

first aid kit

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first aid kit

by Anonymous

Summary

it's just blood.

Notes

Happy Vitalasubzam Week Eve!!!!!!

stray dog

Chapter Summary

a hunger so twisted and horrible

Chapter Notes

vitalasubz set in the weeks after the "animal" attack, but before they met zam

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

Vitalasy still wasn't used to the ring.

He didn't wear it on his ring finger. Even though it fit him well and was in no danger of slipping off, he was so afraid of losing it. So afraid of it slipping off while he was doing dishes, or in the bathroom, or—

Vitalasy turned around to lay on his side, his necklace moving with him, so he could stare at the ring where it glinted on the bedsheets. He was warm, getting warmer still, and he didn't want to get out of bed. That was just not going to happen today. He sat up, at least to grab a glass of water, but all it did was make his head swim and vision blur. He laid back down.

Yeah, definitely not happening today.

He put his hand over the ring and he thought of Subz. His fingers brushed across his bandages and he thought of Subz. He kept thinking of that glass of water and how Subz would want him to stay hydrated.

He then thought, briefly, that he could drink his blood instead, and his eyes widened in horror.

He was starting to understand the hunger. It didn't come all up at once, it was more like a crawl. A spider sinking its teeth in the folds of his brain as it spun a web around it. And if Vitalasy didn't pay attention to the pinpricks of its feet and the feather light graze of its web, the hunger would overcome him.

But for now, Vitalasy's hunger was a disaster waiting to happen, cracks in the dam covered with tape and plaster. He took a deep breath. He could fight it. He was so sure of it. Maybe if he held very still and paid attention, the poison would not sink in. He'd remain himself.

It was still light outside. He focused on the ring, running his thumb over the band, pressing hard against the four star points and the amethyst in the middle. Subz told him days after he gave him the ring that it wasn't silver, it was white gold, and old as hell. He was still fully bedridden then, afraid of tearing stitches with the slightest movement. Afraid of himself, too.

His stomach twisted. Vitalasy wished he was here, and yet, at the same time, he wanted Subz to stay far away from him. With the way that all he could think of was tearing out his throat and sinking his claws into his chest.

He breathed in. And then began counting his fingers, pressing every digit into the pad of his thumb, making sure they were still normal fingers. Soft, human fingers. No claws, not even his nails. He breathed out.

He was miserable, he was calm, he had lost all appetite for normal food and all he could think of was *blood blood blood*. All he could think of was guts and his desire. All he could think of was tearing Subz open on their dining table and—

No. He could not. He must not. He promised.

But it was too late for that kind of reasoning. The hunger overtook him and Vitalasy slipped away.

He couldn't even tell if it was night or day, he didn't know how to read a clock. He swam in a dreamlike darkness, tangled in his bed sheets, feverish. He wasted away in their bed like a sick patient, when Vitalasy was anything but. He was a monster in dead man's clothing. He was the wolf, waiting in the cabin, an imposter in someone else's bed.

The door opening sounded like a thousand falling metal pipes, and he *knew* Subz was there without him having uttered a single word. By his steps, by his breath, by the beat of his heart. Subz approached him and that was his first mistake.

Vitalasy couldn't even tell what Subz was saying— that's the worst part. Words had no meaning, only the vague impression of a sound made it to his ears and he knew Subz was talking but Vitalasy couldn't answer. He didn't know how to speak. And then Subz put his hands on him, something innocent, a calming touch, and it was too much for Vitalasy, the pit in his stomach demanding to be fed.

He leapt forward. He was the wolf, and little red riding hood looked so tempting, he wanted to swallow him whole. He wanted to tear him apart. Vitalasy threw himself on Subz, twisting them around so that Subz was pinned underneath him.

Vitalasy wasn't even fully aware of his body, but his claws encircled Subz' wrists where they pinned his side, the points of his razor sharp fingers digging into his own hand. Subz felt so small beneath him, fully shaking as Vitalasy's face cracked and elongated, and when he opened his mouth to speak no words came out but a long whine.

And then he scraped his teeth across Subz's shoulder, and that should have been the end of it. Subz would try and throw him off, and Vitalasy would either eat him or die a starved monster. But things never went the way Vitalasy planned them. Even in this.

Very suddenly, Subz stilled. And Vitalasy realized that the rushing in his ears wasn't his own heartbeat but Subz's— when it calmed, steadied. He looked at him from the side, sharp teeth still barely there, grazing over the skin of his shoulder, when Subz turned his head and offered him his neck.

Vitalasy stopped. He could feel the force of Subz' heartbeat against his teeth, fierce and steady.

Vitalasy shattered. The offering ruined him. The offering fed him. He hid into Subz' neck and crumpled when he freed his hand and wrapped it around Vitalasy's broad back, now covered in fur. He pressed Vitalasy closer, holding him in a tight embrace, and he shrunk. His claws turned back to dull fingernails, dark animal fur receding off his legs and back. He had a mouth again, and he used it to sob, face pressed to the side of Subz' neck. The bandage, now torn, lay limp in between them where Vitalasy had collapsed on Subz' chest. Subz ran his hand across Vitalasy's back, cool palm across hot skin, and suddenly he felt light headed. The air in the room was stifling, and he was covered in sweat.

He moved his arms down from where they had been pinning Subz' wrists on his sides mere minutes ago, and wrapped them around Subz' torso, hugging him back.

“Come on you big furry baby, let's get you something to eat.” Subz said, and Vitalasy wondered if he could feel the ring where it pressed into Vitalasy's chest, if he could feel its warmth too. Instead Subz ran his hand up Vitalasy's back, playing with the chain where it rested on his neck.

He sobbed harder. “I'm not hungry anymore. I have you, I'm not hungry anymore.”

This, of course, was the only lie he ever got away with.

Chapter End Notes

i got really depressed for two and a half months and then wrote all of this in 4 days. I was really thinking of being all cute and posting it on the appropriate vitalasubzam week days but ! I couldnt wait. so . here we are

speaking of . deadass almost forgot to put this in the series tags will be updated sooner or later

status update on my friend kevin: he wants to read nevada. he doesnt have an ao3 account . i might remove the ao3 user restriction (i wont) or just reformat it in google docs (is a lot of work). i could just give him my ao3. i thought about it. it would give him free reign though. what if he posts a league of legends fics. i couldnt live with that.

dog house

Chapter Summary

everything we've been building up towards

Chapter Notes

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

He was hungry again, but it hadn't gotten bad yet, hadn't gotten to the point where claws would grow out and he'd start sprouting fur on his back. Subz didn't like it when he waited like this, he would insist that Vi go and take care of it immediately. But Subz didn't understand the hunger— couldn't understand it, really. Vitalasy could go now, he could drive out to the desert and find something to eat, but he was still far too human for it. If anything, Subz was better able to handle this than Vitalasy was. Subz didn't flinch at the sight of dead animals and roadkill, he was stone-faced at the sight of gore— Vitalasy was the one who got queasy.

It wasn't just that, either. How could Vitalasy explain that he had two stomachs, and not one? How could he explain that he had something eating at his consciousness, chewing at his strength of will, constantly, and that he had to wait until the hunger got bad for it to stop. A clarity that came not from a sated belly, but the sharp blade of hunger.

The hunger came with the monster, but they often felt like two separate things, two parasites residing in his body, eating away at him slowly.

He said once that Subz's presence sated him. It wasn't the full truth, but it wasn't a lie either.

Vi didn't want to worry Subz with it. If he'd had the choice he wouldn't have told Subz about it at all. He still felt guilty, Subz was always taking care of him, always making sure he was alright. And of course Vitalasy was there for him too, but cheering him up after a failed exam paled in comparison to the fact that Subz quite literally stitched him back together.

They'd had the choice to tell Zam. They didn't.

Vi felt guilty about it, which was a good indicator of how he would feel if he had never told Subz, but it was out of a sincere desire to protect him. Vi didn't think Zam would be able to handle it, he had too much to worry about with his brother missing. And there was also the fact that Vi just didn't...

Maybe Vitalasy was the one in the wrong. Maybe he should tell Zam. Vi didn't know the full situation, but he was sure that what happened to him had happened to Zam's brother too. And maybe it was for a reason, maybe they were the same, *vile, vicious, villainous-*

Well. That's enough of that.

Vitalasy hurriedly got out of bed and walked into the kitchen, starting to prepare dinner. He couldn't stay in bed all day stewing, he'd eat himself before anything else got him. If he wanted to theorize he could go run out into the desert, find Spoke and maybe spend a few hours with him testing and theorizing and *actually* researching what the hell was going on. He poured himself a glass of water and drank it.

The hunger was weird, because it was inconsistent. He'd kept track of it, and Spoke had helpfully suggested a period tracker app before Vitalasy had snapped his maw at him. There was something in Spoke that always brought out the worst in him, but Vitalasy chalked that up to Spoke's personality rather than the fact that he was also a monster. And he never made the hunger worse.

There was no way of predicting when it would come, it varied from just days to multiple weeks. It didn't matter what he ate, how much he ate, he would eat a hare and get hungry again in days, but a puny lizard heart would sate him for weeks. Just as well, the rate at which it worsened varied too. Sometimes it would just sit in the back of his mind for days, nothing overpowering, just *there*. Other times it would worsen in just a couple of hours, leave him at the brink of a transformation before he could even make to the edge of town.

But Vitalasy wouldn't think about it now. He tied an apron around his waist and got to preparing food. Subz was out again, but he'd promised he'd make it to dinner, and Zam was supposed to be arriving any minute now too.

That is how it happened. With Vitalasy *not* thinking about how bad his hunger was getting.

The bell rang, so he turned off the stove and rushed to the door. Zam had a key, which is why Vitalasy wasn't expecting him to be the one standing at his doorstep. He wanted to smile, wanted to say hello, but all words died on his tongue as he took in the sight of him.

There was something terribly wrong with Zam.

Vitalasy opened his arms and Zam collapsed in his embrace, his knees wavered but didn't give out. He held him close, still in shock, as blood seeped through Zam's shirt and onto his own.

"Hey, *hey*, you're okay," he whispered into Zam's hair, but he only shook his head from where it was tucked into Vi's shoulder.

Vitalasy was proud of himself in the moment, for remaining calm. Zam was shaking in his arms and covered in blood, but Vitalasy was composed, and held him tightly while he nudged the door closed with his foot. He couldn't even claim that it took that much out of him, the focus, the composure. It came easy, he barely had to try not to panic.

"Come here," he said, gently guiding Zam to the bedroom. It was probably the safest place, there were not as many windows as the living room, and it was comfortable. Despite the large, ominous, bloodstain on his shirt, Zam was still standing, so Vi was sure he was fine. Vi sat him down on their bed, kneeling down and taking Zam's shoes off for him. They were

stained with mud and flecks of blood - Zam's blood, his mind helpfully informed him - and he would need to clean their floors later, but that didn't matter right now.

"Breathe, Zam," he said, taking Zam's hand in his, trying to offer him comfort. His breaths were unsteady, shaky, and he could barely get through one without sobbing again. Vi brushed a hand over Zam's cheek, wiping away tears and drops of blood. Vitalasy barely felt human, all of his focus on Zam, the place where his hand brushed Zam's cheek, where his other hand rested on Zam's hand. Then he dropped his hand to the giant blood stain over his shirt, hovering over the tear on his chest, where his heart would be. But there was no wound.

"What happened?" He asked, hand now pressed over his heart, feeling how fast it was beating. Zam's hand covered his own and he shook his head.

"It hurts," he croaked out, his voice hoarse from crying. Vitalasy didn't understand what hurt.

"Can we take this off?" He asked softly, carefully, tugging on the hem of Zam's shirt with his free hand. Zam only nodded, and Vi got up from where he was kneeling and helped Zam take it off. He immediately laid down on the bed, which was not what Vitalasy had wanted but maybe if Zam went to sleep they could wait until Subz got here and do this together. Vi held the shirt in his hands, it looked worse than it was- it wasn't even dripping on the floor. There was nothing on Zam's chest - no cut or wound - and Vi sighed in relief. He didn't know why he'd been so *sure* that it was Zam's blood though.

He dismissed the thought, and threw his shirt into the laundry basket before turning his attention once again on Zam, who looked small curled up on top of the sheets. Vi climbed into bed with him, covering Zam with a blanket.

Zam looked at him then, his brown eyes like tea saucers, and Vi wanted nothing more than to comfort him. He ached with the desire to help him. He reached out for Zam, like he would with Subz, but Zam took his hand and placed it on his chest again.

"Help me," Zam whispered, his heartbeat erratic underneath Vi's palm. "I know you can-"

"Zam," Vi cut him off, unsure of what Zam was even asking for. Zam just pressed his hand harder over his heart.

"Listen," he said, and Vitalasy tried to focus but he didn't even know what to do. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to be listening out for. It was just the two of them in their bedroom, dinner half made in the kitchen. Just Vitalasy and Zam, laying in their bed, his hand over his chest where his heart refused to calm down.

Vitalasy breathed, and Zam breathed in sync, staring intensely into Vitalasy's eyes, desperate for understanding.

"*Please*," he whispered, and then he realized, his palm splayed across Zam's chest. He could feel his breaths, his lungs expanding and retracting. He could feel his heart beating, almost hear with how intense it was, and then a little quieter, another heartbeat beneath it. What Vitalasy had mistaken for a rapid heartbeat was *another heart* beating out of sync.

His stomach twisted.

Zam's fingers, his short, bitten down, dull nails knitted with Vitalasy's fingers, long and elegant, ending in sharp claws.

Vitalasy moved in the span of a blink, from laying beside Zam to pushing him down onto his back, straddling him. Zam's beautiful golden hair spilled on the pillow underneath him as he bounced on the mattress, but remained pinned down by Vitalasy's weight.

Zam squirmed beneath him, both his hands holding Vi's hand in place above his heart, as if he couldn't decide if he wanted to pull Vi closer or arch into his touch. Vitalasy's fingers curled into a fist, his nails leaving a bloody trail where they tore into Zam's soft skin. It was easy- his hands were made for killing and it was *easy*.

He moved his hand lower, just under Zam's sternum. Vi looked at him then, and Zam stared back, like two witnesses standing at a crime scene yet to happen. The precious bit of understanding before catastrophe happened. Just the two of them, Zam and Vitalasy, both hurt beyond measure, both overflowing with desire.

Zam's lips were parted, pink, as unsteady breaths left him. Vi had kissed him a thousand times before, and he wanted to now. He wanted to kiss him, he wanted to hold him gently, soothe his worries in a way only a boyfriend could.

"Please," Zam whispered, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes, and something in Vi snapped. He pressed two clawed fingers to the soft part right under where Zam's ribs met, Zam's own hands moving to circle his wrist.

Vitalasy knew he shouldn't, he knew he should stop, but he was just so *hungry*. And Zam was right there, under him, beautiful and perfect and—

Not offering, *begging*.

He barely applied any pressure before the skin *split*, and his fingers slid right in. Zam answered the action with a loud gasp. Blood pooled around Vitalasy's fingers, already two knuckles deep, and a drop spilled out, trailing a path along Zam's ribs and onto their bed. Vitalasy wanted to chase it with his tongue, lick Zam's skin clean, but he was too entranced by Zam's chest, his fingers slipping in deeper and deeper.

Was this the feeling he had when he killed? Vitalasy couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so *awake*, his thoughts unbothered by the pangs of hunger. His focus was clear, singular, and despite the fact that he could hear Zam's heavy breathing it didn't bother him. It urged him on, in fact, the whine that came out of Zam when the wound opened wide enough and Vitalasy slipped a third finger in.

He was warm inside, sticky.

Blood pooled freely now around the wound, painting Zam's ribs and stomach, making puddles in his belly- at least until Zam breathed in again and they trickled out, staining the sheets. But Vitalasy didn't care- nor did Zam for that matter, trapped in a feeling that was

both agony and euphoria, depending on how one looked at it. He was golden, he was the sunset. Zam was always beautiful to him but now, covered in blood, he was something else entirely.

And Vitalasy thought, for a brief moment, that all he wanted to do was help him. All he wanted to do was ease his pain. Hurting Zam was the last thing he wanted to do.

Vitalasy's teeth extended without him even realizing it, piercing his lower lip and making it bleed. Blood dripped down his chin, mixed with saliva, as his entire hand disappeared into the wet, sticky, warmth that was Zam's chest cavity

It was like relief. For a moment, it felt like that should have been the end of it. Vi with his hand in Zam's chest, no further or closer to his heart than when they started this. But then Zam sighed, his lungs contracting, and Vitalasy's fingers brushed against something holy.

Vitalasy didn't know it would feel like this. He'd torn apart animals before, with no feeling other than the base need to sate his hunger. But when Zam's heart brushed against his fingers it felt like ambrosia. It felt like an answer.

It was this. *This*. This would sate his hunger. This is what he wanted to eat.

A tear slipped out, down his cheek, and fell onto Zam's skin.

Vitalasy looked at him, but he was gone, head thrown back in something akin to agony, something akin to ecstasy, and Vitalasy's own heart broke. He couldn't. He couldn't eat his heart. He moved his hand, looking for the second heart, the smaller one underneath, and he wrapped his fingers around it.

Vitalasy would never get used to this. He didn't think he wanted to.

Both of Zam's hearts sped up, pushing into Vitalasy's hand, but he still had the wherewithal only to take hold of one of them. It struggled against his grip. He couldn't just pull it out, so instead he felt around for the connecting veins and arteries. Vitalasy wasn't an expert, and most of the hearts he'd ripped out he wasn't even aware of, but he took care to sever the blood vessels connecting to the heart with his claws.

He pulled the heart out, still beating, soaking them both in Zam's blood that glittered in the dying rays of the setting sun. Vitalasy held it in both hands and watched the blood pool as the heart slowed down. All Zam did was let out a breathy groan in tandem.

In spite of himself, Vitalasy savored it. He brought his cupped hands to his mouth, licking the stray drops that spilled over and then drinking the blood from his hands. Beneath him, Zam was trying to catch his breath, but Vitalasy couldn't spare a crumb of his attention. There was blood all over both of them, dripping down the long way of his arms to his elbow. Vitalasy was not human, but he wasn't fully a monster either. Because when he brought the heart to his mouth he had lips to kiss it with, but a mouth large enough to swallow it whole.

“Vitalasy?”

Vitalasy froze. The blood that once thrummed hot in his veins turned to ice. The heart in his throat caught and he choked on it, but his mind had gone blank. He became overwhelmed with the sickening feeling that comes from waking up from a lucid nightmare. There he was, on top of Zam, covered in blood. The crime finally committed.

And there was Subz in the doorway. To witness them? To arrest them?

He didn't know what to think, what to respond. He turned.

Subz's face was blank, but Vitalasy knew that was just shock. They stared at each other, neither of them breathing. He doesn't know which one of them broke first but one moment they were locked in stunned silence, and the other—

"Zam?" Subz' voice broke over the single syllable word.

"Zam?!" he said again, more urgently, and then he was rushing to be by Zam's side and Vitalasy was rolling off of him, backing away in horror at his own actions. Subz covered the wound with one hand and placed his hand over Zam's cheek with the other, turning his face to look at him.

"Sunshine?" Subz whispered, and suddenly Vitalasy's ears were ringing. He was the one who called Zam sunshine, Subz didn't use pet names. "Zam, baby," his voice was gentle as he rubbed his thumb across Zam's cheek, gently tapping the side of his face to wake him up. But Zam wouldn't wake up.

Vitalasy looked at Zam's chest because Subz looked at Zam's chest, not because he wanted to. Subz was cursing, pressing his hand over where Vitalasy had shamelessly clawed his way in, trying to stop the bleeding. Dizzily, Vitalasy noticed that it had shrunk, but Subz' human hands were small enough to sink in. Subz pulled his hand back in horror.

"We just need to stop the bleeding," Subz's voice was shaking but his hands were steady as he reached for a blanket to press over the wound. "Just need to stop the bleeding, and you'll be alright." he repeated, looking around trying to find something that wasn't already soaked in Zam's blood.

Vitalasy looked at his own hands. He was fully human again. It did not get the blood off.

"Don't just stand there—" he looked up at Subz and watched him stop. For a brief, precious moment, Subz shifted his focus from Zam to Vitalasy. He watched as the gears turned in Subz's mind— the bed soaked with blood, the boy unconscious in their bed, and Vitalasy, covered in blood from his chin to his arms.

Vitalasy couldn't read his face. Vitalasy had never seen Subz *look* at him like this before.

"Vitalasy," Subz said quietly, his voice firm, laced with something Vitalasy didn't recognize. "Did you do this?" He asked, and Vitalasy didn't want to answer. He couldn't say anything that his hands hadn't already said. That his body standing over Zam's empty chest didn't say.

"I— Listen—" He tried, but Subz silenced him with a look.

"Vitalasy," Subz said again, and Vitalasy wished Subz would stop saying his name in that tone. Vitalasy wished Subz would stop looking at him like *that*.

" *Tell me*, this wasn't you , " Subz said, with so much vitriol and pain in his voice that Vitalasy flinched. But there was nothing he could say. They'd always been shit at lying to each other.

"He *asked* me to," Vitalasy cried out, his voice weaker than he thought.

"You- You *tore open* his chest , " Subz said incredulously, the statement coming out like a question.

"I did- But I was trying to help!"

Zam gasped again, and that broke the moment long enough for Subz to turn his attention away from Vitalasy. He wanted to run, he desperately wanted to get away, or get help, or do anything that wasn't helplessly staring at the loves of his life, both bleeding from where he'd hurt them. But his legs were frozen in place.

"You ate his heart," Subz accused. All the excuses and explanations bubbled up in Vitalasy's chest— he was choking on them, there was no one thing he could say to make this better.

"He's not human—" he choked out, finally. It wasn't a full explanation but it good as Vitalasy was going to get at his state. He ran a hand through his hair. "He's not human, and neither am I— Subz, you wouldn't get it—"

"What?"

"It's not— I didn't— I didn't *hurt him* . You don't know what it feels like—"

Subz stared at him. He was never one to push Vitalasy. Instead he looked down at Zam and at the wound, still closing slowly. Subz looked at him again and very, very quietly said:

"Get out."

Vitalasy could feel his heart jump into overdrive, overwhelmed with fear like he'd never felt in his entire life. Predator animal turned prey. He listened. He'd have to be a fool not to. But that same fool in him lingered at the doorway, looking at Subz' back.

He whispered something, because he had to know, he had to ask.

"Are you afraid of me?" Subz' whole body tensed.

"No," and this time, Vitalasy recognized the lie.

Vi, hearteater. Zam, hearthaver. What did Subz think would happen? Hand holding? Jk the multiple hearts thing was new

nah but fr lmk if you have any questions i've been writing four 4 days and have been thinking of this for the past 8 months i know this story inside out but i dont know how well i told it

old collar

Chapter Summary

He wished Vitalasy ate him instead.

Chapter Notes

Subz depression arc part 2: electric boogaloo

TW for gore (human) and animal harm but the animal comes harmed, it doesn't GET harmed, i guess gore then,

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

Vitalasy was gone. It all happened too fast for Subz to take notice of any of the details.

He was looking at his bed– their bed– soaked in blood and torn apart. Zam like a fallen angel in the middle of it, asleep. Or in a coma. Subz didn't know what to do about either of those possibilities. Instead he threw himself into cleaning up.

He wiped the blood off of Zam as best as he could– choking on the smell of iron and gold coming from him. Subz wasn't squeamish but he had to fight against the urge to vomit. There was just so much *blood*, and the only thing that kept him sane was the fact that Zam still breathed. He was still alive, somehow.

Subz grabbed a clean blanket from their closet and some towels from the bathroom and then spread them over the sofa. He didn't run back into the room but it was a damn near thing. The sight of it still as dizzying as it was the first time.

A person shouldn't lose that much blood and still live. A person shouldn't lose that much blood– period. And yet. Zam laid there, peaceful. In jeans that were torn on the knees and no shirt. Subz could almost pretend he was just taking a nap, and not...

He couldn't linger. He couldn't let himself pause and think.

Subz wrapped one arm around Zam's back and the other one under his knees and hoisted him up, being careful so that Zam's head leaned on his chest and didn't dangle. Zam wasn't small– they were practically the same height, the one inch difference serving only to make forehead kisses easier for Subz. But now Zam felt tiny in his arms, precious, fragile. So much so that he didn't want to let him go. His knees hit the edge of the sofa, and Subz pressed a

kiss to his forehead before placing him down, lowering himself at the same time to kneel beside him. He leaned over and pressed his face to Zam's chest.

The wound was nothing more than an angry pink mark now, sitting at where his ribs met. Subz could hear his heart beating in an almost steady rhythm. *One-two-three, pause, one-two-three, pause.*

Then he pushed himself up and leaned into his face, listening to Zam breathe. He pressed a kiss to his cheek, to his nose. He caressed the side of Zam's face, and belatedly realized the ache in his own heart.

He wished Vitalasy ate him instead.

"Zam," he whispered. He didn't think he could speak above a whisper anymore anyways. "You can sleep now," he added, running his hand through Zam's hair, wincing as it caught on dried blood crusts. "You can sleep now," he kissed his cheek. Subz got up and covered Zam with a thin blanket. He didn't move. The air conditioner continued to hum.

Subz bit the inside of his cheek and walked into the kitchen, looking for a trash bag and gloves. Once he found them he went back to the bedroom. He stripped the bed and shoved all of the pillows and blankets into the trash bag.

Next up would be the mattress, but as soon as Subz lifted it in order to roll it up blood started dripping out of it and onto the floor and the sound of it made his stomach turn. Buckets it was.

He was sure they had some in the basement, but as he was grabbing his keys he caught sight of himself in the mirror. There was blood on his hands and face that he didn't even remember getting there.

Subz couldn't stop looking.

He couldn't fathom that this was his reality.

A monster in his bedroom and a dying boy in his living room. And he was standing there, covered in blood in the hallway.

Would it ever stop?

He turned before he could see the tears fall, keeping his eyes down in the bathroom as he walked to the sink and washed his hands and face with cold water. He walked into the bedroom again, this time looking at anything other than the bed, and got some old clothes from the dresser.

Subz left the apartment and locked it behind himself, then ran down the two flights of stairs to the basement passing uneventfully. He was half-expecting to see Vitalasy, but he was gone. He grabbed a mop and bucket and other cleaning things that might be helpful and ran back upstairs. Trying the door before remembering he had locked it. His hands were shaking, his

brain was scattered in all directions— wanting to stick by Zam’s side and his urgent need to clean up the scene of the crime.

In the next twelve hours he managed to do both.

Subz didn’t sleep the entire night.

In the bedroom, he rolled up the carpet they got the first week they moved in and wrapped it with tape and plastic bags. He mopped up the blood and cleaned the floors with bleach. He drained the mattress, collecting the blood in buckets and then pouring it in the bathtub. When he was sure he got most of it out he tied it and likewise wrapped it in trash bags.

And because he couldn’t look at it anymore, Subz dismantled the bed frame too.

When he was done the bedroom was empty and clean, the smell of bleach having destroyed any sight or scent of blood. It didn’t resemble a bedroom at all.

Zam still hadn’t woken up.

Subz checked on him periodically, every ten minutes or so at first and then less and less as time went on. He was breathing, his heart still that unsteady rhythm, but he had not moved even an inch in all the time Subz was running around cleaning, and that unsettled him. Zam had always been a restless sleeper, and only calmed down if Subz held him in his sleep.

Subz didn’t want to think of who was on the other side of Zam those nights, holding him just as tight.

There was no head nor tail of Vitalasy, and Subz didn’t know whether to be worried or grateful. He noticed Vitalasy’s phone was missing, so he knew that he could probably contact him— but that’s all he let himself think of Vitalasy before he threw himself to work again.

He couldn’t sleep. He was afraid of what he’d see if he closed his eyes.

Instead Subz started carrying the trash to his car. He was focused trying to calculate the least amount of time he’d have to drive to burn them in the desert when he ran into his neighbor.

“Need some help with that son?” The man offered. Subz would be lying to himself if he said he ever knew the man’s name, but he recognized his face well enough.

“Thank you, sir. But this is the last of it,” he mumbled, trying to run past him as quick as possible. The last thing he needed was potential witnesses.

“Put your boy in the doghouse, eh?” he asked, and it made Subz stop. He turned, and saw the man looking at him with a smile. When Subz said nothing he continued. “Saw him leave with his tail between his legs yesterday, didn’t realize the fight was so bad you were throwing his bed away,” he added, and his smile shifted into something sadder, as if he was sorry for them both.

“I—” Subz started, trying to figure out an explanation. “No, this is my bed,” he said, and hoisted the planks of the frame on his shoulder as if to prove his point. “Vi will—” *be back*

before dinner , he wanted to say. But he didn't really believe that, nor was he sure he wanted that. The man opened his mouth to speak again but Subz cut him off before he could give any advice. "Just tell him to text me if you see him," Subz said and turned to leave. "It's not like I took his key."

The desert was scorching hot, and yet Subz still struggled to get the fire to start. The bags were starting to leak, and the wooden frame of their bed was coated in lacquer that refused to catch fire. But Subz was relentless, and soon enough with some gasoline and patience, he was staring at a foul smelling bonfire.

He got in his car but didn't leave. He was far from the main road, near the old abandoned gold mines. It was Tuesday noon and even the punkest of teens wouldn't bother going out into the desert now. But he still stayed.

He stayed and listened as the wood cracked. The plastic melted. The blood charred and evaporated. The AC in his car was going haywire and the first stars were starting to peek through as the bonfire turned to embers, and the embers turned to ash.

Subz got out of his car and grabbed his shovel, and then scattered around ashes and sand until they were indistinguishable. Subz looked up and jumped when he saw a coyote across from him, eastward, where the darkness was rising.

"I'm still not afraid of you," he said, and this time he was convinced of it. He stared at the coyote, face apathetic, his jackrabbit heart anything but. Then a gust of wind. A dust cloud. And the coyote was gone, leaving Subz unsure if he was ever even there, not that he cared. He threw the shovel in the trunk of his car.

Only then was he finished. Only then did he get in his car, and leave, the snakes in the desert watching his retreat.

He was losing track of time. He couldn't sleep and didn't remember eating. On his way back he suddenly remembered Walter, and swerved into Zam's house driveway faster than it was safe. The white ball of fluff was whining at the door but happy to see him, and Subz made sure that its water and food bowls were full. The dog didn't like how he smelled like smoke, that much Subz could obviously tell, but it still leaned into his hand and let him run his fingers through its fur.

"You alright?" He asked like he would ask a human. Subz didn't fully understand why animals needed to be babied, a fact that Vi and Zam loved to make fun of him for. The dog barked in agreement regardless. "Going out to do your business on time, yes?" The dog didn't answer this one, so Subz sniffed around. Half of his senses were still burned from all the bleach he'd used, but he didn't smell any dog shit, so there was that. "Good boy Walter," he praised, crouching down to properly scratch behind the dog's ears.

“Zam will be back soon, so don’t make any mess here, alright?” At Zam’s name, the dog started wagging his tail and panting, excitedly looking around. Subz tried to pet it again, but it avoided his hands, looking for its owner. “Oh I see how it is, I gave up smoking for you and you still only care about *that* guy,” he got up and immediately tried to lean onto the wall for support, but collided with it hard when it was further away than he expected. His vision blurred as polaroid photos fluttered from their strings from the impact, one unlucky specimen slipping from where Zam must have hastily jammed it into the edge of his pinboard. Subz sighed, but bent over to grab it before Walter could.

Subz squinted his eyes at it, he didn’t remember Zam taking this one.

He must have passed out or something, because he was asleep on the couch with his head in Vitalasy’s lap. Vitalasy had one hand in his hair, and the other one reaching for Zam. Zam wasn’t looking at the camera either, only the profile of his face was visible, his eyes soft, looking at either Subz or Vitalasy or both. It was so painfully soft. Vitalasy grinning and Zam smiling, Subz oblivious to it all. He tucked it into his jacket pocket for safekeeping.

He glanced at the pinboard, making sure no other polaroids had fallen out, only to see a bundle of happy memories staring back at him. A kitchen with Vitalasy and Zam covered in frosting. A living room with Subz and Walter, asleep, the very first time Subz had stayed over. One of the million times the three of them went to the diner, milkshakes and all. Even Pangi was there, his smile shy with Zam’s arm wrapped around him.

Tears started to well, his vision blurred. Subz scratched at his neck until the lump in his throat was buried, far from where anyone could see, and wiped at his eyes. Walter whined at him, but Subz just turned.

When he came back to the apartment it was dark, but Zam was still there, asleep. Subz tenderly brushed his thumb over his cheek and only then noticed how dirty his hands were. So he left Zam to go shower again.

The sight of their empty bedroom unsettled him. But it was better than the blood. It was better than blood. He got dressed and then turned his attention to the laundry basket– there was a bloody shirt in it. Subz snatched it up immediately and tried rolling it out, but the dried blood left it wrinkly and unrecognizable. He didn’t have the heart to throw it away, even though that would be the right option.

So Subz did laundry.

And as the washing machine spun and spun, he brought a cold rag to Zam’s face and chest and wiped off the blood that was left. He hoped the cold would shock him awake, but all it did was make him break into goosebumps and occasionally shiver.

He even washed his hair, the strands that still had crusted blood in them, and brushed it. And every time he sat down to take care of Zam or do the laundry, getting up got a little more difficult.

Subz's eyes wouldn't focus, but from the lights he realized it was dawn again, (or dusk? He didn't know.) For the last time, he sat down on the floor next to Zam. He pulled the photograph out and looked at it, but then he felt himself starting to cry again, so he put it on the coffee table.

Zam was still breathing, his heartbeat still the same. Subz was thinking of calling the hospital. But he couldn't move and his phone was so far away. He was so, so, tired.

There was a howl. It should have been significant, it should have frozen him in his place, it should have set his nerves on fire. But in his state, Subz was only annoyed that Vitalasy was being loud when Subz could barely keep his eyes open. He felt relieved, too. That Vitalasy was safe, that Vitalasy was alive. All this time, he wasn't even aware he was carrying that worry with him.

He hoped he was okay.

He used the last of his energy to take hold of Zam's arm, cradling it close to his chest.

And so, after almost three days with no sleep, Subz passed out on the floor next to Zam.

It was snowing. Subz was standing in front of his childhood home, watching snow cover the roof, dust the windowsills and carpet the walkway. The wind was blowing something fierce, a storm Subz had never experienced in his life, but he was warm. He put a hand to his chest and it was glowing, a light the color of honey seeping through his fingers.

"Subz," came a voice from the door. He looked up and saw his mother waiting for him, impatience written on her face. "Vitalasy's come over, I let him up in your room," she said, and Subz remembered.

"Right," was the only thing he answered, and he walked into his house. The windows were closed but the snow still seemed to be coming in, and he didn't see where his mother went. But he had to go upstairs, Vitalasy was waiting and they had homework to do. He took his time walking up, watching snowflakes drift through his house.

The hallway stretched on forever but that wasn't important since his room was the first one on the right. His chest was still glowing, and it was snowing inside, but that was fine. He opened the door and walked into the room.

Subz saw Vitalasy and Zam tangled up in their bed, not Subz's, covered in blood. Zam's chest was torn from sternum to navel and Vitalasy's entire stomach was missing, his spine visible from where he was laying.

Subz realized very suddenly that this was a nightmare. He pinched himself and tried counting his fingers, but no matter how hard he tried to will himself to wake up he couldn't. It kept snowing, snowflakes melting onto their warm bodies and then not as they cooled. Subz tried to run away, but the door was locked. He banged on the door until it shattered but there was a wall behind it.

He turned around. Now that the snow covered all of the gore, they looked almost peaceful. Content. Subz still wasn't cold. He looked up but the snow didn't seem to have a source, it just kept falling.

He remained in place, refusing to touch them, afraid of what might happen. He just watched as the snow covered them, leaving only a vague impression at first and then nothing at all. Subz was alone in a room with the corpses of Zam and Vitalasy, and snow. Lots and lots of snow.

Until all of it faded from focus and he was looking at nothing. And then he was looking at a jackrabbit. And then three jackrabbits. He forgot he was dreaming.

One of the animals looked at him as more and more of them appeared, hopping into view. He noticed, with startling clarity, that the jackrabbit was the same one he had found in the middle of the road once.

It was missing its heart. Subz tilted his head and the jackrabbit sniffed the air, exposing its hollow rib cage.

“He ate you too, didn't he?”

Subz wanted to tell them he was sorry. He didn't. He wasn't.

In the middle of the Nevada desert, it began to snow. All of the jackrabbits looked at him at once, his glowing heart reflected in their eyes.

“What kind of monster are you?”

Subz woke up with a gasp, all of the jackrabbits back in his chest and hammering against it. The fresh memory of his nightmare replaced with the old memories of his past two days. He got up, his hand reaching for Zam only to find the couch empty. His mind was still foggy, but he forced himself up to his feet to look for him.

“Zam?” he asked, stumbling through the apartment, checking the kitchen and bathroom and bedroom. “Zam?!” he called out, but nothing and no one answered.

He noticed with a start that the front door was cracked open. Light of the midday sun pouring in. He glanced down at the floor— Zam's shoes were missing.

The fact of the matter was simple.

Zam was gone.

so fun fact, this story was initially going to be titled "stray dog, dog house" as an homage or whatever to richard siken's "straw dog, straw house" poem because i think it's beautiful and if you read it you'll definitely notice how much like, at least the vitalasubzam parts of this story are inspired by that particular poem

but then i had this thought. of Subz sleep deprived watching over Zam, waiting for him to wake up. and because Zam has to disappear at the end of it i thought of. "Zam was asleep for three days and Subz was awake for two of them." As this like, inevitability of it, right? Cause Zam HAS to disappear at the end of it, right? The autopsy has to happen, the Pangi thing has to happen, Roshambo needs to get the heart and dissect it. Zam HAS to leave, but Subz loves him and doesn't WANT to let him get in harm's way, no?

and i thought oh well okay, it'll be short, right? it's just him cleaning up the blood or whatever, and then i kept adding stuff. and i couldn't stop adding stuff. i need to stop. so this is me stopping. with this one, im not abandoning the au or anything lmao

anyway. another thing i thought of was the Subz nightmare stuff, i really liked writing that.

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