the fabric rubbing against his wounds and making him wince with every movement.

With that done, he threw his dirty clothes, teddy bear, and blanket into the suitcase, then put his lamb in the top outside pocket.

He pulled the suitcase out of the room with a bit of difficulty—it was a large and unwieldy thing, the left wheel was still broken and dragged against the floor. Bringing it down the stairs was also a struggle, and it made a loud clunk as it hit each step. Every part of his body felt white-hot with pain, and he was starting to sweat again with simply the exertion of going down the stairs.

He wanted to avoid Elias on his way out, skip the awkward confrontation and apologize later. Given the amount of noise he was making, that probably wasn't an option now. He was almost down the stairs, though; the door was right in front of him and he was so close. He reached for the doorknob.

"Going somewhere?" came Elias's voice, to his left.

Of course.

Elias was sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in his hand. He was dressed more casually than Jon usually saw him: khakis and a loose white shirt. He took a sip from his mug, faint amusement in his eyes.

Jon tried to stand up a little straighter, using his suitcase for support.

"Yes, Elias. I appreciate your generosity in allowing me to stay last night, but I..."

Jon faltered, suddenly distracted by Elias's eyes. His gaze was so intense. The expression was neutral, curious, no hint of animosity or anger, but Jon felt so *seen*. Elias raised an eyebrow, and Jon cleared his throat.

"I think it's best that I get back to my flat in London. I'll need to see my doctor, of course, about the wounds, and—" Jon swayed a little. God, he was in so much pain. "I think... staying here, as my boss it's, ah—"

Elias sighed, setting his coffee down. "You're bleeding through your shirt, Jon."

"I'm—what?"

Jon looked down, and sure enough, a red stain was beginning to form on his side. He must have pulled open one of the wounds when he was coming downstairs.

"O—oh," Jon said. He felt a bit faint.

"Come sit down, Jon," Elias said, standing up. "We can discuss this after we make sure you're well."

Jon hesitated. He knew that the longer he stayed here, the harder it would be to leave. But it couldn't hurt to have something to eat first, apply new bandages...it would be suspicious to leave so suddenly. He couldn't let Elias know he suspected him.

"Alright," Jon said, reluctantly. He left his suitcase by the stairs and sat down at the kitchen table, trying not to look as uncomfortable as he felt.

Elias took something out of the cupboards—a small first aid kit and a red-tinted bottle of medicine. He walked back to the kitchen table, setting both down and scooting his chair closer to Jon.

“Could you lift your shirt for me?”

Jon silently removed his shirt, wincing as the fabric stuck to the drying blood, then held his left arm up. The wound was just under his armpit, close to his back. It would’ve been difficult to get to by himself.

Elias opened the first aid box and tore open an alcohol wipe. Jon felt it sting against his wound and flinched slightly. He stared at the bottle on the table, trying to distract himself.

“That reminds me, what was it you gave me last night?” Jon asked.

“Codeine,” Elias said casually, continuing to clean the dried blood from Jon’s skin.

“Code—what? Where the hell did you get codeine?” Jon asked, incredulous.

“I keep some stored for emergencies,” Elias said, reaching back into the first aid kit.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise, given how out of it Jon had been yesterday, but he hadn’t properly questioned why Elias readily had opiates on hand until now.

“That’s—” It felt... odd. Jon had already been rather out of it when Elias had given him the medicine, and he felt slightly taken advantage of, having been taken home in an incapacitated state.

“Would you have preferred to go without it?” Elias asked, applying a small gauze pad to the wound.

“No, of course not, I just—I don’t know,” Jon sighed. It was a stupid thing to be upset about. Jon had agreed to go home with him of his own free will. There was nothing sinister about it.

“Why didn’t the paramedics give me anything to take with me?” Jon asked, instead.

Elias smoothed over the bandage.

“They don’t want to deal with the Institute any more than they have to. That’s why they didn’t particularly care to prescribe you anything—the less follow-up for them, the better.”

It made sense, from what he remembered, which admittedly wasn’t very much. They seemed keen to get rid of him once they were certain he wasn’t...infested. He pulled his shirt back on, being careful not to stretch any of his wounds too much.

“In any case, you’ll need to take your next dose with food,” Elias said, standing up and walking to the fridge. He opened it and started digging around. “How does toast sound?”

Jon frowned. He was in pain, but he couldn’t afford to be in the same state as he was last night. He needed to keep a clear head so he could make it home by himself. He wasn’t confident about navigating an unfamiliar area while high on codeine.

Elias pulled something out of the fridge and shut it, turning around.

“I don’t know if…” Jon half-heartedly protested. Elias locked eyes with him, then—his gaze neutral, slightly concerned, but eyes piercing and *knowing*—and Jon suddenly doubled over in pain with a gasp.

He couldn't explain it, but he was suddenly intensely more *aware* of his pain, of the hurt radiating from every inch of him, like he was experiencing it for the first time. He gasped and pulled his arms around himself, forehead almost touching his knees. He could feel sweat dripping down the back of his neck, down his clammy skin, into his wounds, everything felt so *present*.

“Jon! Are you alright?”

Jon looked up. Elias was in front of him, a concerned look on his face. Jon locked eyes with him again and felt his breath hitch with fear—had Elias done that to him?

No, that was ridiculous, not to mention *impossible*. He couldn’t let his paranoia get to him.

“I’m—I’m fine,” Jon stuttered out. “Just—hurt all of a sudden.”

The strange wave of pain was starting to pass, though the uncomfortable *awareness* of it was still present, bringing the physical sensations to the front of his mind in a way he couldn't explain. His stomach turned, and Jon’s previous determination to not take any medicine was starting to waver.

“If you’re sure,” Elias said, standing up. “What was it you were saying before?”

Jon swallowed.

“It’s—nothing. Nevermind.”

He could still make it home. It was just a few hours—he could manage it by himself.

Elias nodded.

“Go ahead and take your medicine, then. Then you can eat some breakfast.”

Jon nodded, feeling somewhat defeated. Elias picked up the bottle and measured out a dose.

“Chin up,” Elias said, and Jon obeyed, albeit a bit reluctantly. He was perfectly capable of giving himself his own medicine, but it wasn’t worth the argument.

“There you go,” Elias whispered, once Jon swallowed. He put the cap back on the bottle.

“I went and picked up some groceries this morning. I tried to get some things that should be easy for you to keep down—do you think you could manage this and some toast?”

Elias handed him a yellow bottle, which Jon recognized instantly—it was a bottle of chocolate milk, the same kind his grandmother had given to him every morning growing up. The packaging had changed since then, of course, but it still gave him a sort of fond nostalgia to look at it.

“Y-yeah. That’s fine,” Jon said, swallowing, trying to get rid of the medicinal taste in his mouth. “Toast is good.” He twisted the cap with a shaking hand. Even this was difficult, he had a wound in the middle of his palm and he couldn’t grip it with enough strength to open it.

He grimaced and pulled his hand back. Blood covered his palm.

"Everything alright?" Elias asked from where he was preparing the toast.

"...I need your help," he admitted, holding up the bottle.

Elias set down the knife he was using and walked over, taking the bottle from Jon's outstretched hand.

"Let me," he said, twisting off the cap with ease. He handed the now open bottle back to Jon. "There you go."

"Thank you," Jon mumbled. Elias smiled, and left him to drink the sugary-sweet beverage as started preparing the toast.

It was almost disgustingly sweet—Jon hadn't had this since he was a kid. It was still tasty enough that Jon gulped it down—he hadn't realized how hungry he was.

When Elias came back with two pieces of toast, Jon ate both of them eagerly. Elias sat across from him and watched.

It was so easy to fall into letting Elias care for him. It made his heart ache; he couldn't trust him anymore—not until Jon knew for sure what had happened in those tunnels.

"Well," Jon said, pushing the plate back once he had cleared it. "Again, thank you for your hospitality. I really ought to get going, now, I have a lot of—personal things to take care of," he said, standing up.

"Sit down, Jon, let's talk about this," Elias said.

There it was. Jon knew he wouldn't let him leave that easily.

"I—okay," Jon said, sitting back down. He had to play this carefully, make Elias think he was leaving for reasons unrelated to suspecting him of murder.

"If you want to leave, I understand," Elias said, folding his hands in his lap. "I just want to make sure you're taking care of yourself."

"Oh, ah—Okay." That wasn't what Jon had expected him to say at all. Elias was okay with him leaving?

"Let's put on some fresh bandages, at the very least. You shouldn't walk out with open wounds, they'll get infected."

Jon nodded carefully. If Elias wasn't going to stop him from leaving, there was no harm in staying a few extra minutes to put on some fresh bandages.

"Alright. I couldn't... I couldn't find any bandages in the bathroom," Jon said, somewhat embarrassed.

"That's alright, I have plenty upstairs."

Elias helped him up and led him up the stairs, a steadying hand on Jon's back. Jon walked slowly, carefully up the steps.

“Go to your room—I’ll be right back with the bandages,” Elias said, giving him a pat on the back before continuing down the hall.

Jon obeyed. He sat on the edge of the bed, pushing the balled-up sheets out of the way, a bit embarrassed he hadn’t at least made the bed before intending to leave.

Elias came back a moment later, holding what looked like an old-fashioned leather doctor’s bag, which Jon noted with faint amusement. He put the bag on the bed and took out a plastic bag full of bandages—which Jon recognized, suddenly. One of the nurses had given it to Jon; he’d forgotten about it until now.

“Where’d you get that?”

“One of the nurses gave it to you and you immediately set it down where it’d be forgotten,” Elias explained, taking more things out of the bag. “I packed it up for you.”

“Well—okay,” Jon said, a bit conflicted. “Thank you. I can take it from here, then.”

Elias looked unamused. “Jon, they’re all over your body, including your back, and I can tell you’re still in a tremendous amount of pain. I’ll leave you to do it yourself if you’re uncomfortable with the idea, but I think it would be wisest for me to do it.”

Again, he had a point. Jon ran a hand through his still-damp hair. “Just—fine. Whatever. Just hurry up.”

Elias made a noise like he was unhappy with Jon’s tone, but didn’t comment.

“Take your shirt off for me.”

Jon obeyed, taking off his shirt again. He set it aside and closed his eyes tightly. The sight of his skin still made him feel sick.

Elias dressed his wounds in silence. There were dozens of holes on his upper body alone, not counting the ones made by the worms crawling up through his trouser legs. Elias methodically cleaned each one, applying salve and covering them with rolls of gauze.

“We’ll need to go pick up some more bandages,” Elias remarked. “You’re going through these very quickly.”

“Mm,” Jon remarked. He was starting to feel sleepy.

A few minutes later, Elias directed him to lie down and take off his shoes and trousers. Jon laid on his back, allowing Elias to gently maneuver him to reach all of his wounds. They were mostly on his lower legs, the worms not having time to crawl all the way up his trouser before the fire suppression system was set off.

It was weirdly nice. He felt woozy, and the pain was starting to ebb away. The bed was so soft underneath him, and he felt like he was melting into it.

He’d almost drifted off when Elias’s voice got his attention.

“That’s all of them, I believe,” Elias said, patting him on the thigh. Jon struggled to sit up.

“T... Thank you,” Jon said. The words came slower now, the codeine filling his head with fog. He cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. “I oughta get going, then.”

“No, you’re not,” Elias said, sounding resolute.

It took Jon a moment to realize what he’d said, and his blood went cold.

“I—what?” Jon said, laughing in disbelief. “You said you—I’m an adult, you can’t—you can’t *force me* to stay here.”

Elias rolled his eyes. “I’m not *forcing* you to do anything, Jon. It’s your decision. But you’ve shown a profound lack of ability to take care of yourself, and I don’t believe being on your own is a good idea.”

“I can take care of myself,” Jon shot back.

“You were about to walk out the door with open wounds.”

“Only because you took my bandages.”

“Jon.”

“It’s my—it’s my decision,” Jon said, a little less confidently.

“It is. But I would have thought you’d be a little more grateful for everything I’ve done for you.”

That hurt. Jon felt his stomach twist with anxiety.

“No—no! Of—of course I’m grateful, I just. I don’t want to be a burden. I know you’ll be busy with all the—all the repairs, and I need to, uh...”

Jon trailed off. His excuses sounded so weak when he said them out loud, and the painkillers made it so hard to think.

He could leave, but if Elias truly was guilty, it would just let him know that Jon was onto him. If Elias was innocent, it might irreparably damage his relationship with him. Jon lost in both scenarios.

Either way, maybe Elias had a point. He couldn’t change his bandages by himself, and left to his own devices, his wounds would probably get infected.

“Stay with me, Jon,” Elias said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He gently pushed, guiding him to lay back down on the bed. “Stay here and rest. Let me take care of you while you recover. Do you really want to deal with all of this by yourself?”

He really didn’t. If what Jon remembered from the cab ride was correct, they were quite a ways out from London. He thought about walking to the bus stop with a broken suitcase, transferring over at the rail station, then walking back to his flat, having to figure out meals, changing his bandages every day...

Jon liked to think he was a logical man. Staying with Elias made the most sense, if he could keep his emotions in check. It would also allow him to better investigate the man—there wasn’t much he

could do from his flat, after all.

Elias wasn't forcing him to do anything—this was still his decision.

And he was very, very tired.

"I'll... I'll stay," Jon muttered, and closed his eyes.

"That's a good boy," Elias muttered, leaning in to kiss him on the forehead. Jon winced, turning away from him.

"I'm not a kid right now, don't do that," Jon muttered, half-heartedly pushing him away. Elias pet his still-damp hair and gave him another kiss.

"Maybe not, but you're still my good boy."

Jon hated how good the words made him feel.

The Neighborhood

Chapter Notes

Hi! Incredibly sorry for the long gap between last chapter and this one. Grad school killed me, but I'm on winter break right now and should be posting a bit more often. Thank you all so much for your patience.

► Chapter warnings

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

July 30, 10:53 AM.

A tape was playing in Jon's office.

It'd been in the recorder since the incident; the only thing left on Jon's desk when it'd been discovered. It was a short recording, judging by the amount of tape used.

"...there is something in these files, in these statements," Jon's voice came from the recorder; low and serious, like he was trying to avoid being overheard. "I know that now, some deeper—"

There was the faint sound of a door opening, and what sounded like a chair rolling on the hardwood floors.

"Ah, Elias, good to, um—" Jon's voice on the tape stuttered out. There were footsteps, growing louder, closer to the recorder. Then silence for a moment. Jon softly cleared his throat.

"I believe I told you to come upstairs after you were done taking everyone's statement. Martin left fifteen minutes ago."

That was definitely Elias's voice, and he sounded unhappy.

"I was just—just finishing up some things." Jon's voice again, nervous. "I—it'll be just be a minute, lots to—"

"No," Elias said, and then there were quick footsteps, followed by sounds of a brief commotion: shuffling, the chair rolling again, Jon crying out in what sounded like pain.

"You are in no state to be working, Jon, and I do not appreciate being disobeyed." Shuffling sounds again, and a noise of frustration from Jon.

"Alright! Alright, fine. Let me just—"

There was the familiar click of the recorder, and then silence.

Martin picked up the recorder, rewound it, and listened to it again.

July 30, 11:54 AM

MARTIN, 11:54 AM:

hey! I picked up your bag. want me to drop it off at your flat?

MARTIN, 11:55 AM:

I can bring some other stuff if you need it too, do you need food or bandages or anything?

JON 12:29 PM:

Thank you. Please hold onto it for now. I'll let you know when I can meet up with you to pick it up.

MARTIN 12:31 PM

okay! It's really no problem for me to just drop it off, are you back in london yet?

MARTIN 12:31 PM:

I can stop by any time

MARTIN 12:33 PM:

are you doing alright?

JON 12:40 PM:

I'm fine. I'll tell you when I can pick it up.

MARTIN 12:41:

okay keep me updated, please let me know if you need anything

MARTIN 4:45:

are you sure you don't want me to bring it to you?

August 7, 5:34 PM

Jon still hadn't picked up his bag.

He'd barely had enough energy to walk across the house the past week, much less take a bus to London. He supposed he could ask Martin to hand it off to Elias, but that would only complicate matters and raise questions from both of them.

He should never have asked Martin to pick it up. Elias was riding into London almost daily to oversee repairs at the Institute, he could have easily brought him his bag.

Maybe it was better this way, though. Martin, while not entirely free of Jon's suspicion, was admittedly the least likely of his suspect list. He hated to rely on anyone right now, but if he could

avoid being entirely dependent on one person—namely, Elias—that was a good thing. Trust could get him killed.

He hadn't had much of a choice the past few days, though. It'd been a little over a week since the attack, and everything since had been a blur for Jon. He was either in too much pain or too tired to do practically anything without assistance. The painkillers made him feel tired and uncoordinated in a way he hated, but going without them was unbearable. Every inch of him *ached*.

Either way, he was almost entirely dependent on Elias. He brought him his meals, changed his bandages for him and tended to all of his needs, including his medication. He brought it to him every morning and evening—Jon didn't even know where he stored it, Elias would only give it to him directly.

While Elias was away, Jon would spend his time reading or watching TV, at least when he could keep his eyes open long enough. Truthfully, he spent most of the day sleeping and waiting for Elias to come back home.

This was dangerous, he knew that. There was a strong possibility that Elias was a murderer. Trying to balance that fact with his dependency on the man was too much for his mind to handle.

A nagging part of his mind told him he should take advantage of the opportunity to snoop through Elias's belongings and see what else he could find out about the man. See what he could find out about the institute, or about Gertrude. He'd tried, once, a few days ago. He dragged himself up the stairs after Elias had left to peek into his home office, the room right across from Jon's "bedroom".

It was a small room, decorated similarly to his office at the institute. Jon had been in here a few times before, though they mostly spent their evenings together downstairs. There were two main pieces of furniture: the armchair and a small writing desk on the other side of the room. Lining the walls were tall bookshelves and filing cabinets that nearly reached the ceiling.

Jon had tested all of them. Many of them were locked, but those that weren't were filled with stacks of documents: letters, forms, sometimes even drawings. Most of it looked to be at least several decades old. The sheer volume of it was overwhelming, and none of it made any sense to Jon, especially through the haze of the painkillers.

If there was any rhyme or reason to how it was organized, Jon couldn't figure it out. Everything was filed neatly and put away with care, but the actual order and location of the documents made no sense to him. It surprised Jon; Elias seemed to him a very orderly man, and he never seemed to have any trouble finding anything.

Jon had given up and decided to lay back down, turning on a documentary about sharks and trying not to think about Gertrude Robinson.

That was exactly where he was now, two days later. Laying on the same couch, watching a different documentary, trying to tune out the mind-numbing boredom and his own frustrations about being useless.

Jon had been overwhelmed with work in the weeks before the attack. Sleepless night after sleepless night had added up as he'd obsessively torn through the archives, trying in vain to find out what he could about Jane Prentiss—and look what good it had done him.

Now, he had nothing to do—nothing he *could* do, rather—until he felt well enough to pick up his laptop from Martin. Then, maybe he could start doing some research, start digging into the lives of his assistants and see if any of them had a motive for killing his predecessor. See if he could somehow eliminate Elias as the top suspect.

But for now, as Elias had told him often the past few days, he needed to *focus on getting well*. Overextending himself would only delay his recovery.

He tried to focus on the TV.

It was another ocean documentary. He liked this series. The narrator's deep voice was soothing, and the content was just enough to capture his attention without being too complicated or high-stakes.

It was mid-day and Jon was bored. Earlier, he'd tried to take a walk outside, to get some exercise. At least something to break up the monotony of laying on the couch all day. But moving had just left him feeling winded and sore. At least Elias would be home in a few hours.

He knew he shouldn't look forward to seeing him. The same thought swirled around in his head and repeated itself all day, exhausting him. He knew he needed to distance himself as much as possible, at least until he knew with complete certainty who was responsible for Gertrude's death.

And despite this, their nightly routine remained almost entirely unchanged.

Almost every night when Elias came home, Jon found himself slipping back to that small, vulnerable part of his psyche, the part that craved comfort and attention. He'd let Elias take care of him the way he'd grown so used to. Let him read to him and stroke his hair and call him sweet names. Let his adult mind crumble away with barely any resistance.

What else could he do? He could hardly control it, lately. Especially when he started thinking about Prentiss, about the worms, his body would go cold and he would feel small and helpless, like his mind knew it was too much for him to handle.

His phone buzzed from where he was laying on it. With a grunt, he adjusted himself and pulled it from under him, looking at the notification. Another text from Martin.

He silenced it and tossed it on the floor, hiding his face in his arm.

He was so tired.

When Jon came to, the light from the windows was beginning to dim and there was drool on the pillow underneath him. The TV was still on, playing softly in the background.

He winced and shifted uncomfortably. It was pain that had woken him, the corkscrew-inflicted wound in his leg throbbing red-hot.

He reached over, feeling on the ground for his phone to check the time. It was a bit past 6:00—he'd slept for three hours. Elias would be home soon, then. It was almost time to take his second dose of painkillers.

Jon rolled himself into a sitting position and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, wincing again at the twinge of pain that radiated from his leg. The rest of his body hurt too, but the corkscrew wound

was the worst. It wasn't unmanageable, but it was certainly unpleasant. He could survive until Elias got home.

He dragged himself off the couch, steadying himself as another wave of dizziness hit him. He was probably dehydrated.

Walking to the kitchen and filling up a glass was a simple enough task. Elias had told him not to use the drink glasses in the cupboard, asking that he use one of the plastic cups or his sippy cup. "To avoid any accidents," he'd said.

He grabbed a crystal drinking glass anyway, a small rebellion. If Elias was going to keep him by himself all day, he could deal with Jon using his fancy glassware. The way Elias constantly infantilized him annoyed Jon to some degree. Elias insisted on rules like this even when Jon was feeling like a capable adult.

He drank most of it in one motion, a bit of water escaping down the corners of his mouth. He wiped his face and topped off the glass, then carried it back to the sitting room.

The TV was still on, playing the same documentary series at a low volume. Jon stood by the couch and watched it idly, drinking more of the water. The camera followed a strange-looking eel, ominous music playing in the background. Jon listened with mild interest as the narrator described its odd life cycle and anatomy, the way it defended itself against predators by secreting slime.

Then they showed it feeding, and Jon wasn't fully aware of what was happening until the eels began to swarm.

There were several of them, piling onto and into a dead fish, ripping it apart. Their bodies wiggled against each other, covering the surface until all that was visible was a squirming pile of long, fleshy bodies, eating, burrowing, worming their way into—

The glass slipped from Jon's hand and shattered.

He came back to himself and took a step back, then rushed to the couch and dove for the remote, mashing the power button to turn the TV off.

He dropped the remote and sank to his knees, trying to stop himself from hyperventilating. He felt so sick, so violated. The image of worms swarming every inch of him ate at his mind like the worms had eaten at his flesh.

Jane Prentiss was gone. The worms were gone, all that was left were the holes in his skin. He knew that, but sometimes he could feel them under his bandages. In the middle of the night, they would *itch* and he would tear off his bandages to make sure there was nothing underneath.

His skin tingled. He tore the bandages off both of his arms with shaking hands, inspecting his wounds. They were just starting to close up; Elias had been meticulous about keeping them clean. He poked and prodded at each wound, digging into them until blood covered his fingers and pain made his vision go white with pain. He had to be sure.

There were no worms, though. Just his own flesh, his own blood smeared across his skin. He resisted the urge to pull off the rest of his bandages. He was starting to calm down—the pain was a distraction, at least, but he was still shaken up.

He curled in on himself and brought his head to his knees, still trying to slow his breathing. He wasn't sure what to do with himself, now. He felt vaguely like he was going to throw up, and he didn't want to be by himself. He wanted Daddy to come home.

Oh.

That had been happening more often recently. He'd get upset and retreat back into that smaller headspace without noticing. It seemed to be his mind's go-to response to fear nowadays.

He didn't know how to process fear as an adult. As a child, however, he was intimately familiar with it.

He sniffed and rubbed at his eyes. He didn't like being little when he was by himself. He wanted Daddy to come home. Once he was in this state, though, it was very hard to force himself to think like an adult again.

He could be patient until Elias was home, if he tried. He just needed a distraction. Daddy would be home soon, he wouldn't have to wait much longer.

He reached for the remote again and turned the TV back on, closing his eyes and mashing the home button so he didn't have to see what was previously playing.

He wasn't sure what to watch. Nature documentaries were usually a safe bet, but he was getting a bit sick of them. He certainly wouldn't be watching any more ocean documentaries for a while.

He scrolled through the list of free services on the TV, looking for something calming, something safe. A kid's show, maybe, if he could find something decent.

He ended up opening Youtube and searching "90s kids shows", slowly typing it out on the remote with a trembling hand. He selected the first playlist that appeared and let it autoplay.

Gentle, familiar piano music played as the camera panned over a set of miniature houses and roads. Jon relaxed, relieved. He was familiar with Mr. Roger's Neighborhood—it was an American show, but his grandmother had some of the episodes on VHS tape. Charity shop finds, like most of his books.

He hugged his knees and watched the TV screen. He wished he had his lamb, but he'd left her upstairs that morning and didn't have the energy to go all the way up there and get her. He chewed on his thumb and rocked on his ankles slightly, watching the show.

It was nice. The show was simple but engaging, and Jon appreciated the calm, soft way the man spoke.

He watched a Finnish woman sing a lullaby to a pair of puppets. Mr. Rogers and a man ate an imaginary cake together. Jon watched the show, entranced, playing with a loose thread on his pants. This was safe; nothing would hurt him here.

After an episode and a half, he finally started to feel calmer. He was considering moving back to the couch when he heard the front door unlock. He perked up for a moment—Daddy was home. He looked around for the remote to pause the TV, then froze.

He'd gotten distracted and forgotten about the glass he'd broken.

The remains of the crystal drinking glass—the one Elias had specifically told him not to use—were shattered on the floor, along with a sizable puddle of water. He'd left it there for the better part of an hour, and it had definitely begun to seep into the hardwood floors.

Elias's footsteps were growing closer.

Chapter End Notes

sorry I know it's evil to come back after several weeks with a short chapter and a cliffhanger. This is only a bit shorter because it's the result of a monster of a chapter being cut in half, so the good news is I have the next one nearly done.

Easter eggs for this chapter:

1. [Hagfish are terrifying.](#)
2. The episode Jon watches is a real episode of Mr. Rogers and you can watch it [here](#).

More things! **I've made a discord server.** Join it [here!](#)

It's a general hangout server and loosely focused around TMA age regression content. It also has some art for this fic I haven't posted anywhere else. I see you, frequent commenters. Please come hang out with us.

finally, thank you so much for your comments and support for this fic, it's what keeps me going! ♡

Rules

Chapter Notes

oh my god I'm alive

I'm so sorry, I rewrote this like 3 times but it's HERE. I'm not abandoning this fic, I promise.

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

The house smelled like fear.

Elias noticed it as he was locking the door behind him. It was urgent and pounding; so sudden and intense that he paused for a moment.

Jon was home, and he was afraid. Afraid of Elias discovering something. Afraid of Elias *knowing*.

Elias didn't make a habit of indulging Jon's fear of him. That would be counter to his plans—he needed Jon to trust him.

He couldn't deny his own nature, though.

Elias walked slowly to the sitting room, letting his footsteps ring out against the hardwood floors. The room was empty, the sofa abandoned save for a single, squished pillow. There was a blanket on the floor with a large damp spot.

Elias already knew what was under it, of course. He knew where Jon was, as well, though he didn't need the power of the Beholding for that one.

"Jon?" He called, walking further into the room. He paused for a moment. There was no response.

Elias made his way to the back of the room. Jon was huddled up against the back of the sofa—knees drawn up to his chest, hands fisted in his hair. His arms were unbandaged, and it looked like Jon had been picking at his wounds. Dried blood was smeared across his skin and the tips of his fingers. He didn't respond to Elias's presence except to stiffen slightly, his knuckles turning whiter.

He was terrified. It hung in the air, thick and sweet.

Elias smiled. "There's my little boy."

Jon lifted his head just a bit, just enough to make brief eye contact with Elias. His eyes flicked away quickly.

"What are you doing back here?"

Jon opened his mouth but said nothing. The poor thing had trouble speaking, sometimes.

“What’s wrong, Jon?” Elias asked, taking a step closer. Jon let go of his hair and brought his hands around his knees, drawing them even closer to his chest.

“Nothing,” Jon said hoarsely, the word sounding like it took great effort.

“Nothing you want to tell me?” Elias asked with a tilt of his head. Jon’s anxiety was growing, reaching a breaking point. He was silent.

Elias started to speak again, but Jon interrupted him.

“I broke one of your glasses,” Jon sputtered out, staring at Elias’s knees. “I dropped it and spilled it and forgot to clean it.”

Elias paused, surprised by the admission. He hadn’t expected Jon to be so forthright. He was still terrified, but there was a certain amount of relief that came with the confession—of no longer having a secret to be pried out. The fear of Knowing had left him.

Disappointing. Still, it was a bad habit to feed on Jon. Better to use this as a teaching moment, then.

Elias took another step forward and kneeled in front of Jon, wincing a bit as he did so. It was a shame that mortal bodies aged so quickly.

“Is that what’s under the blanket, Jon?” He asked, his voice soft and level.

Jon nodded, hiding his face from Elias in his arms. Elias reached out and stroked Jon’s hair back from his forehead. He could still feel him trembling. Poor thing. Elias really did love him.

“I asked you not to use those glasses, didn’t I?”

Jon nodded again.

“Do you remember why I told you not to?”

Jon lifted his head, swallowed, and tried to make words. It took him a few tries, but he eventually managed.

“B—because I—I might—break them?”

Elias nodded.

“But you used them anyway, didn’t you?”

Jon tightened his arms around himself. He nodded.

“Did you think you knew better than Daddy?”

“No,” Jon whispered. His mind was drowning in shame, in regret.

Elias was proud of him. There was never any need to punish Jon. Elias’s disappointment hit much harder than any blow.

“The rules are meant to keep you safe, Jon. You agreed to stay here and let me take care of you. I don’t ask for a lot in return.”

Jon nodded.

“All I ask is that you listen and obey me. This is what happens when you disobey—you get hurt.”

Jon stared at the floor. “I’m sorry,” he croaked out.

Elias reached out and rubbed his back, comforting him. He could feel the bony protrusions of his spine underneath his t-shirt. Jon was still human, and still needed to eat. Elias was guilty of forgetting that, sometimes.

“You need to trust me. Daddy knows what’s best for you, understand?”

Jon nodded. “I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Are we going to have this problem again?” Elias asked.

Jon shook his head.

Elias smiled. He leaned in and kissed him on the forehead.

“Just remember that from now on. Daddy knows best.”

Elias leaned back. “How about you clean that up while I get dinner ready?” he asked, standing up. “There’s a broom in the kitchen.”

Jon nodded, standing up after him with shaky feet, holding onto the couch for support, looking miserable. His face was noticeably pale with dark circles under his eyes. His arms were covered in dried blood from the wounds that had been torn open. It’d been almost 12 hours since his last dose of medication, so the pain was likely creeping back in. He looked at Elias like he wanted to say something.

“I’ll give you your medicine after you eat,” Elias said. “Clean this up, then I’ll feed you.”

Jon was still for a moment, looking like he was trying to compose himself. He swallowed, nodded, and left to get the broom.

Jon didn’t feed himself that night.

His hands shook so badly that he could barely bring a forkful of mashed potatoes to his lips. Elias watched with a blank expression, then silently took the fork from his hand and held it to his lips for him. Jon shied away briefly, considering it for a moment, then relenting.

Here was another thing he was incapable of doing himself. Another thing that Elias had to do *for* him. Jon felt the resignation in his chest and let his arms go completely slack, his hands resting in his lap. It would just be easier this way.

The pain always killed his appetite, and so did the medication. He could barely stomach more than a few bites, but Elias kept bringing up the fork. Jon knew better than to protest by now.

Finally, Elias held the familiar plastic medicine cup up to Jon’s lips and he swallowed it with a muted feeling of relief. Elias held up a napkin and wiped a drop from Jon’s lip.

“Do you want me to help clean up?” Jon asked, watching Elias start to pick up his dishes.

He felt utterly pathetic. He was a grown man and couldn’t even feed himself. He’d been a burden on Elias, who’d been spending every day overseeing repairs at the Institute, on top of taking care of Jon. Meanwhile, Jon had done nothing but lay on the couch and watch TV all day.

“No, that’s alright,” Elias responded, putting a dish in the dishwasher. “Stay there.”

Jon sat in silence as Elias cleaned up. He hoped the medicine would kick in soon—both to soothe the pain, and because it did a fantastic job of knocking him out. He didn’t want to be awake right now.

Jon zoned out while he waited, embracing the numb comfort of feeling disconnected from his body, as if watching himself from the outside. The medicine made it easier to do this, but he’d been intimately familiar with dissociation for a while now.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat like that until a touch on his arm startled him back to awareness. Elias had pulled up a chair next to him, and the first aid kit was on the table. Jon hadn’t noticed.

Elias looked at him curiously but didn’t say anything. Jon cleared his throat in response, trying to hide his embarrassment. He got the feeling Elias didn’t like it when he zoned out like that, though he’d never commented on it.

Elias brought a warm, wet rag to Jon’s arm, starting to wipe away the dried blood on his skin. It felt painful and soothing at the same time, and every time it passed over a wound, Jon winced, wishing he’d wait until the painkillers kicked in.

“Did you do this to yourself?” Elias asked.

Jon shifted uncomfortably. It was fairly obvious he had. He didn’t know why Elias bothered to ask.

“Jon?” Elias asked.

“Yes,” Jon said, feeling another sting of shame.

“Why?”

“I got scared and thought—” Jon sighed. “I got worried there might be worms under my—my bandages.” It sounded so stupid when he said it out loud.

Elias, thankfully, didn’t press any further. He leaned down to gently kiss Jon’s arm, then continued cleaning his wounds.

Jon didn’t understand him.

Months had passed since they started this “arrangement”, and Jon still struggled to understand it. It was simple enough to not think about it in the beginning, to believe that Elias simply enjoyed helping him deal with the stress of his job. That was before Elias had started housing him, feeding him, and tending to his wounds every night.

Did Elias have ulterior motives? That still didn’t make sense to Jon. If Elias was trying to get something out of him, he would have tried something already. And what would he even be

interested in? It wasn't like Jon had much to offer. He was an unpleasant person to be around, and he didn't think he was particularly attractive, either.

Still, his best guess was that he was a sort of proxy son for Elias. Some sort of outlet for a man too dedicated to his career to start a real family. But that had to be getting old, at this point. Perhaps it was fulfilling for Elias when he was simply reading stories to Jon or tucking him in, not having to literally spoon-feed him and tend to every one of his needs. No one wanted to care for a 29 year old traumatized man-child.

A realization sunk in for Jon, and sat heavy in his stomach. Elias was going to leave him. The Prentiss incident had turned him into too much of a burden, and Elias was just keeping it up out of politeness at this point. Once Jon was better, Elias would cut him off, likely leaving him out of a job as well.

He didn't want to wait for that to happen. It would be humiliating to stay here, knowing it was temporary, knowing he was a burden. Maybe if he went home, tried to take care of himself, he could distance himself enough and try to get out of this with some of his dignity intact.

"You're shaking, Jon. What's wrong?"

Jon swallowed.

"Nothing"

Elias rested a hand on Jon's leg. "Don't lie to Daddy."

Damn it, Jon didn't feel small right now, didn't want to be. He'd gone in and out of his childlike headspace all day, but he needed to have this conversation as an adult.

"I just...I think I need to go home."

"Jon, we've had this discussion."

"No, that's not—" Jon sighed in frustration. "I'm just a burden here, okay? I should be taking care of myself, not making you deal with... all of this."

"I enjoy taking care of you. I think it's beneficial for both of us."

"Why?"

"I keep telling you, Jon. You're special. You don't understand it, yet, but you will."

Jon grit his teeth. He kept saying that. He'd tell Jon that he was "unique" or "special" and important, but that didn't answer his question.

Plenty of people found him "unique". They found him interesting enough to stick around for a while before they realized he wasn't as interesting as they assumed. That, or they were put off by his less desirable traits: his acerbic nature, his obsessiveness, his inability to relate to others. There was nothing that would entice anyone to stay with him.

Was Jon just a passing amusement for Elias, then? a thing for him to dote on and then discard? Had Jon realized Elias was going to leave him before Elias himself did? Or was Elias continuing to string him along, knowing where it ended?

Elias was an intelligent man. Surely he understood what he was doing to Jon.

Something like anger built in Jon's chest.

"Elias," he said, more firmly than he'd spoken in a long time. Elias looked at him, curious.

Jon looked him dead in the eyes.

"Are you going to leave me?"

The words felt strange on his tongue. Powerful, somehow.

Elias slowly smiled, something like excitement in his eyes. He paused for a moment before responding.

"No, Jon. I don't make commitments lightly." Elias' voice was steady and firm, leaving no room for argument.

Jon believed him.

It was more than just believing—he **knew** Elias meant what he said.

"It may be presumptuous," Elias said, reaching over to put a hand on top of Jon's. "But I believe we're going to be together for a long, *long* time."

Jon swallowed.

"...Okay."

He felt slightly uncomfortable. All the doubt he had before was simply *gone*—at least with regard to Elias leaving him. He still didn't understand Elias's motivations, but he knew, without a doubt, Elias was not going to let him go home.

Elias smiled at him. He continued to dress his wounds in silence.

"My own grandmother didn't want to take care of me," Jon said, after a few moments. He was surprised by the bitterness behind his own words.

He remembered when he'd gotten hurt trying to climb a tree as a child. It was a small dogwood tree near his house with just enough low branches for Jon to convince himself he could safely scale it to get a better view of the neighborhood. One of the thin branches had broken underneath him, and he'd fallen hard onto his arm.

His grandmother had patched him up, as she always did, but with an air of exasperation and annoyance that Jon had never forgotten. After that, he tended to hide any injuries from her.

It was so different from the way Elias tended to his wounds. What his grandmother did out of obligation, Elias seemed to do with reverence.

Elias's voice was low. "She didn't deserve you, Jon. She didn't understand you, either, did she?"

"She did her best," Jon mumbled, staring at the table, regretting his words. He'd never blamed his grandmother for the way she raised him, it would be unfair to her.

It still hurt, though.

“You were different from other children, weren't you? You found it hard to fit in.”

“I guess.”

‘Different’ was one way of putting it. His teachers and doctors had other terms for it.

“Even as a child, they were cruel to you. Weren't they?”

Jon tensed. A brief image of his childhood bully flashed in his mind. He pushed it down. He wouldn't think about that right now.

“You've been through a lot, haven't you, Jon? Perhaps that's why you don't trust me—others have treated you with such cruelty.”

Elias squeezed Jon's hand.

“But we get to make it all better, don't we?”

Jon turned towards Elias, silently asking to turn around and be held. Elias hugged him, taking care to avoid Jon's arms, still in the process of being bandaged. Jon felt incredibly pathetic.

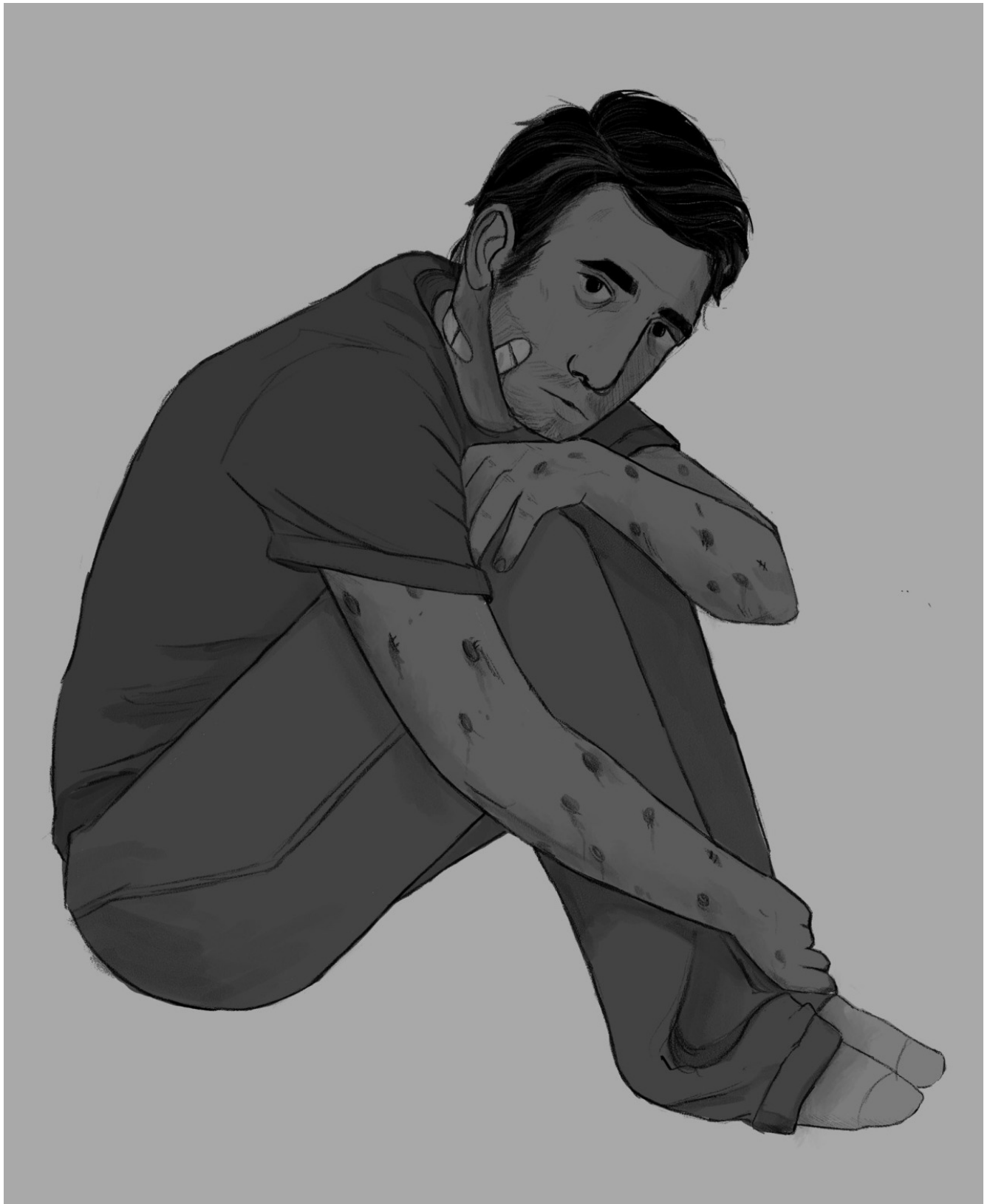
“You'll understand one day, Jon. Why I do all of this. Why I need you.”

“You need me?” Jon asked, quietly.

“I do,” Elias said, smiling like he was sharing a private joke with himself. “And you're growing so beautifully for me, Jon.”

It didn't make sense to him, but things rarely did these days. At the very least, Elias wasn't going to leave him. He didn't understand his motives, but Elias wasn't going to leave him. Elias wasn't going to hurt him.

Daddy wasn't going to hurt him.



Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for reading!

Torn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

And so it continued, for a while.

Jon had free rein of the house most days while Elias oversaw repairs to the institute. He spent much of the first few weeks in an opiate-induced haze, though Elias had begun weaning him off, much to his relief. He hated the way the drugs made him feel; limbs heavy, his thoughts muddled and sluggish.

He was doing better now—wasn't spending most of the day sleeping or watching TV, but the routine left him restless now that he had energy to spare. He'd wake up early in the morning, shower, and meet Elias before he left. Make breakfast for himself and coffee for Elias, tell him goodbye, and then find himself in an empty house for the next eight to ten hours.

It was frustrating, and Jon felt himself grappling with boredom and a gnawing sense of purposelessness. He needed to investigate Gertrude's murder, that was part of it. The thought played in the back of his mind on a constant loop, but without access to the institute's resources or at least his laptop, all he could do was speculate.

The deeper problem was that Jon didn't know what to do with himself when he wasn't working. Work had always been the center of his life. He had no hobbies, no real friends, no *purpose*, and he had never felt that more acutely than at this moment.

There was nothing worse than being left alone with his thoughts.

The house, as nice as it was, offered little in the way of distraction. There were chores to do, sure—he started doing his and Elias's laundry as soon as he felt physically well enough to do so. He cooked his own food, dusted and re-dusted all the shelves in the house, but those tasks took up a fraction of the day, and even after weeks of recovery, still left him tired and in pain.

Jon, frustrated and restless, had decided squarely that he was going to get into the locked cabinets in Elias's reading room. Even if he found nothing, it would at least give him something to focus on.

That was how Jon found himself on the floor for over an hour with a pile of broken paperclips, trying in vain to get the simple-looking lock to turn.

The internet made this look so much easier, Jon thought bitterly, hand cramping as he carefully felt for the pins in the lock with his makeshift tool. His other hand held a bent paperclip at the bottom of the keyway, keeping tension on the lock.

He was feeling around blindly, truthfully. A wave of frustration hit him and he jostled the pick around angrily, raking it in and out. Then he felt the paperclip start to turn suddenly, and the lock opened with a *click*.

Oh.

Jon took a moment to massage his hands, his heart racing. He hadn't been expecting that to actually work. If only he'd tried that an hour ago.

Jon got to work searching the cabinet. He wasn't expecting anything earth-shattering, but anything that might give him more insight into Elias's past could potentially be useful.

Thankfully, the locked cabinet was better organized than the ones he'd previously searched. He thumbed through the folders: insurance policies and medical records that he flipped through briefly; nothing of note there. At the back of the drawer was a section labeled "tax records." That could be interesting.

He pulled the file labeled "2015" and flipped through it, holding the folder just a little too tight. He was still on a low dose of painkillers, and reading numbers through the haze was difficult, but he pushed through it, trying his best to make sense of what he was looking at. It took him a few minutes to discern a clear picture.

From what he could tell, Elias owned a substantial amount of investments. Substantial was a bit of an understatement—the interest and dividends on those alone were enough for him to live comfortably, even without the salary he paid himself as head of the Institute.

Jon felt a sting of bitterness at that. He'd been scraping to get by when he was a researcher, barely paid enough to afford rent. Even though the promotion to Head Archivist had come with a substantial pay bump, it felt a bit different when he realized that amount was essentially a rounding error to his boss. He knew what his assistants made, too, and he was surprised they could even afford to live in London.

Where had Elias gotten this much wealth to begin with? The Institute was funded by private donors; it wasn't exactly a money-making institution. Even if Elias had invested every penny from his first few years in his position, Jon still couldn't see how it had added up to this much. Inherited wealth, then? The records didn't go back far enough to tell.

He tried the other cabinets with renewed confidence. It took him a few tries, but raking the pick in and out of the lock proved to be effective, and it only took a few minutes to get the rest of them open. To his disappointment, though, there were no more tax records; nothing else that seemed important enough to look through in detail. Just more of the same: paperwork for the house, title for the car... and a copy of Elias's will and life insurance policy, which *was* interesting. He'd named the Magnus Institute as the sole beneficiary in both instances.

There was one other interesting thing in the last cabinet he checked, though it mostly just appealed to Jon's curiosity. It was a manila folder tucked into the back of the cabinet, "Elias Bouchard" written on the tab in neat handwriting. Inside were regular ID documents: a birth certificate, passport, diploma... nothing unusual. Jon was about to put it back when he noticed a small envelope tucked inside.

Inside were Polaroids that looked like they were from the late 80s. Mementos, likely taken during Elias's college days. Pictures of him grinning sheepishly, probably ambushed by someone with a camera at what might have been a house party. The idea of Elias going to college parties was amusing to Jon. It made him feel more... human, somehow. Everyone was young once, after all.

His face was younger, more carefree, his hair a dark chestnut brown instead of the salt-and-pepper it had become over the years.

Jon noticed his eyes, as well. They were a bright blue, standing out even through the blurriness of the film. He supposed they'd faded over the years like his hair, into the soft gray he was familiar with now.

Interesting, but not what he was looking for. He carefully put the photos back in the envelope and spent another hour going over everything a second time, flipping through the tax documents several times to see if he'd missed anything. Nothing.

He checked the time—Elias would be home soon, he needed to wrap this up. He double-checked that all the files were in their proper places, cleaned up the discarded paperclips on the ground, and gave the room a once-over to make sure nothing was out of place.

All of this made him uneasy. He wasn't sure what he *wanted* to find, exactly, but it just left him with more questions than answers.

He needed his laptop. At the very least, if he had his laptop, he could start digging into the rest of his suspects, maybe investigate the source of Elias's wealth. Maybe he had some sort of money laundering scheme that Gertrude was going to expose—no, that was ridiculous.

Jon knew that the true answer would never be so mundane. But he had to check every possibility.

Jon sat in Elias's dark red armchair and chewed his lip. He needed to meet up with Martin, then. Martin had texted him several times in the past few days, asking how he was doing, if he wanted to meet up for lunch, etc. Jon had either made excuses or ignored him each time.

He supposed it was time to get it over with. He was finally feeling well enough to manage the trip, and it would be a good opportunity to get some information as well. He could find out what Tim and Sasha had been up to, if Martin had heard from them.

Jon hadn't. That wasn't unusual, his assistants didn't socialize with Jon outside of work. Martin was just...weird.

Jon tapped the side of his phone anxiously. He chewed his lip and opened his messages with Martin.

JON: Sorry I haven't responded. Are you free tomorrow for lunch?

Martin's reply came almost immediately.

MARTIN: yeah! Is our usual spot okay? what time?

He meant the cafe near the Institute, the one where Martin had ordered the ridiculous stack of french toast months ago. He and Martin had gone back a few times while they were living at the Institute.

He wasn't sure how he felt about having a "usual spot" with Martin.

JON: Yes, that's fine. Is 1:00 alright?

MARTIN: yeah of course, see you then!

He watched the dots as Martin typed and deleted several times. Another text didn't come.

Elias returned home shortly after, and they settled into their nightly routine. Elias showered while Jon ate dinner—Elias tended to eat his meals while he was out—and they met each other in the living room, Jon waiting patiently for him. The living room now filled the role that Elias's office once had: this was where they spent their evenings together.

These were the moments Jon looked forward to, despite everything. Whenever he heard Elias's key in the front door, he felt himself retreat into that smaller headspace like clockwork.

He'd long since stopped trying to fight it. Instead he focused on compartmentalizing his feelings, shoving them aside to deal with later. He knew it was an unsustainable solution, but it was all he could manage for the time being.

In the first few weeks, when Jon was still largely incapacitated, their evenings generally consisted of Elias feeding him and reading aloud until Jon dozed off. Elias would carry him to bed and tuck him in with his lamb and a kiss on the forehead.

Now that Jon was recovering, he could do a bit more. He didn't need a lot from Elias and was mostly content to amuse himself while Elias sat on the couch and worked, read a book, or simply watched him.

Tonight, Jon was coloring, sitting on the floor with his elbows propped up on the coffee table. He didn't have all of his drawing supplies here, but Elias had given him some coloring books and crayons. Filling in the shapes was soothing, less difficult than staring at a blank sheet of paper when he felt like this.

(He sometimes pulled these out during the day, even when he wasn't feeling small. It was a way to occupy himself when his thoughts felt overwhelming—if his hands were occupied with crayons, they weren't picking at his wounds. Most of the time.)

Right now, Jon was methodically filling the outline of a cat's tail with Dandelion Yellow and Burnt Orange. His lamb was in his lap and he could feel the brush of Elias's leg against his side, a comforting reminder of his presence.

He couldn't stop his mind from wandering, however, going back to the files in the room upstairs. He felt the uncomfortable sensation of being pulled in two directions; his adult mind screaming at him that something was wrong, he shouldn't trust this man, but he didn't want to think about that right now. He just wanted to color the stupid cat—

He felt Elias reach over and stroke his hair. He put the crayon to his mouth, nervous.

"How are you feeling, dear?"

"I'm alright," Jon said, not taking his gaze away from the coloring sheet in front of him. He didn't know what color to make the cat's eyes.

"Do you want to play with your stuffed animals? I have a new friend for you to meet."

That caught Jon's attention. Elias occasionally brought him gifts when he came home. The coloring books had been one of them—it was typically a small toy or a piece of candy he knew Jon enjoyed.

Lately, it had been stuffed animals: Beanie Babies, specifically. Elias must have found a lot of them at a secondhand shop. They were clearly old, slightly worn with the tags ripped off long ago, but

that just made Jon love them even more.

"Uh-huh," Jon said, looking at Elias with wide eyes.

Elias smiled at him, and Jon quickly averted his gaze. He wasn't great at eye contact to begin with, but it felt especially difficult with Elias.

Elias reached into his bag lying next to the couch and pulled out a little plush dog; light brown with floppy, dark brown ears and big, expressive eyes. Jon accepted it from him eagerly, and held it close to his chest, then to his face—it smelled like Elias's detergent. Elias always washed them before giving them to Jon.

It smelled like comfort.

"Why don't you go get the others and introduce him?" Elias suggested.

Jon nodded. He picked up his lamb and ran upstairs to his bedroom with both of them in his arms. His Beanie Babies were in a pile on his nightstand—he liked to have them nearby when he slept.

"Pile" was a bit of an overstatement, really. He had three, well, *four* now. All of them gifts from Elias. A cat, a frog, a pig, and now a little puppy.

They were all ones he'd had as a kid, as well. That in itself wasn't unusual—it was the nineties—but these, specifically, had been some of his favorites growing up. His grandmother had given them all to charity when Jon moved out; it was a miracle his lamb had managed to avoid that fate as well.

He'd never told Elias that. Daddy was just very good at finding things that appealed to Jon.

He picked them up, held all of them in his arms and squeezed, drawing them to his chest. He loved them so much. He'd always loved stuffed animals. They were his friends when no one else was.

He was glad Elias gave him old stuffed animals. The ones that needed a home and someone to love them. He couldn't stand the thought of them abandoned on charity shop shelves, thrown out after years of gathering dust.

He went back downstairs—walking a bit more carefully now, his leg was starting to act up—and put them proudly in Elias's lap. He held onto his lamb, though. He was still touchy about anyone else holding her, even Daddy.

He chewed on his thumb and watched Elias pick up the little puppy and give him a little kiss on the nose. Jon grinned.

"Did I do well?" Elias asked, handing the plush back to him.

"Yes! Thank you, he—oh no," Jon's voice sank, his heart dropping in his chest. He didn't notice until now, but the seam on one of the ears was ripped, and there was a small hole where it connected to the head. Tiny, really—it wasn't something most people would have noticed.

"I hurt him," Jon muttered, distress creeping into his voice.

"Oh, sweetheart," Elias said, softly. "Show me?"

Jon held out the dog to him, pointing out the area where the seam had ripped.

Elias took the dog and inspected it closer, pulling the ear slightly to see the small hole.

"Oh, I see," Elias said, handing the toy back to Jon. "You didn't hurt him. I must not have seen it when I gave it to you. I'm very sorry."

"I did hurt him!" Jon argued, agitated. His puppy growing up had a tear in the same spot, that was how he'd known to look there in the first place. It must have been something Jon had done, must have torn it open while he was running upstairs, handled his toys too roughly like his grandmother had said when he came to her crying about it. She hadn't bothered with it, and Jon didn't know how to fix it at that age.

"The thread is coming out and his ear is gonna fall off and then he won't be able to hear and he'll be ruined—"

"Jon," Elias interjected, a hint of annoyance just barely creeping in at the edge of his voice—that stung. "I have a needle and thread upstairs—would you like me to fix it for you?"

"Uh-huh," Jon said, quietly.

"What do we say, Jon?"

"Can you fix it please, Daddy?"

Elias carefully set the stuffed animals on his lap on the coffee table, then stood up, stretching a bit. He kissed Jon on the cheek.

"I'll be right back."

Elias disappeared upstairs and Jon waited anxiously for him, shifting from foot to foot. It didn't take long, and Elias was back a few moments later with a small sewing kit.

Jon watched him settle back onto the couch and open the little wooden box, pulling out a needle and carefully threading it. Jon handed him the stuffed dog, eyes fixed intently on Elias's hands as he moved the needle with gentle but confident precision.

He was finished in less than a minute, tying off the thread and trimming it with a small pair of scissors. He put his tools back in the sewing kit and handed the stuffed animal back to Jon.

Jon inspected the ear. The repair was invisible, he truly couldn't tell there had ever been anything wrong. He hugged his puppy to his chest.

"Thank you," he said, quietly. He gave Elias a hug. Elias held him, rubbing his back and giving him another kiss on the side of the head. Jon squeezed him tightly.

"Do you want to come cuddle with Daddy?" Elias asked, voice soft and inviting.

Jon nodded eagerly. Elias shifted so that he was lying lengthwise on the couch, his legs resting on the cushions. Jon didn't hesitate, crawling onto the couch and positioning himself on top of him. Elias made a pained sound as Jon's elbow accidentally jabbed him in the stomach.

"Sorry," Jon muttered, and shifted so that his head was on his chest, legs tangled with Elias's. He held his lamb and his puppy in the crook of his elbow.

Elias put one hand on Jon's back, protective and soothing, and gently stroked Jon's hair with the other. The hard lines in his face softened as Elias leaned his head back against a pillow.

Jon had a complicated relationship with physical touch. Sometimes, like now, it was soothing. Sometimes he flinched away at the slightest brush of skin, even from Elias, even when he felt small like this. But Elias had gotten very good at telling when Jon craved or avoided touch, almost able to sense it before Jon himself was even aware of what he wanted.

Elias seemed to enjoy it, too. Jon thought maybe that was part of what Elias got out of this; the simple comfort of physical affection. When was the last time someone hugged Elias that wasn't Jon? Daddies needed hugs, too.

Jon snuggled his head closer to Elias's chest and let himself relax. He felt Daddy's chest rise and fall with each breath, felt the steady thump of his heartbeat, inhaled the faint scent of his detergent, and felt calmer than he had in days.

This was where he belonged.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys I finished grad school lol

(If you're still reading this after two years, I love you. I currently have this planned out to 39 chapters + epilogue but it could end up longer or shorter. For the first time since starting this fic I have a concrete plan + outline for how I want it to end, so I feel more confident about finishing it.

The [Discord server](#) is still alive and I post art on my [Tumblr](#) as well.

Thanks so much for sticking with this fic. ♡)

Snap

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunbeams crept through the window above the bed, slowly waking Jon. His lamb was in his arms and his stuffed animals were arranged neatly on the nightstand beside him. Elias must have carried him to bed last night after he fell asleep on him, Jon thought, the memory warm in his chest.

Jon rolled onto his side and squeezed his lamb a little tighter.

He didn't feel embarrassed about this anymore. Not in this house, at least. There was still the deep fear of other people finding out, but alone with Elias, it felt... natural. Elias never acted like it was unusual, and Jon didn't wake up each morning with a sense of crushing self loathing and shame.

Instead, he just felt guilty.

He stared at the little stuffed dog on the nightstand. Elias really had done a good job repairing it; there was no trace of the original damage. The dog stared back at him with beady, sad-looking eyes.

Elias was so kind to him, and for what? How was Jon repaying him for all of this? By going behind his back to "investigate" him? By digging into his past and rifling through locked cabinets in the house Elias was letting him stay in?

This wasn't about Elias, Jon reminded himself. He needed to investigate all of his colleagues, and this was a necessary step. With any luck, he'd be able to eliminate Elias as a suspect as quickly as possible.

Elias would understand. The killer would be caught, then Jon could finally relax and rid himself of this uncertainty that lingered in the back of his mind.

On the other hand, if Elias *did* kill Gertrude...

Jon wasn't sure what he would do. But he at least needed to find out why.

He set his lamb on the nightstand and rolled out of bed. Meeting up with Martin today and getting his laptop back would be a crucial first step.

Not that he was looking forward to it.

Jon went through the motions of his morning routine, his thoughts elsewhere. Martin was... fine. He wasn't a great employee, but living at the Institute with him for months had forced Jon to tolerate him a bit more. He still wouldn't call him a *friend*, nor was he entirely free of Jon's suspicions, either.

It was hard to imagine *Martin* of all people murdering someone in cold blood. Then again, assumptions like that could get him killed.

Jon undressed and entered the shower, adjusting the handle and waiting for the water to warm before stepping under the spray.

He remembered his first time in this shower, almost a month ago; the way the water had felt like acid on his open wounds. The memory of sitting on the shower floor, dizzy with pain, barely a thought in his mind except that he needed to *leave*—needed to get away from this place, away from Elias.

Now, Jon let the water cascade over him, enjoying the comforting warmth. He was glad he stayed, despite everything. He'd been foolish to try to leave that night. He had been nowhere near ready at the time, physically or mentally.

Still wasn't, probably, Jon thought.

It wasn't Martin that made him anxious about today's outing. Nor his health, really. He felt well enough to handle the trip.

What he was really afraid of was going out in public.

Jon looked down at his body and traced the water that ran in rivulets down his gaunt frame, catching and forking at twisted lumps of scar tissue. Despite Elias's fastidious care those first few weeks, his wounds had healed into ugly, raised welts that marred almost every inch of him. Some had formed thick keloids encircling the original injury. It made him sick to look at.

He could cover most of it with long sleeves and pants, but the horrible things continued onto his hands, his neck, even a few dotted across his face.

People will stare.

A few months ago he wouldn't have cared, even with the scars. Before he started this job, he never cared if anyone was looking at him. He was never really aware of it. The fear of being watched was new for him, and the idea of *standing out* was so viscerally upsetting that it made his stomach turn.

What if people looked at him and... *knew*, somehow? Knew about his secret, about his relationship with Elias. Knew that he was a twenty-nine-year-old man-child that carried around a stuffed toy everywhere. Knew that he woke up screaming in the middle of the night from horrible visions of spiders, of worms, of *eyes*, watching him, **knowing** him?

No, that wasn't rational. No one could look at him and know that—or anything else—about him. Jon knew that.

He took a deep breath, trying to get ahead of the anxiety attack he could feel rising in his chest.

He couldn't stay here forever. It wasn't good for him.

He turned off the water and watched it swirl down the drain.

Jon toweled off and got dressed, sorting through clothes he hadn't worn in weeks. Elias had bought new clothes for him to wear while he was recovering, and he now had plenty of comfortable t-shirts and sweats, but he needed something he could go outside in. He was Martin's boss, after all. He needed to look at least somewhat professional.

Several outfits later, Jon was getting agitated.

Nothing fit him anymore.

He knew he hadn't been eating enough; the painkillers made him horribly nauseous. He hadn't realized how bad it had gotten, though.

His clothes were too big now. The dress shirts and slacks he used to wear every day felt too loose and too restrictive at the same time, bunching and draping in ways he wasn't used to. It upset him in a way he wasn't expecting, this small sense of normality being taken from him.

He forced himself to look in the mirror—really look—for the first time in weeks. There was a full-length mirror in the bedroom that Jon avoided at all costs. He had even tried to take it down at one point, but it was too heavy and too sturdily mounted to the wall. Jon stood in front of it now.

He looked awful. His oversized clothes hung limply off his frame. His eyes and cheeks were sunken, and his skin had lost a fair amount of color from being inside for weeks. His hair was unkempt, too long for the style he normally kept, but too short to get it to lie flat. It stuck up at odd angles, infuriating him.

Worst of all were the scars. Thick masses of scar tissue covered nearly every inch of him, stretched and deformed, like they were crawling across his skin, ready to devour him once again.

He was repulsive.

Jon trudged down the stairs, passed through the living room, and walked into the kitchen without a word. Elias was drinking coffee at the table.

There wasn't any spoken arrangement between them, and Jon never set any kind of alarm for himself, but he still felt *late*. He normally made coffee for Elias in the morning, but had delayed for several minutes upstairs in front of the mirror. He'd tried to make himself look presentable, but there was no salvaging his appearance and it only left him in a bad mood.

"Good morning, Jon."

"Good morning," Jon sighed, tugging and adjusting his shirt. It still didn't feel right.

"You look nice," Elias said, taking a sip of coffee.

Jon glared at him before he could stop himself. Elias raised an eyebrow.

"Is everything alright?" Elias asked. He watched Jon from the table, his eyes following Jon's movement. Jon felt his gaze like a physical weight pressing down on him.

Jon grunted vaguely and turned away from him, facing towards the pantry, half-heartedly looking for something to eat. Something easy to keep down—he still didn't have much of an appetite.

Talking to Elias was the last thing Jon wanted to do right now. He was in a terrible mood and knew that talking would just get him in trouble. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down.

"Use your words, Jon."

A burst of anger rushed through him, his hand frozen halfway to a box of cereal. He *hated* when Elias did that—talked to him like a little kid when he wasn't regressed. It was demeaning.

Jon abandoned the box of cereal and slammed the pantry shut.

"Stop talking to me like I'm a goddamn child," he hissed. "You know damn well I'm an adult right now."

"Perhaps you should act like it, then. Is slamming doors and sulking the way adults behave?"

Elias remained seated, unruffled by Jon's outburst. His calm demeanor only fueled Jon's irritation further, and Jon felt blood rush to his face as heat prickled at his neck and ears.

Jon held his tongue. He didn't trust himself to speak without saying something he'd regret.

"I've never had cause to discipline you, Jon," Elias said, a low tone of warning in his voice. "Don't make me change that."

Anger and indignation shot in Jon's chest and escaped as words before he could stop it.

"Piss off, Elias."

Elias rose to his feet abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the tile floor. Jon felt a jolt of fear stab through him, his defiance suddenly giving way to the wave of dread that seized him.

"Jon." Elias's voice was low and stern, but calm. "You know better than to speak to me that way."

Jon's legs felt weak and he could hear his own heartbeat in his ears. He opened his mouth to speak, but Elias cut him off.

"I don't want to hear your excuses," Elias said as he rounded the table towards Jon. "As you're so fond of reminding me, you're an adult. You should be able to control your temper appropriately."

Jon shrunk back, feeling like a cornered animal. "No, Elias, I..."

"Look at me when I'm speaking to you."

Jon's eyes snapped up at the command. He tried to hold Elias' gaze, but couldn't, the effort feeling almost physically painful. He looked away, staring at the buttons on Elias's shirt.

"I said *look at me*."

Jon forced himself to comply and felt his legs shaking underneath him. He couldn't do it, Elias's eyes were so intense, so intimidating. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Elias didn't press the issue any further.

"Now, you're going to go sit down in the living room until you've calmed down. Understood?"

Jon nodded, unable to speak.

"Good. Once you're calm, I'll join you and we can discuss this further."

The wait was honestly worse than the initial confrontation.

Jon knew he had made a mistake. The worst part was, he wasn't even angry at Elias, not really—certainly not to the degree to warrant such a response. Elias was right; he was acting like a child. A

stupid, annoying, petulant child, lashing out at the one person that cared about him because he was in a bad mood.

He was such a goddamn idiot.

Jon put his head in his hands, knuckles white around the hair that he gripped.

Elias let him sit with his shame for a few more minutes before joining him. He sat on the ottoman and faced Jon.

"Jon."

Jon kept his head down, ashamed. The tone in Elias's voice made him want to sink through the floor.

"Look at me, Jon," Elias said—softer, this time, gentler. Jon lifted his head enough to stare at the collar of Elias's shirt, which Elias seemed to accept as a compromise.

"You already know your behavior was unacceptable." There was no accusation or anger behind the words, it was a simple statement. "This kind of outburst is not what I expect from you, Jon. It's disappointing."

"I'm sorry," Jon whispered, throat feeling hoarse.

"I know you're struggling, and I have been more than patient with you while you recover. But my patience has limits. If you can't control yourself, there will be consequences. Do I make myself clear?"

"...yes."

"Speak up, Jon. I can't understand you when you mumble."

"Yes. Yes sir. I'm sorry."

Elias chuckled. Jon wasn't sure why.

"Good. I'm not angry at you, Jon, but we do have certain obligations towards each other. Communication is one of them."

Jon nodded.

"Now. Why were you acting out?"

Jon curled his hands into fists on his lap, watching the gnarled scars turn white with pressure. How could he even begin to explain what he was feeling? He couldn't explain to Elias his guilt about investigating him or the stress of Gertrude's murder.

"I was going to meet up with Martin today for lunch," Jon explained. "He's been bugging me about it and I figured—maybe it'd be good to get out of the house, see another face."

Why did even this feel like a confession? He was going to tell Elias before he left, things just... kind of spiraled.

He didn't need Elias's permission, anyway. He was an adult.

He was.

"So I started getting dressed, put on some clothes I hadn't worn in a while, and... I look... bad." Jon stared at his lap, at his slacks. They were identical to the ones he was wearing on the day of the attack, but he'd had to shift his belt buckle up two notches.

"I've lost weight, my hair is too long, and the scars... I'm not typically self-conscious about my appearance. It's not something I even think about, normally. But I'm worried people will stare."

Elias didn't say anything, so Jon continued.

"When you told me I looked nice, I just—I don't know. It felt like you were making fun of me, or—something like that."

It sounded so dumb when he said it out loud.

"Have I ever made fun of you before, Jon?"

"...No."

"Do you see me as the sort of person who would comment on your appearance sarcastically?"

Jon stared at his lap.

"...I'm sorry."

Elias put a hand on Jon's knee.

"I understand your apprehension about going outside. But I'll remind you one more time that lashing out will get you nowhere, and in the future, I expect you to communicate with me appropriately. Don't make me have this discussion with you again."

Jon felt sweat on the back of his neck and nodded, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

"I'm sorry."

"I know. You're forgiven."

Jon didn't deserve his forgiveness, but he would accept it, nonetheless.

"Now," Elias said, taking his hand off of Jon's knee and sitting up a little straighter. "Where were you planning on meeting up with Martin?"

"Just that place right across the street—Café Society, I think it's called. Why?"

"I'm driving into London anyway, I thought you might like me to drop you off."

Elias had a point. Jon was planning on taking the bus and transferring at the station, but going with Elias would be a bit faster, not to mention more pleasant.

He just really didn't want Martin to see Elias drop him off.

"I'm only seeing him for an hour at most. I don't know if I want to be there all day."

"Driving will be faster from here. You can, of course. keep me company in my office until we go home, or you could take the tube home."

Jon considered it. "How about the other way around? It's still early, I'm not meeting Martin until 1:00. I'll meet you at the Institute and we'll ride home together."

"That sounds reasonable. And you're right, it'll be good to get you out of the house." Elias sighed. "I'm sorry I've kept you cooped up in here."

"That's not your fault. I've been..." Jon trailed off, balling his hands into fists in his lap.

"Well, as I said before, we have certain obligations towards each other. While you're here, your health is my responsibility—both physically and mentally."

"Well, I—" Jon hesitated, voice catching in his throat. "Thank you, Elias. I don't think I deserve—"

"Nonsense. We've been over this, Jon. I enjoy having you here, as long as you want to stay."

Jon's eyes dropped to his hands, fingers tracing the ridges of his scars almost unconsciously. He felt Elias's gaze on him like a physical weight.

"...I really am sorry for snapping at you, Elias. I don't know why, I just—"

"We're past it, Jon." Elias's tone left no room for argument. "Just keep an eye on your temper."

Jon nodded. "I will."

Elias patted him on the knee.

"I need to head out, then. Are you sure you don't want to ride with me?"

"I'm sure. Thank you, though."

Silence for a moment, as Elias stood up. He took a step closer to Jon and leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to the top of Jon's head. Jon leaned into it almost instinctively, closing his eyes.

"Be good for me, Jon."

"I will."

Chapter End Notes

very touched by the comments last chapter and very happy that everyone is still excited to read this, thank you so much!

Cafe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Martin wiped sweat off his forehead.

It was an unusually hot day for London, he thought. He leaned onto the railing and watched sunlight sparkle off the brown water of the Thames.

The café was tucked away between a condominium complex and the river, and up until the water's edge was nothing but concrete. There was no shade, except near the tables, and Martin didn't want to be told off for loitering. So, he stood here instead, running his tongue over the back of his teeth as he waited for Jon, drumming his fingers on the railing.

He was nervous. Jon made him nervous, a lot. Sometimes in a good way! A rare smile from Jon, or even rarer, a compliment, would leave him flustered. Even just thanking him for tea, one of the few things Jon seemed to truly value him for. It was pathetic, honestly. He was far past the age he should be having *workplace crushes*.

Especially in light of everything that had just happened. Especially for *Jon*.

Martin wasn't naive. He knew that Jon had disliked him when they started working together, and he couldn't blame him for that. Martin was clumsy and unskilled, a high-school dropout that had managed to lie his way into a position he was vastly underqualified for. He would've disliked himself, too.

Something had changed over the months they spent at the Institute together, though. It wasn't entirely wishful thinking; Jon had softened towards him, at least a little bit. There were a few times Jon had been downright sweet to him: bringing him blankets after his first night in the Archives, paying for his lunch that same day. The night they'd watched Star Trek together in the storage room was, embarrassingly, one of Martin's favorite memories, and he re-visited it often.

He wanted more memories like that with Jon.

They formed a bit of a tenuous friendship after that point, though only outside of the context of work. Jon couldn't be his friend and his boss at the same time, Martin understood that. When he could drag him away from his desk long enough to go eat together, though, it was different. He was more relaxed outside of the Institute, more... personable. Martin had even made him laugh a few times, something he was secretly very proud of. It was nice.

Their relationship had deteriorated a little bit as the months dragged on, however. The stress of the infestation and living at work was getting to both of them. Jon snapped at him more and more, and Martin found himself responding in turn more than a few times. They went out together less and less often, and Martin watched him work himself to death in his office for, ultimately, nothing.

He wondered where that left them, then. How would Jon react to him? Did those months mean anything, or would they be back to their strained boss-and-employee relationship?

Martin was worried about him. Not just about their friendship, if he could call it that, but about Jon himself. Their handful of text exchanges since the attack hadn't given Martin much insight into his wellbeing.

He was always worried, nowadays. It was exhausting, and it was difficult to tell what was justified and what wasn't. He knew his fears weren't always rational, but what if they were? Elias had him nearly questioning his sanity, dismissing the worm situation, and look what had happened. He wasn't crazy.

At the same time, he still slept with a corkscrew. Even though he knew Prentiss was dead, even though he'd watched her body burn.

It wasn't just Prentiss. Anxiety permeated every minute of his day. He worried about himself, about his safety. He worried about Jon. He worried about his mom. He worried about Tim and Sasha. He worried, often, that they resented him, that they were ignoring his texts because they hated him.

He worried that he was being watched. He kept all the curtains closed in his apartment, unplugged all his electronics and kept his phone in airplane mode whenever he wasn't using it, terrified that someone was watching him, waiting for him to drop his guard so they could... do what, exactly? He didn't know. That just made it worse.

Was that justified?

He didn't like being unable to trust his own judgment. He was so caught up in his spiraling thoughts that he didn't notice the approaching footsteps behind him.

"Martin?"

The familiar voice startled Martin out of his thoughts and he spun around, heart leaping to his throat for a moment as he saw Jon in front of him for the first time in weeks.

He looked rough. There were thick, circular scars dotting up his neck and jawline. He looked tired, eyes sunken, and his hair was overgrown and sticking up—though Martin thought it was adorable, honestly.

"Jon!" He took a step forward, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice. "You're here."

"Sorry I'm late," Jon said, shuffling awkwardly, avoiding his eyes.

"No, no, it's fine. I'm just—it's good to see you! R-really," Martin said, rubbing the back of his neck. Had he come on too strongly, reacted too eagerly?

Jon nodded. "Good to see you too, Martin," he said, and even through the exhaustion, it sounded genuine.

Unexpected relief washed over him. Jon was here, he was alive and seemed to be okay, and their fledgling friendship hadn't been ruined after all. Martin nearly hugged him, arms moving automatically, but thought better of it at the last second, transferring the motion into smoothing out his shirt with a nervous laugh.

"Well, I've got your bag right here. I, um, I grabbed some other stuff off your desk in case you needed it, I saw two different chargers, I wasn't sure which one you needed so I grabbed both, put

the tape recorder in there too, and, um—"

"—*Martin*. "

"S-sorry," Martin stammered, feeling heat rising in his cheeks.

"It's—it's okay. I appreciate you getting it for me but, well. Let's get out of the heat, shall we?"

"Good idea."

They ordered at the counter—Martin insisted on paying this time, pulling his card out faster than Jon could—and sat down at their usual spot, a bit further away from the other tables but comfortably in the shade. Jon was silent for a while, staring out at the Thames and idly scratching the scars on his arms.

They sat in awkward silence for a bit, unsure of what to say.

"Are you alright?" Martin asked, after a long moment.

Jon glanced at him. "I'm okay. I—I haven't been outside in a while, truthfully," he said, sounding guilty. "I'm sorry I kept putting you off."

"No, no, it's fine! I really didn't mean to push you, I'm sorry. Has it been... rough?"

"I'm doing better now. The first few weeks I could hardly function, and I just..." Jon shook his head. "I'm just restless, now. I've never been good at dealing with boredom."

"Yeah, I think I understand. I spent about a week moving into my new flat, and ever since it's just been... I don't know what to do with myself, y'know?"

"Definitely," Jon said, then took a sip of water, gripping the glass a little bit too tight. "Doesn't help being so far out from London," there was sharp annoyance in his voice, a tone Martin was all too familiar with. "I was on the Victoria line for over an hour, not counting the *bus*."

Martin stared at him blankly.

"...I thought your flat was in Islington?"

Jon blinked, and Martin saw the realization come over him that he'd said too much.

"Oh. Um." Jon's eyes flicked towards the table. "I haven't been staying... at my flat."

Martin's heart sank. Of course he hadn't.

"...You're still staying at Elias's house, then?"

"Yeah." Jon nodded. "It's just, I—I don't have any family in the area, or anyone who could help me while I recovered, so—he—he offered to let me stay. As a courtesy"

Jon picked at the flaking paint on the table, still avoiding Martin's eyes.

“That’s nice,” Martin said, flatly. He hoped he didn’t sound too bitter. *Get it together, Martin, he doesn’t owe you anything. He doesn’t even like you.*

He’d been suspecting this ever since he started living at the Institute. He saw the way Jon acted around Elias; saw him leave in the direction of his office every evening. Martin was there long enough to realize that Elias was effectively living at the Institute as well, though he doubted it was because Elias feared for his safety.

Martin took a sip of water, waiting to see if Jon would say anything. He knew should let the subject drop, but he couldn’t. He needed to hear it from Jon, even if he already knew the answer.

Martin set his water down and cleared his throat.

“So are you two, um...”

Jon stared at him, not understanding. “Are we what?”

Martin sighed. “...you know.”

“...No, I don’t.”

Martin sighed and leaned back. Jon was one of the smartest people he knew when it came to anything that didn’t involve *himself*, but he was about as socially aware as a brick sometimes.

“Are you dating Elias?”

Jon blinked, absorbing the question, then all the blood in his body moved to his face at once.

“*No!*” He looked genuinely offended at the question, scowling. “He’s my *boss*, for one thing, and twenty years older than me—what on *earth* made you think—”

“I wasn’t judging!” Martin interjected, raising his hands in surrender. “I mean, I’d get it! He’s handsome, plenty of people have a thing for older men, y’know, uh...”

Martin’s face matched Jon’s now and they avoided each other’s eyes. Martin rubbed the back of his neck.

He honestly wasn’t expecting that answer. Well, Jon *denying* it wasn’t entirely unexpected, but Jon was *very* bad at lying, and his response sounded genuine. But, if they weren’t dating, then what the hell—

Jon broke the silence.

“Did you really think we were—”

“I mean... yes? People don’t typically live with their boss platonically.”

A bit of bitterness slipped into his tone again and Martin mentally kicked himself. Jon didn’t seem to notice.

“We’re not—I swear, Martin, that’s not—that’s *not* what it is.”

“Okay, okay, I believe you. You two just... seem really close?”

Jon chewed his lip, looking like he was trying to find the right words.

“We are, but it’s not...” Jon stumbled for words for a moment and sighed.

“I... My father died when I was two, I don’t have any memory of him. My mother died a few years later, so my grandmother mostly raised me, and I never had any kind of... father figure growing up. So I guess it’s just—” Jon ran a hand through his hair, agitated. “Elias sort of—I don’t know. I know it sounds stupid, but—”

Martin’s eyes widened. “Oh, no. I—I’m so sorry, Jon, I shouldn’t have—”

Martin felt awful. His questions about the relationship aside, he felt awful for making Jon drag up what was clearly a sensitive topic.

“No, it’s okay. I, ah, I can see how it looks from the outside, so...”

They sipped their waters in silence for a bit, avoiding each other’s eyes.

The selfish part of him was relieved at Jon’s answer, but more than that, he felt bewildered. What did Elias being a “father figure” mean to Jon? What did that relationship look like? Elias was a lot of things, Martin had certainly never thought of him as “*fatherly*”.

Not that Martin had much of a basis for comparison, either.

“Um. In any case, is he treating you well?”

Jon bristled. “Yes, why?”

“Sorry, I just—I mean, you two *are* living together. The night after the attack you said you had an argument and you were angry at him, that worried me a bit. Elias can be a bit, uh... scary.”

“Oh, that’s— no, that was nothing. I think the painkillers made me a bit, uh,” Jon laughed nervously, “belligerent.”

“Mm. I’m glad.”

Jon drummed his fingers on the table and continued looking away from Martin.

Martin wished their food would come already, so they could talk about something else. This wasn’t how he wanted this meeting to go, at all.

It was Jon that eventually broke the silence.

“Well. Nevermind that. How have you been?”

“I’ve been...” Martin hesitated. “...good. Haven’t done much since I got settled, honestly. Read some books. Tried to learn how to crochet.” He really didn’t want to talk about himself.

“Have you heard from Tim or Sasha?”

“...Not really. I reached out a few times, but...” Martin made a vague, frustrated gesture., “Sasha seems fine, she has a new boyfriend, so she hasn’t wanted to hang out. Tim...I don’t know,

honestly. I brought him food a few times, offered to spend time with him, but he hasn't been very talkative. I hope he's doing alright."

Your life really is pathetic, isn't it? The familiar, biting voice in his head reminded him. It'd been louder the past few weeks. *Always trying to force your way in with people that don't want you around.* He pushed the thought aside. Wallowing in self-pity wouldn't help him.

Jon leaned in a bit. "Have either of them said anything about Gertrude?"

"What? No. Like I said, they're barely even talking to me at all, much less...about that."

Jon looked slightly disappointed.

"Well. Do you know when you'll be back to work? Elias told me the repairs are almost done, but I didn't ask when everyone would be back in."

Martin nodded. "He emailed me yesterday, actually, asking me to come back next Monday. Not sure if he sent the same message to Sasha, I assume so. Not sure about Tim, of course—I assume you guys are going to need more time to recover. No offense, but you still look...rough."

He'd seen Jon walking with a limp when they went to order at the counter. That was the leg he'd pulled the worm out of, wasn't it? He felt guilty. He hoped Jon was getting it treated properly.

Jon set his jaw. "I could manage."

"Yeah, but just because you *can* doesn't mean you *should*. You nearly worked yourself to the brink before we left, you don't have to jump back in so quickly."

Jon shook his head. "Like I said, boredom's not good for me. I need... I need to be at work. That will help more than anything."

Martin sighed. "...I think I understand. I haven't been—the time alone hasn't been good for me, either. Ever since Prentiss, being in my flat alone, even after moving is just..." He swallowed. "I don't like it. But at the same time, I'm not sure I want to go back, either, after everything that happened."

He felt like an idiot complaining. He wasn't the one that had been eaten alive by worms.

"I—I'm sorry, I know it's nothing compared to what you and Tim went through, I shouldn't be—"

"No. It's okay." Jon's voice was soft, softer than anyone had spoken to Martin in months. Especially from Jon—

Martin swallowed. He felt like crying, suddenly. He hadn't spoken to anyone about this, had hardly spoken to *anyone* in the past few weeks. Even his mom only sporadically answered his calls. And now, here he was, about to start crying in front of his *boss*. He was a mess.

Jon looked like he wanted to say something but was holding himself back, chewing his lip.

Martin downed the rest of his water in a single swig, trying to quell the tight feeling in his throat.

Jon was still staring at him awkwardly.

Martin sighed. “Just say it, whatever it is you’re thinking.”

“It’s not—It’s not important.”

“Jon.”

Jon bit his lip, hesitating for a moment.

“...Who do you think killed Gertrude?”

Not what Martin was expecting, but he was just glad it wasn’t a question about himself. He couldn’t pretend he hadn’t thought about it, but... he couldn’t exactly tell Jon his real opinion.

He crossed his arms and thought about it.

“I only met Gertrude a handful of times—I don’t know who would’ve had a reason to kill her. I don’t think she had any assistants, anyway. Maybe a disgruntled statement giver, someone with a grudge?”

“Mm.” Jon seemed unsatisfied with that answer.

“Well, what do you think?”

“It must be something in the tunnels, right? Who would even know they’re there, much less how to navigate them? You were down there with Tim and I, something is *off* about them, there’s something... more to them.”

“...Right.”

He could tell Jon was lying. He remembered the tape he found in Jon’s office after the attack, and it certainly didn’t sound like he thought the murder had any sort of supernatural explanation.

He also remembered the other voice on that recording. The one dragging Jon away, making him cry out in pain. *Some “father figure”.*

Their food came shortly afterwards, and they sat in silence for a bit. Then Martin teased Jon for always ordering the same thing—*ham and cheese on croissant, no tomato, light mayo, water with no ice, and a fruit cup*—and they argued about it jokingly. It was the kind of playful banter that Martin desperately missed. He was relieved they could still talk about things besides work.

“It’s a good sandwich,” Jon grumbled, and took another bite.

Martin watched him eat. He always ate slightly hunched over, like he was daring someone to take a bite off his plate, always scrunched his nose slightly when he took a bite, and oh, God—he was adorable.

Martin couldn’t stand it. He ate his sandwich, red up to his ears. It was a good thing Jon was so oblivious.

They lingered for a bit after finishing their food, neither wanting to leave but having nothing more to say, afraid the conversation would inevitably lead back to work.

Jon cleared his throat, shifting in his seat slightly.

“Well, thank you for lunch, Martin, I’m very sorry for putting you off for so long.”

“No, no, really. I, um. It was nice to see you, really. Do you want to walk back towards the station together?”

Jon nodded. They threw their trash away and walked back together towards the crosswalk, where they’d part ways. Martin felt like he was forgetting something—

“Oh!” Martin said, stopping in his tracks. Jon stopped as well, looking at him, curious.

“I um, I got something for you. I meant to mention it earlier but I—got distracted, didn’t want to bring it up while we were eating, either. It’s kind of... morbid.”

Jon raised an eyebrow.

“It’s, um. It’s right in your bag, there, I just put it in the outside pocket.”

Jon looked inside the pocket and pulled out a small mason jar. Martin watched him inspect it, nervous.

It took Jon a moment to realize what he was looking at, but when he did, his eyes widened slightly.

“Is this...?”

“Prentiss’s ashes. I got them from the ECDC people, Elias and I went with them to see Prentiss’s body burned while you and Tim were... yeah.”

He hoped it wasn’t too morbid, too weird. He’d thought Jon might appreciate it—he was the kind of person that appreciated something tangible, hard evidence to consider—even if he couldn’t prove these were Prentiss’s ashes, specifically. Maybe it would help. He’d kept it on his own nightstand for the past few weeks, and it’d helped quell his own anxiety, at least a little.

Jon turned it over in his hands for a few moments, silently. Martin got more nervous the longer he held it without saying anything, just watching the ashes shift and move as he turned it.

“...Thank you, Martin.”

His voice was soft, and Martin could hear the gratitude in his voice. He sounded genuinely touched. Relief filled Martin.

“Y-you’re welcome. I just thought you might—I don’t know. I knew you would have wanted to see her body burned if you could, so I thought, y’know, maybe the next best thing?”

Jon nodded. He put the jar back in the bag.

“It is. It means a lot to me, Martin, thank you.”

Martin’s heart skipped a beat and he couldn’t help himself. He leaned in and hugged Jon, squeezing him just a bit too tight.

“I-Oh!” Jon said, stiffening for a moment, but then relaxed into the embrace. He patted Martin’s back.

Martin came back to himself and let him go, flustered. “I-I’m sorry! I don’t know what I—just—sorry.”

Jon laughed, a real laugh, maybe more from surprise than anything else, but—it still made Martin’s heart flutter. He was mortified, but at least Jon didn’t seem to mind. In fact, there was a bit of light in Jon’s eyes that Martin hadn’t seen in months.

“It—It’s okay. Just, ask next time. I’ll see you around, alright?”

“Yeah, of course. See you, Jon,” Martin replied, his words coming out a bit breathier than he intended.

Martin gave him one last shy smile, and Jon headed off in the opposite direction, giving him a small wave.

Maybe things would be alright.

Chapter End Notes

(Sorry for the delay, I started this chapter two years ago and it was still fighting me. I have finally defeated it.)

Trepidation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

That was strange, Jon thought, flustered. He was walking towards the institute, his step full of nervous energy. He realized how fast he was walking and forced himself to slow down, bringing his stride to a normal pace.

He could still feel the warmth of Martin's hug lingering on his skin. Typically, Jon was loath to be touched, especially without warning, but... he hadn't hated that. Elias would hug him occasionally, but the hugs were always very chaste and fatherly—a firm hand on his back and a kiss on the side of his head. Martin's hug made him feel like he was being crushed, in a good way.

He ran a hand through his hair, embarrassed.

That wasn't how he'd meant for that meeting to go. He should have spent his time more productively, gotten more information about Tim and Sasha, tried to figure out if Martin was telling the truth or not. He stubbornly reminded himself that as harmless as Martin seemed, he *couldn't trust him, couldn't trust anyone, not right now*.

Infuriatingly, he could barely find it in himself to care about that right now. His mind clung to something else stubbornly.

“Are you dating Elias?”

Like they were *teenagers*.

Jon's face reddened and he felt himself walking faster again.

God, he was an idiot. He wanted to be angry with Martin for asking, but he knew that wasn't fair. He really hadn't been subtle, had he? He tried to wait until after-hours to go up to his office, but it was a moot point when neither he nor Martin ever left the Institute. Then, letting it slip that Jon was living at his house—*temporarily*, but, still.

It was a perfectly reasonable conclusion for Martin to come to, even if it was incorrect.

...was it, though?

He hadn't thought of it in those terms before, but Elias had quickly become the most important person in his life. Despite everything, despite Jon's suspicions, what they had clearly went beyond friendship—at what point did something like that become romantic?

They lived together, obviously, but it was a temporary arrangement. Elias took him on “dates”, they hugged and cuddled together—really only when Jon felt small, though, and Elias only ever kissed him on the cheek.

Elias still wouldn't share a bed with him, either. Their sleeping arrangement was something Jon had been hung up on ever since Elias had given him his own bed in his suite.

He understood why. He knew it would be crossing a line. Sharing a bed would blur the boundaries of...whatever it was between them. That distinction was abundantly clear to him when he felt like an adult. When he was small and scared, though, all he wanted was the comfort of having Elias near him while he slept.

He still had nightmares frequently, always felt like he was being watched when he slept. If Elias was near him, he could at least pretend it was him.

But sleeping in the same bed was something couples did, not fathers with their sons. Not bosses with their employees-slash-proxy-sons.

Jon realized he'd stopped in the middle of the walkway while he was lost in his thoughts. People were pushing past him—he needed to sit down. He walked towards the closest bench and sunk into it, overwhelmed.

Elias hadn't given any indication that he wanted their relationship to change—Jon had no idea if Elias even liked men. He was pretty sure he'd never been married, and he'd never mentioned any previous relationships.

He couldn't help wondering, though. Once this was over, if Elias was cleared of suspicion, if Jon could trust him...

If Elias asked him, would he say yes?

Say yes to what, exactly?

Jon was 28 and Elias was nearing 50. It's not like he'd be asking him to *prom*, so—ask him *what*? To marry him? To have sex with him? To move in with him permanently and live a domestic life like his brief experience with Georgie, before he fucked everything up? Go to fundraising events as Elias's plus-one, watch institute donors side-eye and gossip about him, about Elias's strange-looking, scarred fiancé?

Did he want that?

It wasn't the age difference that bothered him. Elias was handsome, Jon enjoyed his company, enjoyed talking to him and being around him, perhaps more than anyone else in his life. He was smart, he cared deeply about Jon, and Jon cared about him too, despite everything.

So why not? Who else was there in Jon's life? Why did the idea of this becoming something *more* feel so foreign to him?

...because I know nothing about him.

The answer came to him unbidden. Jon stared at his shoes.

Elias never spoke about himself, or his personal life, on anything more than a superficial level. Jon knew very little about his life before the institute. Most of what he knew came from Elias's filing cabinets. Whenever Jon asked about life outside of work, Elias would answer vaguely or brush it off, always managing to steer the conversation back to Jon.

Jon didn't even know why Elias had been drawn to the supernatural in the first place. He hadn't wanted to ask, aware the answer could be rooted in something traumatic, the same way it had for

himself, but—the fact that Elias had never so much alluded to it disturbed him. What had drawn him towards this path?

Elias seemed to know everything about him. He knew everything Jon wanted, everything he needed.

What did Elias want? What did Elias need?

He didn't know.

It was the heat that eventually forced Jon from the park bench, wiping sweat off his brow. He had too much on his mind; he felt mentally and physically exhausted. He didn't want to think about this any more, didn't want to think about Martin or Elias or the Institute or *anything*. He wanted to go home and crawl into bed, watch something dumb and mindless on his phone to distract himself.

He was so sick of thinking.

Going back home would mean repeating the tube ride out of London, though, and he wanted to avoid that at all costs. He'd already agreed to go home with Elias; maybe he could take a nap in his office for a few hours.

That thought was his only comfort as he approached the entrance of the institute, his stomach twisting. He pushed open the heavy, wooden door, a motion he'd done hundreds of times before, and stepped inside for the first time in weeks.

Everything looked normal. No worms or men in hazmat suits, just the same entryway he'd walked through almost daily for almost five years. There was Rosie's desk by reception, though it looked like she was on lunch.

There were two women Jon vaguely recognized—from HR, maybe—talking quietly off the side, holding coffee. One of them gave Jon a polite wave in acknowledgement. Jon gave a stilted wave back and walked past them, embarrassed.

Everyone on the first and second floor—the vast majority of the Institute—had been back to work within a week of the incident. It was just the basement that was off-limits, a single ribbon of bright yellow CAUTION tape strung blocking off the stairs that led to the archives. He stepped over it and made his way down the stairs, trying to ignore the impending sense of wrongness that grew heavier with every step.

The lights were on in the Archives already, the borderline-oppressive fluorescent glow already making Jon's head hurt. He'd forgotten how much he hated the lighting down here.

He walked cautiously down the hallway, hyper-aware of every sound and movement. It was silent aside from the faint hum of the air conditioning and the near-silent padding of Jon's footsteps.

Things looked mostly as he remembered them. All the... organic debris had been cleaned up, and there were only a few signs of ongoing repair: tool bags and buckets of plaster next to the damaged sections of wall, cardboard floor protection covered in white dust. It looked like the repair crew had just finished patching up the drywall and were waiting for it to dry.

He inspected the trap door first.

It was tucked away in a disused corner of the Archives, blended into the floor, unassuming. Someone had marked it with hazard tape, thankfully. It was so well-concealed that Jon wasn't sure he'd be able to find it, otherwise.

He expected to feel something more, standing over the spot where he'd been eaten alive by worms. Crawling, digging into his flesh, into his mouth, hearing Tim scream in agony, feeling the seconds slow down to a crawl, the only thought in his mind wondering when he would die, *if* he would die, desperately hoping he would, quickly, just to make it *stop*.

He felt numb. His heart still hammered in his chest, but emotionally he felt nothing, static in his head, mind and body disconnected.

He kneeled down.

It took him a few minutes to find the concealed handle and lift it, exposing the lock. He gave the handle a tug, but it didn't budge.

The lock was sure to be much higher security than the flimsy cabinet locks in Elias's home. He doubted he'd be able to pick it. The lock was integrated in such a way that he wouldn't be able to cut or saw it off, either.

He put the handle back with shaking hands and stood up, frustrated. He'd check his office next, then.

The previously-collapsed wall in his office was bare, the newly installed patch of drywall still wet around the edges and unpainted. The contents of the shelves sat hastily-packed into cardboard boxes in the middle of the room. The furniture had been shifted around slightly, presumably while they were cleaning up the debris, and it bothered him far more than it should have.

Jon stepped over the boxes and sat at his desk.

Something was wrong.

He'd felt it from the moment he stepped through the front doors of the Institute and it had gotten stronger when he entered the Archives, something here was *off* and it deeply unsettled him.

He had expected... some sort of reaction, of course, to coming back here for the first time in months. Trepidation, anxiety, that was expected. He was also familiar with the ever-present feeling of being watched down here, still felt it now. That wasn't it, though.

Something here felt deeply, horribly **wrong** in a way he hadn't felt before, he was sure of it.

He swallowed.

Was he sure? Wasn't it more likely he was working himself up over nothing? There was nothing different about the Archives, aside from the repairs in progress. Once he got back to work properly, the feeling would fade, wouldn't it?

He stood back up, knees feeling weak. He didn't want to spend any more time down here—he'd go see Elias. Maybe being in his office would calm him down.

It was still a place he associated with safety, despite everything.

He opened the door to his office and almost ran face-first into Sasha.

“Jon! What are you doing here?”

“Sasha—! what are *you*—I—” Jon cleared his throat, trying to collect himself. “Sorry about that, I just. I—I’m just picking up something I left. Um. What are you doing here? Martin said you guys wouldn’t be back until next Monday.”

Sasha put the box of files she was holding on the floor, straightening out her shirt.

“Elias let me come back a bit early to try to get things organized. Sort through what Prentiss destroyed and see what can be saved, things like that. Getting some overtime pay for it. What about you?”

“Oh, that’s—that makes sense. I’m just—I’m just stopping in, I hadn’t expected to see you here, sorry.”

Sasha tilted her head. “What did you come back to get?”

“...pardon?”

“You said you came back to get something. What did you get?”

“Oh, just my laptop. Just, uh, needed it for... research.”

Sasha looked at him—was that amusement on her face? Jon couldn’t tell.

“Well, it’s good to see you, Jon. Will you be back soon?”

“Aah—hopefully. Still supposed to be recovering, technically, but—going a little stir crazy, you know.” He laughed unconvincingly.

Sasha smiled at him, and bent down to pick up the box of files.

“Well, don’t push yourself, alright? Martin will be back on Monday, won’t he? I’m sure we can handle things for a bit.”

“Right.” Jon took a step back, resisting the urge to glance over his shoulder. “Well then. I’ll... see you around, alright?”

“See you, Jon”

Sasha smiled at him and Jon walked away as fast as he could without running, cold sweat on the back of his neck.

Gahhh I'm not happy with this chapter at all but better done than perfect. Next chapter gets fun again, I swear.

I commissioned some wonderful art by moth-bells on tumblr for chapter 5 of this fic, [check it out!](#)

Wrong

Chapter Notes

► Chapter warnings (spoilers)

Jon ran all the way to the third floor before pausing to catch his breath. The world was spinning around him, pain pulsing bright in his injured leg. He couldn't get enough air into his lungs.

He didn't even know why he was panicking. Nothing had *happened*. It was just Sasha, the same Sasha he'd known and worked with for years. Why was he freaking out so badly?

He took deep, ragged inhales, trying desperately to calm himself.

Something had felt deeply, horribly *wrong* the moment he'd stepped back into the building, and he couldn't pinpoint what it was. The paranoia that had gradually waned over the past few weeks was back in full force.

Less than half an hour of being back in this place and he was kicking himself for not taking things more seriously, for letting his guard drop as the weeks passed—casually texting Martin, letting himself be so vulnerable around Elias, for even entertaining the notion of romantic feelings for someone who may have *murdered his predecessor*.

Maybe being here had simply forced him to revisit that day and confront the reality of it. It was too easy to fall into a comfortable routine at Elias's home, pleasantly sheltered from "real life", from the truth of what he had to fear.

He tried to bring his breathing back to a normal level and straightened out, putting a hand against the wall for support.

A voice behind him startled him out of his thoughts.

"Oh, Jon. Are you back to work already?"

Jon started and turned around, looking for the source of the voice. It was Rosie, looking vaguely concerned—annoyed, maybe? Jon didn't know Rosie very well and didn't think she liked him very much, either.

He cleared his throat.

"Ah—Rosie. No, not yet, I just needed to stop by for something. Is Elias in his office?"

She shook her head.

"Not right now. He just stepped out for a lunch meeting, actually. I can let you into his office, if you'd like."

"Oh—um—could you? You don't think he'd mind?"

Rosie shrugged.

“I don’t think so. He told me you might be coming by.” She walked down the hallway, clearly intending Jon to follow her. Jon did so, limping a bit.

“You’re up here all the time, anyway,” Rosie said, taking out her keyring when they reached Elias’s office. There was the barest hint of accusation in her voice.

Oh, God. Had he been that obvious?

Jon stuttered out something that may have been an excuse, but Rosie ignored him, opening the door and gesturing inside.

“Ah—thank you, Rosie, I—”

“Don’t mention it,” she said, and walked away without another word.

“I... alright,” Jon muttered, and stepped inside.

He closed the door behind him, hearing it latch with a sturdy *click*, and he was alone.

It was eerily silent in here, only the faint hum of the air conditioning filling the space. It wasn’t the first time he’d been in Elias’s office alone, of course—he’d lived here for months—but it felt different, somehow.

He shifted from foot to foot.

It could be a good opportunity to look around. If Elias had “just left” for a meeting, he probably had at least 20 minutes to search. Search for what, exactly, he wasn’t sure—he wasn’t expecting a murder weapon or signed confession—but he couldn’t stand here and do nothing, either. Especially after slacking so much over the past few weeks.

There was a lot to go through. It was a large office, and bookshelves and cabinets lined each wall from floor to ceiling—he wouldn’t have time to look through everything.

His desk was the most obvious place to start. It was a massive thing, starkly Victorian, with several drawers on either side. Elias kept the top of his desk impressively clean, almost the exact opposite of Jon’s, always filled with stacks of papers, post-it notes and half-empty cups of tea.

He started testing the drawers. A few were locked, but most slid free without any resistance. He searched each thoroughly, emptying and combing through them, keeping a lookout for anything suspicious—a hidden compartment, maybe—but there wasn’t much of interest. Plenty of office supplies, stationery, chargers for random electronics, all things Jon expected.

There were a few items that Jon found oddly endearing, that made Elias seem more human, somehow. A small first-aid kit. Breath mints, ibuprofen, a small tube of hand cream. A half-eaten bag of hard candy. A personalized, leather-bound planner. He took pictures of the next couple of weeks, just in case.

He checked the top-right drawer last. More of the same: an assortment of expensive-looking pens, miscellaneous office supplies (stapler, memo pads, an extra watch battery, a small bottle of hand sanitizer...) and a single loose key.

Jon's heart pounded.

Would Elias notice it missing? It didn't seem to have been put in the drawer with much thought, buried in the back under a pile of office supplies. He probably wouldn't notice its absence for a while—maybe he could have a copy made and replace it as soon as he got back to work.

Jon shoved the key into his pocket before he lost the nerve. The thought that it might be for something other than the trap door didn't even cross his mind.

That was all the drawers, then. He tested the locked ones one more time, just in case. One of them came loose with a firm tug—it was just stuck, not locked. Jon's heart leapt for a moment.

Inside was a stack of loose-leaf paper, with bright oil pastel markings on them. Jon's drawings... Elias had kept all of them.

"Having a look around?"

Jon started. Elias was in the doorway. *Damn it, he hadn't even heard the door open, Rosie said he'd just left, how long had he been—*

"Elias! Um, good to see you, I-I'm sorry, I was just... looking for a pen. Rosie let me in."

Jon stood up, shutting the drawer with his knee, trying and failing to act casual.

Elias raised an eyebrow. "That's alright. Did you find one?"

"Find what?"

"A pen."

"Oh! Yes, sorry," Jon forced a laugh, feeling sweat prickle on the back of his neck.

Fuck, he was bad at this. Elias definitely knew something was up. He couldn't put the key back, now, wouldn't have an opportunity with Elias here. He stepped away from the desk.

Elias walked towards him and Jon took a step back, instinctively, but Elias walked past him and sat down at his desk.

Jon's hands were shaking. He stood there feeling stupid, stuck in place, paralyzed by anxiety. Why wasn't Elias saying anything?

"How did your meeting with Martin go?" Elias asked, pulling his laptop out of his bag and unfolding it.

"Huh? Oh, he's... good. He's doing good."

Elias just looked vaguely amused, eyes focused on the screen as he signed into his computer.

Aware he was still standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, Jon stepped away, retreating to the all-too-familiar couch on the other side of the office. He rubbed his palms on his pants, heart still beating uncomfortably fast. *Calm down. Acting suspicious is just going to make things worse.*

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

“You didn’t tell me Sasha was back already.”

“I wanted you to focus on your recovery instead of thinking about work,” Elias said, typing. “She reached out last week and asked if she could come back early. I obliged. I’m having her go through the documents that Prentiss... *sprayed*, to see if any of them are salvageable.”

Jon nodded, playing with the hem of his button-up. He wished he was wearing a t-shirt, something comfier.

“She scared me. I was walking out of my office and almost bumped her.”

Elias chuckled. “Is that so?”

“Uh-huh,” Jon said, quietly. He rested the knuckle of his index finger on his lip.

“Are you feeling small, dear?”

...ah. This damn couch.

Jon hesitated for a moment. He wasn’t, exactly, not yet anyway. He could stave it off if he tried. He knew he *should*.

He didn’t want to, though. The deeper part of his mind, exhausted, scared, desperately wanted this, wanted to be held, comforted, to retreat to a state where things felt simpler, easier, despite everything.

If he found out that Elias had killed Gertrude, would it even change anything? Or would he continue seeking comfort from a murderer?

Twenty minutes ago he’d sworn he wouldn’t break like this. What a joke.

He sniffled, his eyes stinging and vision going blurry. God *damn it*. He screwed his eyes shut and brought his palms to his eyes, his lip trembling.

“Oh, sweetheart.”

He heard Elias stand up from the desk and walk towards him. Jon felt the weight of Elias’s hand on his shoulder and flinched.

“Tell me what’s wrong, Jon.”

“...I don’t wanna be small.”

“Why not?” Elias’s voice was soft. He rubbed Jon’s shoulder.

Jon just shook his head, a high, involuntary noise escaping his throat.

“It’s okay to let go, dear. You’re safe here. ...You’ve had a long day, haven’t you? Riding up here all by yourself. That must have been scary, wasn’t it?”

Jon hesitated and nodded.

“...scary,” he muttered, straining around the lump in his throat.

“Why don’t you draw something for me? All your things should still be in the cabinet.”

Jon lowered his hands from his face, sniffing.

“...okay.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Elias kissed the top of his head. “You’re alright, Jon. It’s alright to let yourself relax.”

“...I want my shoes off,” Jon mumbled, watery.

Elias patted his shoulder, then knelt down, carefully removing each of Jon’s shoes. It reminded Jon of that first night, when Elias found him passed out at his desk. The thought twisted his stomach.

Elias put his shoes neatly to the side and Jon wiggled his toes. That did feel a bit better.

“Do you want me to go get your supplies?” Elias asked.

Jon nodded and moved from the couch to the floor, propping his elbows up on the coffee table. He sniffled again and rubbed his eyes. He didn’t really want to draw right now, but if it made Elias happy, he would.

Elias brought him a stack of paper and his box of supplies: oil pastels, colored pencils, crayons... he had a good selection at home, too, but he’d mostly been filling in coloring sheets. He hadn’t properly *drawn* in a long time, and the thought made him nervous for some reason.

Elias kissed him on the top of the head. “Let me know if you need anything, alright?”

Jon nodded, and Elias went back to his desk.

Jon stared at the blank piece of paper in front of him. What was he supposed to do, again?

He pulled one of the pastels out of the box: a deep, vivid green. He tried making swirls on the paper, the way he’d first experimented with them, months ago. The motion felt robotic, alien, and the pastel clumped in strange ways on the paper.

He’d try crayons, then. He fished some out of the box, trying to decide on a color. He still wasn’t sure what to draw, really.

A cat, maybe? He’d drawn a cat in here, once. It’d made him happy. There was a little orange cat he used to see on his way to work, and he wondered if it was alright, if it was getting enough food and water and attention from passersby.

He tried. He tried drawing it, but it wasn’t *right*. He was just going through the motions. He didn’t know how to draw. He’d never known how to draw. What was he doing?

He pushed the sheet aside and grabbed another sheet of paper, kept trying, but it wasn’t working. He tried drawing his lamb, but she wasn’t here right now. None of his toys were. This was all *wrong*.

(The last time he was in here, he was bleeding. Bleeding through his shirt, through his bandages, wounds reopening every time he moved.)

He tried the pastels again. It stained his skin as he moved over the paper, rubbing off on the heel of his hand. The red looked like blood. One of the pastels had fallen onto the floor, onto the rug. It would stain. Elias would be angry.

(The last time he was in here, Elias had shoved a teddy bear in his arms and made him come home with him. He'd been on a lot of medicine, and it made him feel strange.)

His hands shook as he tried to draw. He wanted so desperately for this to feel like it had in the beginning—butterflies in his stomach instead of sick, heavy dread. Worried about whether or not Elias thought he was weird, not whether or not he was a murderer—

Jon was drawing for him. Jon was trying to draw. It wasn't working.

All he could picture in his mind were *worms*. Worms, Gertrude's dead body, rotting, decomposing flesh, *worms*, burrowing into his skin, choking him, flesh, worms, screaming, Tim screaming, worms crawling into his mouth, Elias, Elias with a gun, pointing it at her, pointing it at him—

The pastel snapped on the paper.

It wasn't right. It wasn't right, it wasn't right and it would never be right again, not like this. He was losing his grip, losing control. He'd just searched Elias's office for evidence of a murder and now he was drawing—*trying to draw, it wasn't working*—on his floor, like an idiot.

He wanted his lamb. He wanted his blanket. He wanted Daddy, and it disgusted him so badly he felt bile rise in his throat, a burning lump rising up and he whimpered and dropped the broken pastel (*fucking pathetic*), trying to quell the flow of tears with the palms of his hands pressed against his eyes, don't cry, don't cry, *stop crying, STOP CRYING.*

He hadn't noticed Elias's presence until he felt the hand on his back and Jon sobbed, curling in on himself. He didn't want Elias's touch—didn't *want* to want it, maybe, he wasn't sure, but he tried to squirm away from it. Daddy hugged him from behind and held him close, saying something Jon didn't understand, holding him closer and tighter, kneeling behind Jon and pulling him into his body and he **DIDN'T WANT THIS**—

He knocked the drawing supplies off the table and screamed, but Daddy just held him tighter. Jon thrashed and kicked his feet but the arms around him were unmoving, unforgiving, even as he struggled. Daddy was saying something to him. He couldn't hear. He held Jon's hands when he tried to bite them and Jon couldn't move, couldn't escape, couldn't lash out, just sat there in that prison of an embrace and *wailed*.

He didn't know how long it had been.

He was facing Elias now, still on the floor but halfway in his lap. The tears had run out by now but he was still trembling, gasping for air, terrified. He wasn't sure he had ever been this scared before, not even when the shelf collapsed, or he opened the trapdoor, not even when he was a child and—

He hiccupped and tried not to hyperventilate against Elias's shoulder. Elias rubbed his back.

“Stay here just a minute, alright?”

Elias let him go—practically having to peel Jon off of him—and stood up.

Jon stayed on the floor, disoriented, the world spinning around him. He felt lightheaded. Panic shot through him and he struggled to breathe again, his own body betraying him. He couldn't tell what was going on, how long it had been, where Elias had gone—there was no room for anything in his mind but fear, pure and blinding and awful.

At some point, Elias was in front of him again, kneeling, holding something between his thumb and forefinger.

“Take this. You'll feel better.”

Jon squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head.

“None of that. Open up, Jon. *There* we go.”

Elias gently pried his mouth open and Jon let him. Elias always got what he wanted either way, there was no point in resisting. He placed the pill under his tongue.

“Hold it there for a bit. Let it dissolve under your tongue.” Elias kept his hand on Jon's cheek, gently holding his jaw closed. “*No*, don't swallow. Just hold it there.”

After another minute or so, Elias let go of his cheek and brought a water bottle to Jon's lips. Jon took a sip, swallowed, then sobbed again.

“There we go,” Elias cooed, stroking his hair back. “That's a good boy.”

Jon hiccupped. He was barely aware of what was going on around him—Elias started wiping his face with a damp towel, wiping away all the tears and snot. He held up the water bottle to Jon's mouth and made him drink some more, and Jon tried, in between panicked breaths and hiccups.

He wasn't sure exactly how long it was before the medication kicked in, but it happened *fast*. He felt a warm rush, like all the strings in Jon's body had been cut and he was floating.

The panic ebbed away, and relief covered him like a warm, heavy blanket. Uncaring, drowsy, the paranoia safely tucked away in a part of his brain he didn't need to look at right now.

He liked this a *lot* more than the painkillers.

Elias kissed him on the forehead.

“Let's go home early, hmm? What do you think?”

That sounded nice, Jon thought. He wanted to go home, but he didn't really want to stand up. The floor was fine. He'd be okay here.

“Come on now, Jon.”

He helped Jon up, who reluctantly got to his feet, then stumbled backward a bit, the world spinning again. Elias steered him towards the couch and let him sit back down.

“Careful, now. Have some more water, alright?”

He brought the water bottle back to Jon's lips and let him drink. Jon took the bottle from him and took long sips, draining the rest of it.

Elias shrugged off his blazer. It must be ruined, Jon thought, noticing the tears and snot covering the shoulder he'd been sobbing against. He ought to feel guilty about that, but there wasn't much room left in his mind for it.

Jon held out his hands, motioning for it.

"You want my coat?" Elias asked, raising an eyebrow.

Jon nodded, eyes fixed on it.

Elias handed it to him and Jon hugged it, clinging to it like one of his stuffed animals. The scent and familiar texture were soothing, familiar, and he inhaled it deeply.

"Alright, Jon, let's get up now."

Elias helped Jon to his feet again, keeping a firm hand on his arm to keep him from swaying. He led Jon to the door but Jon planted his feet, refusing to take another step.

He wanted to go home, but didn't want to cross this threshold. People were still here, they'd see him, see his face red and swollen from crying, clinging onto Elias like a child. His mind went to Martin, to Rosie, to the assumptions everyone must be making.

"We need to go home now," Elias said, gently nudging him forward. "Come on now, and we can take a nap together when we get home, alright?"

As far as bribes went, that was a pretty big one. Elias almost never let Jon fall asleep on him; he was pretty strict about Jon sleeping by himself.

Jon followed him, hesitantly, still holding tightly onto the jacket. He didn't feel small anymore, not necessarily, but didn't feel like a full adult, either, caught in a strange in-between state.

He didn't think anyone saw them as Elias guided him out of the back entrance of the Institute, out to where his car was parked, but he couldn't be sure. Elias helped him into the passenger seat, and Jon didn't protest when Elias buckled his seatbelt for him.

Elias slid into the driver's seat and started the car. Jon held the coat close to his chest and stroked it like it was an animal, staring out at nothing.

"Just a little longer and we'll be home, dear. Hang in there for me."

Jon nodded, barely hearing the words. It was the timbre of Elias's voice that mattered, that he clung to, like the tear-soaked coat in his arms.

Jon closed his eyes as Elias drove them home, tuning out the sounds of midday London traffic and letting his mind go blank.

Attachments

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

ELIAS

6:47 AM

Please clear my schedule for today. I'll likely be back in on Thursday, but I'll let you know if plans change. Thank you.

Elias set his phone down on the kitchen table without waiting for a reply. It was too early in the morning to expect Rosie to respond, anyway.

He took a moment to check in on Jon, looking through the decorative eye carved into the mirror frame in his bedroom. Still asleep, still clutching his little lamb to his chest, momentarily peaceful.

Sleeping this late was unusual for him. The first few weeks aside—when Jon was still healing and heavily dosed with pain meds—Elias had gotten his sleep schedule remarkably consistent. Jon typically woke around 5:45 AM, and then was showered, dressed, and downstairs to meet Elias by 6:15.

Elias would let him sleep in this morning.

He was worried about him, truthfully. He'd made a mistake yesterday, he could admit that. He hadn't been paying close enough attention to Jon, hadn't realized how close he was to breaking.

He watched steam rise from the cup of coffee in front of him.

Jon was no good to him broken, but more than that...

He ran the events of the previous day through his head again. Jon snapping at him, apologizing, riding the tube into London a few hours later... his meeting with Martin, which Elias had watched variously through both Martin's eyes and the eyes of a woman in an ad for overpriced flats on the window next to them. Jon walking to the Institute, meeting Sasha, meeting Rosie, digging through Elias's desk drawers—an act that had honestly delighted him.

He loved seeing Jon indulge his hunger to Know, even when it was directed at him, almost especially so. His baby servant of the Eye—still clumsy, still unsure of his own budding powers, his own desires. It was cute, in a way.

Still, there was only so much snooping he wanted Jon doing in his office. He had to intervene at some point. There was no avoiding Jon's panic in being caught, but Elias figured he would move past it. And it seemed like he had, for a bit, so Elias hadn't been too concerned. Jon not wanting to regress was a bit strange, but he'd brushed it off as his lingering stress from being caught with his hand in the cookie jar, so to speak, and left him to it.

That had been a mistake, clearly.

It was almost 4:00 by the time he'd calmed Jon down and driven him home. Elias let him nap on his chest, as promised, after changing him into more comfortable clothes and convincing him to trade Elias's now tear-stained coat for his lamb. He laid on the couch with him, Jon's head on his chest and their legs tangled together.

Elias had meant to turn his gaze elsewhere, beyond his physical eyes—there were people and things he needed to check in on, and sitting idly had always bothered him—but he'd ended up watching Jon the entire time, fascinated by the little noises he made as he slept, the little twitches and stutters in his breath, the way his fingers gently grasped the fabric of Elias's shirt.

Elias didn't sleep much anymore. He didn't need to, hadn't ever since he'd fully accepted the call of his patron and shed his first human body. He found himself wondering, as he watched Jon's chest rise and fall, how long it would take Jon to reach the same state, divest of human needs like food and water and rest.

A small, private part of him hoped the Beholding would take its time with Jon. He rather liked watching him sleep.

The rest of the night was uneventful. Jon eventually started to stir from hunger, so Elias gently woke him and fed him leftovers: beef stew from the night prior. Jon was quiet, reserved, somewhere in between headspaces. Elias didn't push him one way or the other, just took him back to the living room and let him watch a movie while Elias caught up on work, watching him out of the corner of his vision the whole time.

Jon was exhausted enough by the time Elias put him to bed that he didn't protest being left alone.

Elias had spent most of the last nine hours just watching him.

He drummed his fingers on the table, thinking.

Elias was fond of Jon. He'd always been fond of Jon—that in itself wasn't particularly noteworthy. He'd been fond of many people over many decades, but always at arm's length, aware that his... lifestyle choices didn't lend well to long-term term relationships.

Something was different now, though, and it unnerved him slightly.

He'd gone into this knowing that keeping Jon was a luxury, not a guarantee. Prentiss was his first real test, and he would have been disappointed if Jon died, certainly, but he'd been prepared for the possibility.

...What had changed?

He wasn't having doubts, not exactly. If he wanted to keep Jon, this was the only path forward. Jon would die without his influence, whether through accident, illness, or old age, and what a terrible fate that was.

As the Archivist, as the lynchpin, he'd live forever.

Elias could keep him.

He couldn't coddle him in the meantime. He'd grown more resilient with Elias's help, of course, and as his powers grew he'd need less of it. Elias couldn't have doubts every time Jon was hurt or

scared.

It was for Jon's own good. He'd understand, one day.

He took a sip of coffee and checked in on Jon again. He was starting to stir, groaning and turning over as he woke. Elias smiled.

Jon walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, hair damp from the shower and feeling exhausted in that way sleep never seemed to help.

Elias had his back to him, washing his mug in the sink.

"Good morning, Jon. How are you feeling?"

"I'm... alright. It's already 7:00, shouldn't you be going?" Jon asked, a hint of nervousness in his tone.

"I'm taking the day off. After what happened yesterday, I didn't want to leave you alone."

"That—that's really not necessary, I'm alright."

"Well, I already told Rosie to clear my schedule, so it's done," Elias said, setting his mug on the drying rack. He turned to face Jon. "Come sit down."

Jon's stomach twisted in knots—he *really* didn't want to have this conversation. He obeyed anyway, sitting stiffly at the small kitchen table and staring at his feet.

Elias pulled a chair and sat down across from him, putting a hand gently on Jon's knee. Jon tensed.

"I wanted to apologize for what happened yesterday."

"I—Huh?" Jon blinked and looked up at him, confused.

"I hadn't realized how much being back at work after the attack might affect you. I should have been more attentive to you, to how you were feeling. I'm deeply sorry that I wasn't."

"Oh, I—it's—it's not your fault, I don't—" Jon stumbled over his words. "...It's alright."

"It's not, Jon. You put your trust in me to take care of you, and that's a responsibility I take very seriously."

Jon stared at the hand on his knee.

"I'm sorry," Jon mumbled, unsure of what else to say.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Elias said, rubbing his knee. "Do you want to talk about it at all? How you were feeling?"

Jon shook his head. Elias smiled softly at him.

"That's alright. Like I said, I'm taking the day off. Is there anything specific you'd like to do today?"

Jon was silent for a long moment.

“Um...”

He couldn't think of anything. He'd felt strangely numb since his breakdown yesterday, and all he wanted to do was curl up with his stuffed animals and hide, watch something comforting on TV, and let his mind switch off.

He knew that wasn't an option, though.

“Why don't we take it easy today?” Elias suggested, his tone a bit lighter. “I'll work in the living room, and you can do whatever you feel up to. I'll make lunch in a few hours, and we can go somewhere special for dinner tonight.”

“Okay.”

He felt Elias take his hand, rubbing his thumb over Jon's clenched fist.

“I know things are hard right now. But it'll be worth it. I promise.”

Jon nodded.

The day was long and uneventful. Jon busied himself with chores for most of the morning, ate lunch, then settled into the living room with Elias, tentatively opening his laptop for the first time in weeks.

He knew he couldn't start investigating properly, not yet, not with Elias in the same room. Even if Elias wasn't looking over his shoulder, Jon had a tendency to block out his surroundings when he was absorbed in a task. He couldn't risk Elias walking behind him and seeing what he was doing.

So, he cleaned out his cluttered email inbox, scrolled through long-abandoned social media accounts and the few forums he still frequented, skimmed the news, and tried to keep himself distracted. Tried not to let his eyes wander towards Elias, or the cabinet he kept his toys and coloring books in.

Eventually, as the afternoon light began to fade, Elias asked if Jon felt well enough to go to dinner, and Jon lied and said yes.

The restaurant they went to was pleasant, all things considered. It was low-lit and quiet, with food Jon liked and was familiar with. He ate as much as he could stomach, trying not to be rude despite his lack of appetite. He knew it worried Elias when he didn't eat.

When they arrived home, Jon told Elias he was tired and wanted to go to bed early.

He declined Elias's offer to tuck him in.

Jon was up on time the next morning, though the exhaustion still lingered. He insisted he was fine, gave Elias coffee and his best impression of a smile, and told him goodbye as he left.

He was alone, finally.

He was alone, and he could focus on what he'd wanted to do for the past *month*. He could start investigating Gertrude's murder properly, could start looking into the lives of his suspects in detail, and try to figure out if any of them had any possible reason to want Gertrude dead.

Elias was the most obvious candidate, but maybe it wasn't best to start with him. He'd already dug through the contents of his filing cabinets and his desk, and he'd barely looked into the others. Besides, he had backups of all his assistants' HR paperwork on his laptop, there were plenty of leads there he could chase.

So, he spent the day investigating Tim. He looked through his education and employment history, dug through old social media accounts, reluctantly coughed up \$20 for a sketchy "people finding" website to find his rental history, and so on. He tried to convince himself he was making good progress as he typed addresses into Google Maps and scrolled through ten years worth of Instagram posts.

His head hurt. He ate leftovers for lunch, cleaned up the kitchen for a bit, and got back to work.

Elias came home at his normal time, dinner in hand. Jon ate, made polite conversation with Elias, and they sat in the living room together, the same way they had almost every night for the past few weeks.

Jon didn't always regress during these evenings. Sometimes he'd read, watch TV or just talk with Elias. Tonight was one of those nights. He was reading through one of the many paperbacks he'd ordered and never got around to finishing.

Trying to read it, anyway. He found his eyes glazing over the same paragraph over and over again, the words not sticking in his mind.

He'd been staring at his computer screen all day. His eyes hurt and his mind felt like it was filled with fog—he squeezed them shut. He wanted Daddy to read to him.

He didn't ask.

Friday was the same.

Elias went to work. Jon sat at the kitchen table and tried to convince himself he cared about investigating Sasha. He stripped the sheets off his bed and did his laundry, like he did every Friday.

Elias came home with dinner, and they ate in uneasy silence, both aware of the unspoken tension between them but unwilling to break it.

That was odd for Elias, who, in Jon's experience, tended not to shy away from confrontation. He thought about the day Elias had called him up to his office and proposed this "arrangement" between them. Elias's calm confidence, Jon's excitement and terror, felt in equal measure. Why wasn't Elias saying anything?

Jon sat with him in the living room that night. He folded his laundry. He read the same paperback and went to bed a few hours later, telling Elias goodnight before walking up the stairs by himself.

He kept his lamb in the nightstand drawer. He didn't sleep well.

Saturday.

Jon thought about telling Elias he wanted to go back to work on Monday, when the Institute was set to fully re-open. This status quo couldn't last, clearly. Jon needed to get out of here before he either broke or became complacent again.

He had work to do. He had a murder to investigate—by himself if he had to. He needed to get back to work, get away from here, away from Elias, regain his independence and then maybe.... maybe things would be okay.

Then he could think about trusting Elias, again, if Jon hadn't already ruined things.

He couldn't bring himself to do it, though. He saw Elias that morning, smiling at him, asking how he slept, and the words died on his lips.

Jon cleared his throat.

"...I, uh, I slept alright. Do you want coffee?"

"I would love some. Thank you, Jon."

Jon measured out the grounds and started the coffee machine, staring at it as it whirled to life.

He knew what he needed to do and couldn't bring himself to do it. *Why, though?* It was never the plan for him to stay here indefinitely, and obviously he would be returning to work eventually. Why was he so terrified to ask?

He *needed* to get away from here, get away from Elias, away from this house, before he lost himself.

The machine finished. He brought Elias his coffee, who accepted it with a smile.

It took until dinnertime for Jon to break.

Elias had asked him for help making dinner, which was typical. They often cooked together on Saturdays; it was something Jon generally looked forward to, something that gave him a purpose.

A few weeks ago, Elias had taught him to cut vegetables properly, showing him how to hold the knife safely without nicking himself. Jon was a bit embarrassed he had to be taught. He cooked for himself, yes, but he never knew there was a specific technique he should be using.

His movements had been stiff and awkward, making slow and uneven cuts. At the time, his hands were still healing from the wounds, the decimated muscles and nerves trying and failing to translate his intentions into fine motor movements.

Elias had been patient with him, and didn't complain when some of the zucchini rounds were twice as thick as the others.

His mind was wandering today, though. He fell back on years worth of muscle memory, failing to curl his fingers as his other hand clumsily moved the knife without thinking. The blade slipped, glancing off the cucumber he was cutting and slicing into the side of his finger.

“Shit!”

Jon dropped the knife with a clatter and held his injured finger to his chest. Sharp, hot pain radiated from the cut and he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Jon? Are you alright?”

Jon tried to respond, but the words felt stuck in his throat. All he could manage was a groan, frustration and pain and self-loathing taking up all of the space in his mind. *Idiot, idiot, idiot—*

“Oh, let me see,” Elias said, softly.

He felt Elias take his hand and gently uncurl his fingers to inspect the wound, sucking in air through his teeth. Jon felt tears welling up in his eyes and rubbed them away with his uninjured hand.

“Come sit down, I’ll get the first aid kit.”

Jon nodded and sat down at the kitchen table. It hurt, but the pain wasn’t what was bothering him. It was the frustration, the humiliation, the pent-up stress and his inability to even do this *one stupid thing* correctly. How could he live on his own when he was too stupid to even *cut vegetables* by himself—

“Here we go,” Elias said, pulling up a chair next to him. “Can I see your finger?”

Jon closed his eyes and held out his hand. He’d always been squeamish around blood, even his own.

He heard Elias rifling around in the first aid kit, then felt the sting of an alcohol wipe. He flinched slightly.

“I’m sorry for the sting, sweetheart. This will just take a moment.”

The lump in Jon’s throat tightened as Elias worked. The sting turned to a dull throbbing, and he felt Elias let go of his hand for a moment. He took a deep breath, trying to get ahold of himself.

He opened his eyes to see Elias pulling a familiar roll of gauze from the first kit.

And he broke.

It was a humiliating sort of relief, sitting there, sobbing, unable to stop himself from slipping, from wailing like a child at the kitchen table as Elias bandaged his finger.

All of his efforts to stop himself from regressing had been for nothing. He was as broken as he’d ever been. There was no fighting it.

“Shhh. We’re almost done, love.”

Elias finished wrapping his finger, cutting off the excess with a pair of scissors. He helped Jon up and pulled him into a hug, holding him tight against his body as Jon wept.

“Come here,” Elias whispered, rubbing his back. “You’re alright. You’re alright, sweetheart.” There was a hint of something like relief in his voice.

“I’m sorry,” Jon cried into Elias’s shoulder. He didn’t know what he was apologizing for. His entire body shook with the force of his sobs. Elias just shushed him and stroked his hair, gently rocking him.

Jon let himself melt against him. It had only been a few days, but he missed this, missed letting Daddy hold him and comfort him, missed the feeling of his arms around him and the sound of his heartbeat. Missed the hand that gently stroked his hair as he cried.

They stood like that for several minutes, until Jon’s sobs turned to gentle sniffles.

“Why don’t we save this for tomorrow,” Elias said, nodding towards the half-prepared dinner on the counter. “Do you want some of your leftovers from last night?”

Jon shook his head and clung tighter to Elias. “Alright,” Elias whispered, giving him a gentle squeeze.

Jon felt... fragile, in a way he wasn’t used to. He never really thought about his *habit* in terms of age, it didn’t work like that for him. He was still aware of himself, aware he wasn’t an actual child—but he could swear he felt *younger* than he typically did.

Much younger.

“Daddy?” Jon asked, his voice trembling.

“I’m right here, love. What do you need?”

Jon couldn’t talk. He just sobbed a bit more, holding Elias close to him. They stood like that for a few moments more, Jon’s face buried in the crook of Elias’s shoulder, afraid to let go of him, for the moment to end.

He was starting to feel lightheaded from crying, though, and was swaying slightly on his feet. Elias gently patted him on the back.

“Do you want to go to the living room, dear? I can get your things for you.”

Jon nodded.

“Okay. I’m going to pick you up, alright?”

Jon nodded, and Elias lifted him up to his waist, letting Jon curl his legs around him.

Elias was surprisingly strong for his age. He was typically able to carry Jon for a few minutes without getting tired. All the weight Jon had lost in the past few months probably helped as well.

Elias carried him carefully to the living room and gently set him on the couch. Jon tried to cling to him, not wanting to let go.

“Jon, sweetheart,” Elias said, patiently. “I’m just going to get your toys, alright? Can you stay here for a bit?”

Jon reluctantly loosened his grip, allowing Elias to disentangle himself. Jon squeezed his eyes closed as Elias stepped away, listening to the sound of his footsteps disappearing up the stairs.

He really didn't want to be alone right now. He chewed the tips of his fingers anxiously.

Elias was back shortly after, though, carrying Jon's lamb and a few of his other favorite stuffed animals.

Jon reached for his lamb immediately, holding her close to his chest. He always felt more grounded with her—being in this state without her always left him feeling adrift and unstable. He put his fingers back in his mouth.

"Don't chew on your fingers, dear," Elias said, gently pulling his hand away from his face. "Do you want your teether?"

Heat rose in Jon's cheeks but he nodded, and Elias went to retrieve it for him, opening the cabinet that held Jon's toys. It was a wooden ring with silicone attachments in different shapes and colors—Jon's favorite was the dinosaur. Elias handed it to him and he slipped it into his mouth.

Elias ruffled his hair and kissed the top of his head.

"What would you like to do, sweetheart? Do you want to color?"

Jon shook his head. He reached out for Elias, trying to pull him closer.

"Aww," Elias chuckled softly. "You just want to cuddle?"

Jon nodded, and Elias sat down next to him. Jon turned to the side and swung his legs over Elias's lap, nuzzling up to his shoulder. Elias pulled him in close and kissed the side of his head.

He felt so safe like this, despite everything.

"Why don't we watch a movie? Does that sound nice?" Elias asked, reaching for the remote on the side table. Jon nodded.

Elias turned on the TV and started scrolling through the movies available for rent. Jon wanted to ask for an animated movie, maybe something Disney, something calm and familiar. The words felt difficult and far away right now, though. His eyes drooped shut as he laid against Daddy's shoulder.

Elias started playing something a few minutes later, and Jon watched it through half-open eyes. He'd put on the Great Mouse Detective, one of Jon's favorites growing up. He remembered watching it on VHS on the floor of his grandmother's living room, playing on their tiny CRT.

Still, exhaustion was winning out. He didn't realize he was falling asleep until Elias gently roused him an hour later.

"The movie's over, sweetheart. Are you sleepy?"

Jon nodded, keeping his eyes closed. He didn't want to move.

"You've been very tired the past few days. Have you had trouble sleeping?"

Jon felt inexplicably guilty at the question and squeezed his eyes shut tighter, burying his face deeper in the crook of Elias's shoulder and nodding. Elias rubbed his back, soothing him.

“I know talking about this is difficult, sweetheart. We don’t have to right now.” He stroked Jon’s hair. “Why don’t we get you in the bath, and then you can get some sleep?”

Jon nodded again, and Elias picked him up and carried him to his room. There, he helped Jon undress, ran a hot bath for him, and gently washed his hair, taking care not to get soap in his eyes.

He helped Jon towel off and dressed him in comfortable pajamas—a set Elias had given to him after seeing the state of his decade-old, tattered pajama pants and t-shirt that he typically slept in. They were light and soft with no tags or uncomfortable seams, and the fabric felt nice against his skin.

He was half-asleep by the time he crawled into bed and face-planted onto his pillow, not even bothering to pull the covers over himself. Elias stroked his hair back.

His stomach growled at that moment and Elias paused.

“I never did get you dinner, did I?” Elias asked. “Do you want some of your leftovers?”

Jon made an unhappy noise and shook his head. He didn’t want food, he wanted to sleep.

“You really ought to eat something, love. Would you eat some cereal for me?”

Jon shook his head again.

Elias pat him on the shoulder, considering for a moment.

“I’ll be just a minute—don’t give me that look, I promise I’m coming right back.”

Jon grumbled but relented, glaring at the door as he watched Elias disappear from the room. He wondered what Elias was getting—he did *not* want to eat, and wasn’t above throwing a fit about it.

It took a few minutes for Elias to return, and Jon flushed red when he saw what he was carrying. He buried his head in the pillow.

“Oh, don’t act like that,” Elias chided gently, setting the bottle on the nightstand. He climbed into bed next to him, sitting up with his back against the headboard. “Will you come sit in my lap?”

Jon gave him a wary look, face still half-hidden in the pillow. He knew what Elias was trying to do, but it was hard to say no to him. His eyes flicked to the bottle on the nightstand.

Elias had never bottle-fed him before. Jon would be lying if he said he’d never thought of it, but the idea still felt... scary, somehow. Jon still felt self-conscious over anything he saw as too “babyish”, even if Elias never acted like it was strange. He could never fully shake the shame of being an almost thirty-year-old man acting like a child, even when he was deep in headspace.

Plus, he still didn’t want to eat.

Elias smiled at him and reached over to brush a lock of hair out of his eyes.

“You’re alright, sweetheart. Come here.”

Jon pushed himself up and crawled over to Elias. He settled in between his legs, facing to the side, leaning his head against Elias’s chest. Elias pulled him in closer.

“There’s my sweet boy,” Elias cooed, nuzzling the top of his head. He held him like this for a while, gently rubbing Jon’s shoulder as he cradled him. Jon was nearly asleep when he felt Elias reach for the bottle. He whined and pressed his face into Elias’s shirt.

“Shhh. Will you try this for me?”

Elias held the bottle in front of him—not insistent or pushing, just a silent invitation.

“You’ve had this before. It’s the vanilla drink that you like.”

Sometimes Elias would give him powdered “instant breakfast” when Jon wouldn’t eat anything else. It was incredibly sugary and probably not the best for him, nutritionally, but he could almost always stomach it.

Jon moved his face from Elias’s shirt and nodded, silently giving permission. Elias brought the bottle closer, touching it gently to Jon’s lips. Jon opened his mouth the slightest amount and let the tip rest on his tongue.

“That’s it,” Elias whispered, tilting the bottle back. Jon gave an experimental suck, eyes flicking to Elias for reassurance.

Elias’s eyes were full of love and adoration, like Jon was the most precious thing in the world to him.

“There you go,” Elias breathed. “You look so sweet like this.”

Jon kept drinking, his eyes fixed on Elias. Elias smiled at him.

He finished the bottle like that, silently drinking as Elias watched him and cradled him with a steady hand around his shoulders. His eyes fluttered shut after a few minutes. He felt pleasantly sated and warm and *loved* and he never wanted to leave.

Elias set the bottle aside and used his thumb to wipe a bit of milk from Jon’s lip. Jon’s lip trembled and he struggled to speak, trying to make words for the first time in hours.

“m-m’srry,” Jon said, the words sounding like they’d been physically pulled from him.

“Sorry for what, love?”

“M-m’srry I—” Jon’s lip trembled. It was so difficult to talk, but it felt so important. “M-sorry I didn’t—” he squirmed in Elias’s arms, frustrated.

“Shh.” Elias stroked his hair back. “Are you trying to say you’re sorry for trying not to be small all week?”

Jon nodded. His throat felt tight.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Elias leaned down and kissed his forehead. Jon could feel his breath in his hair, the warmth of his embrace, the steady beating on Elias’s heart. It was almost overwhelming. “You don’t have to apologize for that. I love you.”

Silence, for a moment, as Jon struggled to form words. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible.

“...even when I’m...?”

He thought about how unpleasant he was as an adult. He thought about how ungrateful he’d been toward Elias. He thought about snapping at him, yelling at him, going behind his back and rifling through his belongings. He thought about the dozens of rolls of bandages Elias had gone through as Jon was healing, he thought about the piss-soaked sheets from nightmares and all the times Elias had held him, fed him, bathed him, comforted him, even though he didn't deserve it.

What a horrible, ungrateful burden he was.

Elias held him tighter, bringing his face close to Jon’s.

“I love every part of you, Jon. There’s nothing you can do that would make me stop loving you.”

Jon buried his face in Elias’s shirt and sobbed.

Chapter End Notes

incredibly sorry for the long wait for this chapter, this is another one that I re-wrote about 3 times before being happy with it @_@

(side-note: if you're in the mood for some lighter stuff, I posted the first chapter of a [fic where elias gets agere'd via creepy artifact and jon takes care of him](#). mixing it up!)

comments are always appreciated, thank you so much for reading ❤️

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