

a strange appetite

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a strange appetite

by Anonymous

Summary

chronicled experience of Subz' highschool and college years with his best friend and roommate Vitalasy

you're a killer

Chapter Notes

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

It was a strange time in senior year high school. His girlfriend had broken up with him and he'd decided that maybe it was best if he just kept his head down for the rest of the year. Maybe it was best to just focus on his studies and getting out of this town. He'd decided, that, besides his family, he wouldn't make any bonds that would keep him there.

And then, a biology project.

And then, the eyes that just wouldn't leave him alone.

And then -

They made an odd pair - nobody would have really thought Vitalasy of all people would be best friends with Subz. Vitalasy, who was on the student council *and* on the school's basketball team *and* an honors student *and* -

Vitalasy, who was voted prom king.

And Subz. Voted most likely to leave town the day of graduation.

Vitalasy was shit at biology though, Subz had to carry him through the entire project. But no matter how loudly he complained Vitalasy wouldn't leave him alone.

Best friends! They were best friends. What a damn cliché. Always in each other's orbit. Not a single day of high school passing by without Subz seeing his smiling face, without feeling those eyes on him. He didn't know yet what it was, he didn't know yet why he didn't like his best friend's girlfriend. He didn't know the strange feeling of bitterness he carried with him, watching them dance at prom, wondering why he even came. (Vitalasy had looked so sad and disappointed when Subz said he didn't want to go. Of course he relented. Of course he came. For his best friend.) He didn't even realize, until Vitalasy has cornered him in a darkened school hallway, his girlfriend's lipstick still on his collar, and kissed him stupid.

Right.

That didn't really change anything though.

There was still the question of the girlfriend. The question of future plans. Subz' desire to run run run out of this town, his heart like a jackrabbit in a cage. And it kept beating faster. Every time he applied for a new school, every time Vitalasy looked at him *like that*. Every time he thought his future could hold something sweet for him.

But he didn't really have a sweet tooth. Sweetness was something for Vitalasy, the diner's milkshake melting on his tongue as Subz scrawled on the pages of his notebook, another idea he was sure to discard.

"Slow down, you'll get a brainfreeze," he scolded, and Vitalasy just smiled, not a cruel bone in his body.

"I just like milkshakes! You should get one," he'd say, and then order one before Subz could

protest. Of course, Vitalasy would end up drinking that one too. He was the one who loved to eat, and Subz -

Well, it didn't really matter what Subz liked. As long as it brought him away from here. He could dream all he wanted, but staying up and studying was what was going to carry him to graduation. Sleep came second to his studies. Besides, the coyotes howling around his house wouldn't let him sleep anyway. Keep your head down, Subz. Stick to your studies, Subz. Ignore the hungry looks Vitalasy gives you when you pass him in the hallway. Give in when he finally corners you, it was hopeless anyways, you've always been weak when it came to him.

Stand your ground regardless, tell Vitalasy he has a girlfriend.

Vitalasy was his best friend, of course he understood. Subz could be the one thing the golden boy couldn't get. Subz would be the one to honor their friendship, since Vitalasy was so keen on ruining it.

The coyotes kept howling outside his house, but other than that graduation arrived without much fanfare.

He clutched his diploma like it was a flight ticket. A prisoner's release paper. He was free. He was free. His eyes sought out Vitalasy, tall and proud giving a speech on stage, their school's pride and joy. Subz' best friend. And he became so overwhelmed with the need to take his hand and run away. Take Vitalasy with him and leave this town in the dust where it belonged.

Maybe he'd ask him. Ask him out for milkshakes and food. Ask Vitalasy to follow him to the ends of the world.

It was a small ask, really. Subz would already do the same for him.

So he clutched his diploma in hand.

He found Vitalasy after his speech.

He asked for a moment of his time.

He watched him smile, watched him light up.

He heard the blaring sirens of the firemen.

He followed - as they all did - and watched as Vitalasy's house turned to ash.

He watched as Vitalasy lost everything.

He watched as Vitalasy turned to him.

He held his hand. That was all he could do.

All his future plans turned to ash. Subz' grandparents had left him an apartment and his parents never really liked how close he was to his best friend so he moved there, still stuck in town. Vitalasy's family left - but he didn't. Subz didn't really understand, just held his best friend in the night, trying his best not to let the grief in. He slept on the couch because there wasn't a second bed and then he slept in the same bed because the couch was uncomfortable. They never got another

bed. Vi's girlfriend left him only two weeks after the fire. Because she was moving out for college. Because she wanted a fun summer. Parties and bonfires and driving out in the desert.

Vitalasy couldn't do any of it. So Subz got them ice cream and made sure the air con worked and the TV played nothing but shitty reality TV, just how Vi liked it.

It would be easy to say Subz felt resentment at having to take a gap year. At having to stay. But it never even crossed his mind. All he had was fondness, and a body to keep him warm in the desert nights. He'd do it all again, too. Set all his plans on fire just for the chance to listen to Vitalasy sing in the kitchen, the smell of something delicious sizzling on the stove, ice cream from the corner store melting in his hand. He'd set himself on fire just for the chance to kiss him in the night, just them, wrapped up in each other as the summer heat fizzled out.

So high school was strange, but he was getting used to strange. The sound of coyotes outside his window didn't bother him anymore with Vi around, and his heart only stuttered when they kissed, and he could live with that. He could live like that.

Picking up a couple of odd jobs during his gap year, sometimes even driving out of town but always coming back. Always. Vitalasy started to smile fully again, even inside of their apartment, and Subz was learning that he liked it. That he wanted it. He could've stayed content, found himself a job that was less odd and more stable and stayed like that. Stayed with Vitalasy like that. But Vitalasy knew he didn't want that, and Subz was realizing he didn't want that either. So Vi found a school - remote, online, programs that suited both of them. They could stay in their apartment, earning enough to stave away the dreaded student loans and cover the bills and not have to pay rent. The only unusual cost was paying for gas when they had to drive out to campus to take their exams and seminars.

He wanted it.

So a year after graduation. A year after the fire. He started college knowing what he wanted, not shy about holding hands.

He wouldn't call Vitalasy his boyfriend though. Of course, by everyone's definition, that's what they *were*. Everyone had called them boyfriends during high-school even before Vitalasy's girlfriend left him. And sure, they lived in the same apartment and shared a bed and kissed more often than not but. But boyfriend wasn't the right word for how he felt about Vitalasy. It didn't even begin to encompass it. He'd trace Vitalasy's cheekbones with his thumb, watching for any constellations in the dotted freckles there, and Vi would watch him back. And Subz still couldn't define the feeling he got from when he felt those eyes on him, but he thought that loved was a good start.

Of course, he slipped up sometimes. They'd be sitting in the same diner, just like in high school, and he'd watch Vitalasy dip his fries into his milkshake.

'My boyfriend likes to eat,' he thought, and roll his eyes and tell Vi not to chew with his mouth open.

"I'm enjoying my food," he'd say through a mouthful of fries, and Subz would shove at his face.

"You're being a public menace is what you're doing," he'd scoff, and Vi would remember his manners for the night and forget them again by the next time. Because Subz loved treating Vi no matter what he did, because Vi was one of the only people who could drag Subz out to socialize. His eternal soft spot.

College passed like that, grossly in love, always having someone to lean on no matter how much his lesson plan or workload drove him up the wall. The stress of a difficult exam forgotten about with a held hand and a sky full of stars. Because he knew if it all got too much Vitalasy would grab a blanket and drive him out of town, lie down with him on the ground, and watch the night sky. Just the two of them, as jackrabbits ran around in the dark, and coyotes howled their terrible song. And all of that quiet to Vi's heartbeat underneath his ear, lulling him to sleep.

And all of it was almost enough to make Subz forget how strange everything was. He lived in a town that wouldn't let him leave. (He didn't really believe that.) (It was just that there was one too many coincidence and Subz rambled when and if Vi convinced him to have a drink with him.) Vitalasy's house wasn't the only one that had spontaneously caught on fire, it happened often enough that it *should* have been investigated as a crime. Although, none of the fires after the first one were as destructive, there was still no action to look into it. And everybody knew why that was. And no one would talk about it. It wasn't any of Subz' business.

And really, what could he do against their local crime lord?

Their town really ought to have been too small for someone like that, but Clown was set on terrorizing it. And if the human threat wasn't enough, there were also rumors about creatures that haunted the desert. And Subz...

He could only pretend he didn't care so much before he had to admit that it worried him. It worried him every time he left Vitalasy alone, it got worse every time he arrived home. Those college towns and seminars were all so calm and pretty, so at odds from where he lived. But he hoped they'd make it. They were in their senior year now, so close to the finish line. They'd sell the apartment and run away into the night, hand in hand, throwing high their graduation caps. They just had to hold out a little longer.

"You're back on Friday then?" he asked, leaning on the trunk of his car. He'd already packed everything. He had two exams this week and had to leave already. Vitalasy put a finger to his chin in a way he always did while he was thinking.

"Uh! Saturday more likely? I don't know how long they'll take on Friday," he said, and Subz took his hand, starting to trace patterns into his palm.

"Make sure to leave the apartment clean," he said, pretending like he wasn't worried. Pretending like it didn't annoy him that they had to make the trip separately, like it wouldn't gnaw on him the entire time whether or not Vi was safe. He still dreamed of coyotes, still heard them in the night sometimes.

"I will, I will," Vi said with a smile. He took Subz' hands and brought them to his lips and kissed them. Vi understood, it was the look in his eyes that soothed Subz' heart more than anything.

"You're so cringe," he groaned, but he loved it when Vitalasy kissed his hands so he kissed Vi to make sure he knew it. To make sure he kept doing it in the future. He broke the kiss reluctantly, he really, *really* didn't want to go. He also didn't like the idea of not seeing Vitalasy at all for a week.

Maybe finals were getting to him. Or maybe this town was finally driving him insane. It was anyone's guess.

He leaned his forehead against Vitalasy's.

"You leave Wednesday," he said simply. Seeking reassurance.

"You come back Thursday."

"And we'll see each other on Saturday."

"Right!" Vitalasy said. *'So you don't have to worry,'* remained unspoken.

"Right."

"Don't worry Subz, you'll pass those exams," Vi ruffled his hair.

"Dude," he said in protest, but let him have his way. He could've stopped him, Subz had always been a bit stronger, but he missed Vi's touch already.

"Come on, dude! You'll miss your exam! Go!" Vi gently nudged him despite his tone of voice, and Subz relented. He kissed him on the cheek one last time and got in the car, watching Vi wave at him all the while from his rear view mirror. He playfully rolled his eyes but that just made Vi wave more. He gave in and gave a little wave of his own, and drove off. Vitalasy didn't stop waving his hand until Subz was out of sight.

That would be the last time Subz saw Vitalasy, before the change came.

Chapter End Notes

huge fan of love and devotion and the consequences thereof. huge fan of building a life on your own with the person you love. huge fan of vitalasubz also. geez, subz, why are you such a worry wart, it's not like anything strange has ever happened in this town.

it might be helpful to know this story is set before the midmystics, roshambo, and zam stories. the timeline will be more clear as the series goes on

and i'm your best friend

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings in End Notes! Please check them prior to reading!!!

Also there's a lovely person who wrote a fic with highschool vitalasubz based on this [go read it here!!](#) it's 100% horror free and adorable. omg.

chapter titles from The Front Bottoms "Be nice to me"

This fic wouldn't exist without Hozier

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

Being back at college was such a stark change from his desert town that Subz for a moment forgot to worry in the chaos. It was a balmy spring, cherry blossoms and daffodils everywhere, along with smudged papers and empty coffee cups. He was never one for coffee, that was always more Vitalasy's thing. He was so particular about it too, Subz was barred from making it unless Vi was really desperate. And there he was again, worrying about Vitalasy alone in their apartment surrounded by coyotes instead of finishing up his coffee and reviewing his notes.

The fear was irrational, he knew that. But Subz wouldn't calm down until his exams were finished and he was back home, Vi safely in his arms. The only thing that gave him respite was the occasional quick text and reply, even though he really had to study, and Vitalasy knew that. But Subz was dying inside and just wanted to be home.

The last text he got from Vitalasy was on Wednesday morning, saying how he was about to head off, and Subz had smiled and texted him a quick drive safe before his phone promptly turned off on him. Of course. He'd forgotten to plug in the charger in the evening, and he was about to head into his final.

He'd be fine. He could at least pretend the anxiety wasn't bothering him. Pretend he wasn't having these thoughts, so that when he came home he could breathe his silent sigh of relief and forget this entire ordeal.

Subz finished his exam. His car was too old to charge his phone, and all the gas stations were out of chargers- either broken or sold out.

He found himself alone, in silence, driving down the highway back home. His phone dead, the watch on the dashboard supplying it was 1 am, as if the empty roads and his heavy eyelids weren't obvious signs. But he only had a little ways to go, he'd rest when he was home.

He slammed his foot on the breaks, lurching forward with the force.

There was something in the middle of the road. From the distance at first he'd thought it was a corpse - but now that he looked at it closer it was just an animal. Roadkill. He put a hand over his own jackrabbit heart, and focused his eyes.

It... it was a hare.

He ran a hand across his face, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel nervously. He should really just drive off. He should really ignore it and go back home. Not let it bother him. Let someone else take care of it.

But despite the act of selfishness he liked to put on, Subz got out of the car and went to grab the shovel he kept in his trunk, only to realize it was gone. It must've been in Vi's car. He sighed and grabbed a towel.

In the harsh glare of car lights, he scooped up the hare off the asphalt - because it *was* a hare, small for its size and covered in its own blood - and carried it to the side of the road in a sling.

He hated to look at it, but couldn't take his eyes away. There was that something about being human, and not being able to take your eyes off of a tragedy.

His mind, unhelpful, supplied an image of Vitalasy standing in front of the wreckage of his former family home.

Wincing, he lowered the hare on the dusty ground - too hard and cracked to dig out any kind of grave, the poor creature would be left to coyotes, but it was better fate than having your heart ground against the asphalt. He didn't want to think about the almost precise wound on the hare's chest, he refused to think about whether or not it still had a heart in there, or if whatever had killed the hare had done so by eating its heart. That would be ridiculous. He got into the car and got home without incident, unable to shake off the image of dead hare from his mind.

The apartment door opened without much whining, and he dropped his bag in the corner before passing out in their bed. He was too exhausted, he'd deal with the mess in the morning.

What the fuck, Vitalasy?

Subz knew when he made Vi promise to leave the apartment clean there were low chances of that actually happening, but he didn't expect the place to be almost completely trashed. He'd only plugged in his phone to charge when he woke up, to no new messages. It made his skin prickle in worry, so he texted Vi that he'd arrived home and asked him how he was doing. Which he now regretted, he should have been meaner in his text, because their apartment just looked *awful*. Clothes lined every inch of the floor, hanging off the doors, handles, chairs. Dirty dishes piled on the sink, cabinet doors were strewn open, as if Vi had been searching for something before he left, but what he was looking for in their dump kitchen drawer was beyond Subz. Something gnawed on him, but he ignored it. Vi must have been in a strange mood - which didn't excuse the state of the apartment at all, but was a better explanation than someone breaking in.

Just to make sure, he checked their stashes. Cash hidden under false drawer bottoms and behind picture frames, jewelry Vi's parents had given him before they'd fucked right off into their new life. It was all there. Even Subz' grandma's ring, from its barely hidden place in the sock drawer Vi had left opened and exposed, was still there.

Subz collapsed on the floor, holding the little ring box, unaware of how stressed out he actually was before he'd started frantically checking all their precious belongings.

All of their stuff was still here. All of Vi's stuff was still there. He was still here, he'd come back.

The world outside was strangely quiet.

Vitalasy wasn't responding to his texts. Which wasn't unusual, but it bothered him still. No calls, no texts. It was Thursday afternoon and Subz was only getting through the clean up job because he found the stash of cigs that Vi had promised him he'd thrown away. They were shit at lying to each other. It was comforting, if not annoying at times. Regardless, the cigarettes burned away one by one, some he didn't even touch after lighting them, letting them burn away as he leaned on his balcony railing, watching the world pass by.

It was quiet, unnervingly quiet. His jackrabbit heart cried tears of joy at the lack of coyotes, but his rational brain understood the tension brewing in town. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. And he didn't know if it had something to do with Vitalasy leaving their apartment a mess and then not replying to his texts or not. It could be coincidence. It could just be Vi being messy, lazy, busy. Poor signal and low battery.

But Subz didn't believe in coincidences.

He sighed, grabbed his wallet and keys. He at least had to get something to eat. Maybe someone at the diner would be feeling chatty. Maybe someone would explain the weird tension in the air to him. Maybe someone would *know* something. Anything. Or at least he'd get dinner.

He barely saw anyone on the street as he drove through, which, fair, it was a small town. Maybe they were all busy. Maybe there was a party, or an event he didn't know about. He'd ask Vitalasy - he was the more chatty one of the two of them. He enjoyed social events unlike Subz, but, his boyfriend was MIA at the moment.

Subz suspected the diner was closed as he approached but only got confirmation when he was parked in front of it. Empty, on a Thursday evening. He ran a hand through his hair. He could count on one hand every time he'd seen this diner closed in his entire life.

Well, then.

There was nothing he could do, realistically. He drove himself to the grocery store and picked up something to eat along with some basic groceries and went back home, seeing even less people on his drive back. It was all so strange. He stared at the microwave plate turning in rhythm with the electrical hum. He wanted to leave, things just didn't seem right, but he couldn't leave without Vitalasy. He couldn't. They'd promised that to each other, somehow, without saying.

The land that shall receive thee dying, in the same will I die: and there will I be buried.

Or something. Subz didn't go to church. He debated it for a moment, thinking it may offer him some information, but swiftly dismissed the thought. He had better things to do.

Friday morning rolled around, and he didn't have anything better to do. Which was bad, because the idleness was going to kill him. The idleness was going to stuff him with worry, roll him up in doubt, light him up with church candles and smoke him down until all that was left of him was bones for the coyotes to gnaw on. Which were still quiet. The town, blissfully, seemed to be regaining a little bit of its normalcy. And by a little bit he meant that when he opened the pack of cigs he bought at the grocery store last night and went to smoke on the balcony, he saw a man walking his dog. Which was more than he saw yesterday.

Flicking the still lit bud down on the ground, Subz decided he couldn't take it anymore. Vi still wasn't replying - *fine*. He was mad, not clingy. Subz would find something to occupy his time, too. He called up his old boss at the car workshop and it turned out that he still hadn't found a replacement since Subz quit, and he was welcome to come in for a shift or three. Great. Just great.

At least the apartment was clean now.

He thought to himself as he rolled up the sleeves of his hoodie. They were too long, they'd always been too long, because the hoodie wasn't bought for him and technically wasn't his. But it was in their closet.

Subz had to stop thinking about it. He couldn't stop thinking about it. He arrived at the workshop and greeted his old boss and started working and yet Vitalasy was still there in his head, dancing around the edges of every thought he had.

The afternoon passed, and he was proud of himself for not forgetting how to fix cars despite the well of knowledge in his mind on business psychology and marketing. He was still good at it.

The hoodie waited for him, thrown over a chair in the small office because despite his pettiness Subz couldn't stand the idea of getting it stained with car oil. He lingered. He wanted to ask his boss if anything unusual had happened, but he was more cagey than usual. He sounded fine over the phone, but when Subz had arrived for his shift he looked like he was reminded of something. Or someone. Whatever, he could have it his way.

Subz was used to the odd looks. He was bisexual, he was antisocial, he lived with the guy whose house burned down and whose parents were run out of town. There was a long, long list of reasons why people in town would stop and stare at him. He didn't care, he was used to the way his skin prickled with discomfort. But if it had something to do with Vitalasy's disappearance...

He shouldn't think like that. There was no evidence Vitalasy wasn't just extremely busy with his college seminars to send Subz a text back. There was no evidence of foul play - despite their trashed apartment.

Subz grabbed the hoodie and left the workshop to grab dinner.

It was foolish of him to think just because he couldn't hear wild animals stalking his neighborhood that he could sleep. He stared at the bedroom ceiling and it stared back. If he glared at it enough, he could see eyes amongst the stars taped to it, but then he'd blink and they'd disappear. He tried his breathing exercises to no avail - all the sheep he'd counted too - but sleep would just simply not come. There was still no message from Vitalasy, and at this point he'd given up worrying. He just

wanted an answer - Subz just wanted him to come home. The night was so quiet he could hear the clock ticking from the living room, a metronome to the buzzing of the upstairs neighbor's air conditioning. Nothing came. Neither sleep nor the coyotes, and at some point he gave up rolling around their bed and got out. He didn't make the bed, the hoodie he'd worn that day stayed there like a drowning man in a wine dark sea, but instead opened the balcony door.

It was barely cooler than the day, but it was better than nothing. There was no wind, and so the ashes from his cigarette fell straight down. He knew, doubtlessly, that his downstairs neighbor would complain about the ashes landing in her flower pots, but he couldn't be bothered at the moment. He just needed Vi to come home. It was already Saturday, it was already time for him to come home. Subz couldn't even sleep the hours away, he was just stuck there waiting, hours dragging on like years with the weight of his concern.

He flicked the cigarette bud into the darkness, following its descent like a comet through the night, until something caught his eye.

Two spots, shining bright in the darkness, like two halves of the same full moon, staring at him.

He stared back. Grabbed a cigarette. Lit it.

The howl of a coyote shattered the calm of the night like a catalyst. And it felt like a beginning. It felt like an ending.

Subz went back in and grabbed his jacket, a torch light. The cigarette he stubbed out with his boot as soon as he left the building. He didn't bother with his car, he thought the noise might scare the creature off, which is the exact same reason he carried a blank. He didn't want to kill anything, truth be told he didn't have the stomach for it. Vi had called him soft for it once, Subz had scoffed and said it was just him being *normal*.

Well, normal people didn't go out chasing wild animals through the night, but if he didn't acknowledge it he didn't have to think about it.

Normal people didn't hear the coyotes as loudly and clearly as Subz did either, but he didn't like to think about it too much. It wasn't killing him, not like his curiosity was right now, so he could live with it. Subz could live with many things, suffer through them, but he couldn't live without Vitalasy.

Maybe that was why he gave chase so easily? Why he was so willing to believe this strange, wild animal would have the answers. There was just too much, he couldn't make sense of it.

His boots met sand, hissing. There was the shrubbery, the trees that could barely be called a forest with all the sand crawling through the roots. He was farther out than he would've thought, how long has he been running for?

Subz turned on his torch, but the darkness didn't yield to the light as it should have. He saw very little, neither moon nor torchlight would give him any comfort. It was just him, and the darkness, and the padding of the creature somewhere nearby. He realized, all of a sudden, in what silence he found himself in. There was no wind to rustle the branches or move the sand, no slithering, crawling creatures hiding in the darkness. There was no jackrabbit running pitifully from its predators, only his own heart thundering in his chest, threatening to break his ribs and run away. He moved the torch, dragging the light around as if that would do him any good, as if that would yield him anything. He didn't dare call out for the creature, even though it was the reason he was here. What was he hoping to achieve, really? He hadn't even brought his phone with him, he couldn't call anyone, take a picture as evidence. He was stranded in a desert oasis following a feral

coyote.

"What the fuck am I doing here?" he sighed quietly, defeated. He gripped the torch, wanting to at least get a good look of the coyote before he left. He wasn't one to trust authorities - look what they'd done about Clown, look at what happened when they tried.

Once again, there was Vitalasy on his mind. It made sense, maybe. It was spring. The end of the year was approaching soon, and along with it the anniversary of the fire. Vitalasy's house wasn't the only one that suffered an arson attack that year, but it was for sure the worst, and the only one with a death tied to it. Vitalasy's step-father, the only detective in town that was brave enough to look into Clown, to try and have him arrested and jailed, died in a housefire during their highschool graduation. Subz couldn't protect Vi from that, he couldn't protect them from the grief, the suspicious looks people gave them, superstitious. Thankfully, Vitalasy was never a target of Clown's anger, but it didn't stop people from having their doubts.

At least they had each other.

Subz wouldn't trust a cop, but a feral animal was different to Clown. At least they had reasoning for any cruelty, and they could be put down.

He stepped forward.

It was like breaking some sort of spell. The darkness fell away, the man in the Moon brightened the desert with his smile, and Subz' heart sank into his stomach.

Because that was Vitalasy's car in the desert, covered in a thin layer of sand and dust like it had been sitting there for five days. He approached it slowly, not hearing, in his stupor, the footsteps following behind him.

He reached the car, brushing his hand over the handle, collecting dust on his finger tips, and it was the last thing he felt before something heavy collided with his head, and his mind fell into oblivion.

Subz woke up with a start, and regretted it just as quick. His head was pounding, and the sun filtering in through the blinds wasn't helping. He realized he was at home, in their bed, his phone, as always, dead on the bedside table. The events of last night hit him like a semi-truck, but it didn't make any sense. How was he home? He looked at his hand and there was no dust, no sand from the desert. His jacket hung where he always left it, where he would have grabbed it in his late night frenzy, but it, too, held no evidence of his adventure. Could it have been a dream? All of it? The car, the coyote, the cigarette he had at the balcony?

He lay back down. He plugged in his phone and desperately tapped at the power button as soon as the screen read '1%'.

Still no messages.

It was 9 am on a Saturday, and Vi still wasn't home.

Subz put the phone back on the bedside table. It would be fine, it had to be. Vi had told him that the seminar might take longer, that he might come home late.

He wasn't doing either of them any favors worrying himself into insomnia and nightmares. Subz closed his eyes and fell back asleep.

At least that's what he tried. But he couldn't get the nightmare out of his head. After two hours he gave up, dressed himself and grabbed his wallet and keys. He'd bought groceries but he didn't feel like making himself any breakfast, so instead he drove out to the diner, ignoring the stomped cigarette bud at the front door, which could have been anyone's, really.

He arrived at their usual diner without much fanfare, sat himself at their usual booth with even less. The waitress swung by once and took his order, not bothering him more other than to give him his food. She knew - Vitalasy wasn't there, and Subz ordered very little. It was black coffee and an omelette, no milkshakes, fries, and pancakes. He sat and ate in peace and quiet, ignoring the odd look people gave him here and there. It was nothing out of the ordinary, he was a guy sitting alone and pathetic at a diner, eating his breakfast mere minutes before they stopped serving it and switched to their lunch menu. He didn't need to read the looks in their eyes, he already knew them.

Or at least he thought he did, until someone sat himself across from him.

Subz tried his best not to look shocked, instead leveling the man with a mean look.

The man was unaffected, a calm smile resting on his face the way a scowl was always on Subz'.

"Good morning Subz," he said, and it took Subz a moment to recognize him. The smooth tenor of his voice, the feather tattoos peeking under his sleeves, the eyes that were neither blue nor green but something in between. And a stupid name to boot.

"Hello?" He didn't mean it to come out as a question but it did. Subz didn't really pay much attention to Parrot while they were in highschool, despite Parrot's crowning achievements almost overshadowing Vitalasy's. He was all the synonyms for smart and then some, someone whose biographer would need a thick thesaurus thirty years into the future to describe. If Parrot managed to leave this town. If any of them did.

"Yes, I know we haven't talked much since high school, but I was hoping you still remembered me," a smile, all polite business. He offered out a hand to shake, "Parrot," he added, when Subz accepted the handshake.

"I know who you are," Subz said, his eyes narrowed. And then, to be a little shit, he added: "I thought you left town."

Parrot's wince was almost imperceptible, but it was enough vindication for Subz.

"No, I found a job here. Stimulate the local economy, and all that," Parrot's teeth flashed when he smiled this time, and Subz didn't need to be a genius to notice the edge in his voice, the threat in the *'job'* he found. Not that he cared.

"Good for you then," he shrugged. "What do you want?"

Parrot sighed, unsatisfied with their little game. Subz didn't care, he wasn't one to play.

"I'm just here to tell you that Clown's gone, and no one appreciates the way you keep looking at people."

The information was a slap to his face. Clown? The terror, their town's nightmare, gone?

"What does that have to do with me? I had exams up North this week, I just came back two days

ago."

"No, but Vitalasy still hasn't come back, has he?"

Subz froze. Painfully obvious. Game, lost. He might as well have handed Parrot a transcript of every thought he's had the last 72 hours.

"All I'm here to say is, people don't appreciate the looks you're giving them. So you either keep your head down Subz, or-" He pulled out a card out of his jacket pocket and slid it over to Subz-
"Call us."

Subz as sure as hell wasn't doing that.

"Who's us?" He asked, and the cool smile was back on Parrot's face, as if nothing had happened.

"We could work out a great deal for you bro," he said instead of answering, in the tone of a cheap business pitch, and then he slid out of the booth, adjusted his jacket, and left without another word.

There was no work at the mechanic's for him today so he didn't go there. Couldn't have gone there even if he wanted to. With his headache, Parrot's words, and Vitalasy's absence all weighing on him, he left the diner. Omelette half eaten and coffee untouched. He went home, not looking at anyone or anything, and instead he locked all the doors and lowered the window blinds. He laid down in bed. He laid down in bed. He laid down in bed. His head was a throbbing pulse point, his blood did nothing but pointlessly rush through him. He was drained from worry and stress, and yet sleep refused to come. Once he got bored of laying down he went on his computer, trying to do stuff for college and then giving up, riffling aimlessly through his game library. Nothing. He checked his phone. Nothing.

He was beginning to feel restless, his exhaustion giving way to panic. He should be home by now. Vitalasy should've been home by now. He had to wait 24 hours to be able to report him as missing - but whether those hours should count from their hometown or their college town he didn't know. He didn't want to know. Subz remembered at some point that painkillers existed, and that Vitalasy would probably want him to stay hydrated, so he did that. His headache lessened but his worry didn't.

All he was was confused. The anxiety was supposed to be just that - anxiety. Parrot didn't have to come up to him and practically confirm his worst fears, damn brat. Subz pulled out the card that Parrot had handed him, it was a normal business card - if not a little plain. It had a teal colored eye next to the word "Laboratories", an address that placed them on the edge of town, and a number. He put it away. He refused. The town wasn't cursed and the coyotes weren't loud and Vitalasy would come back home, safe and sound.

He'd give it another 24 hours. He'd go to church before he went to any place that called itself '*Laboratories*' and Parrot worked for.

The cigarette pack was empty, and he didn't want to go leave and buy more. He didn't want to smoke anymore either. The long and short of all of Subz' desires started and ended with *Vitalasy*. That was it.

He lay down after pacing around his apartment, grabbed the hoodie, and closed his eyes.

Sleep wouldn't come, but Vitalasy would. He would. He had to.

There was a knock at the door and Subz woke with a start for the second time that day. At least he assumed it was the same day, he was still tired, his head still hurt. It was dark in his apartment but the blinds were closed. He got up slowly at first and then rushed to the door, flattening himself against the cold surface as he pressed his face close to peek through the keyhole. His eyes caught on red hair and a distinct flash of purple, and he swung the door open.

Words caught in his lungs, unable to pass the lump in his throat. The instant relief in him poisoned by the fact that Vitalasy looked all wrong. His hair was a mess and there was dirt on his face and there was a very, very wrong large red stain on his shirt.

Vitalasy's voice was weak, tender as he spoke, "Subz-" and then he fell forward. Subz scrambled to catch him, dragging him back and into their apartment.

"Vitalasy," was the only thing that came out of his mouth cause everything else would have been too much. *Where were you? What happened? Why didn't you answer? Are you okay?* All useless, terrible words that he couldn't even form as he left Vitalasy in a sitting position and checked the outside. There was no one, good. Good? He didn't have time to think about it. He closed and locked the door and looked at his boyfriend again. He kneeled in front of him, cupping his face in one hand and used the other to tug at his shirt to inspect the wound.

"What happened?" he asked. It didn't look like a gunshot, he couldn't find an entrance point, and he couldn't even register the idea of what would happen if it *was* a gunshot.

Vitalasy groaned in answer, his head leaning into Subz' hand for support. "A coyote," he mumbled, trying to stand up and failing.

"An animal attack?" Subz asked, his mind blanking, and Vitalasy's affirmative noise was somewhere between a groan and a howl of pain. Subz picked him up and half dragged half carried him to their bathroom. Once there he laid him gently down into their bath tub. There was blood on his pants so he pulled them off, but to his relief Vi didn't seem to have any scratches ore bitemarks there.

"Woah..." Vitalasy said, half drunk with the pain. "Take me out to dinner first," he joked, and Subz audibly scoffed before grabbing their first aid kit and a pair of scissors.

"I *have* taken you out to dinner," he said, but the words lacked any sort of bite. He lowered himself on the cool bathroom tiles, so he could have better access as he cut Vitalasy's shirt open. "Many times, in fact," he said, as he painstakingly took care not to hurt Vitalasy. And slowly, ever so slowly, he peeled back the dark stained shirt off his chest.

"Really?" Vitalasy mumbled, but the words barely registered in Subz' mind. He was too busy trying to process the three angry slashes across Vitalasy's chest, like something had wanted to *dig* into him. Rip something out. His thumb hovered over the wound, hand shaking with trepidation.

"Lucky me," Vitalasy said, through gasping breaths, taking the hand that hovered around his chest in his own and giving Subz a dopey smile.

This broke Subz out of his thoughts and he pulled back, Vitalasy's head lolling back and hitting the edge of the tub at the same time.

There was a terrifying moment in his childhood where Subz had shoved his brother during playtime and he'd fallen and hit his head so bad he needed stitches. His father was mad at him, but his mother had seemed calm until the moment she said he had to sit there and watch as she stitched the wound. It was an accident, he'd stopped feeling guilty over it as he'd grown and realized that it wasn't his fault, he couldn't have known, as a child, that his brother would get hurt so badly. He could never forget the look in his mother's eyes though, and with that, he still remembered how she stitched the wound. He grabbed a towel and soaked it in warm water. Their first aid kit had needle and thread - it wouldn't be the same as sewing clothes, but he had to. His hands weren't even shaking anymore.

He came back to Vitalasy, the warm towel hovering over his chest and dripping water on his stomach. Vitalasy's eyes were glassy as looked at him, completely out of it. Pain, shock, trauma.

"I'm going to clean you up, and then we're going to stitch up the wound, okay?" he said, and Vitalasy's groan was neither here nor there but it sounded like acknowledgement, so he slowly brought the towel to skin, bright white soaking up the red immediately. He focused first on the skin around it, so he could see clearly when he stitched it up later. The scratch seemed to start at his left pectoral and end under his right ribs, where they seemed lighter. He didn't have any saline solution, so when he'd cleaned up most of the outside he grabbed another towel and some gauze. He started slowly where the wound seemed the most shallow, careful not to hurt Vitalasy anymore, and worked his way to the left pectoral when-

Vi's right hand shot up and grabbed his wrist. In shock, Subz dropped the wet piece of gauze he was holding just as Vi brought his hand to his mouth and *bit it*.

Subz yelped and pulled his hand back, yelling out a perfectly warranted "What the *fuck*?" as he cradled his hand to his chest. It barely even hurt, although Vi had bitten him hard enough that there were tooth marks - matching half moons on his hand and palm.

"It hurt," Vitalasy said, his voice sad and pained, and Subz couldn't help but pity him. He grabbed their last clean towel and rolled it up as much as he could, his hand aching slightly.

"Bite down on this," he said and to his surprise Vitalasy listened and bit down. Subz cupped his face, unwittingly smearing blood on his cheek where he meant to wipe away a tear. "I just have to stitch you up, okay?" He said, unable to recognize his own voice for how soft it was. "Then I just wrap up a bandage and you're done, okay?"

Vi closed his eyes, his breathing had calmed down immensely since they'd started. He nodded his approval, and Subz tried his best to put on a reassuring smile before letting go of Vi's jaw. He rinsed his hands before he returned and threaded the needle. Subz took a deep breath and leaned in, trying his best to get as close as possible without covering the measly light source he had. The needle pierced skin and Subz winced at how easy it went in, how easy it was to pierce skin - pierce *Vitalasy's* skin. He shouldn't have been focusing on that fact too much, the evidence for how easy it was to hurt a person, to hurt his *boyfriend*, was staring him right in the face as a big angry gash across his chest. But he couldn't dismiss it. He finished the first stitch - the making and unmaking - tried his best not to make the knot too tight or too loose, and moved on. He could hear Vitalasy breathing, sometimes he panicked, and Subz had to wait a few minutes for his breathing to calm down before he could continue, but he managed.

The wound isn't that bad, he tried reassuring himself. Not infected, not deep, only a few minimal stitches and bandages and Vitalasy should be fine. Vitalasy *would* be fine. He repeated it to

himself, under his breath, as he wrapped a bandage around it.

"There," he said, and Vi looked so relieved he might've passed out. Subz gently took away the towel out of Vitalasy's mouth and threw it in the corner with the rest of the dirty laundry. There was dirt and sand in his hair, he realized, but he kissed the top of Vitalasy's head regardless.

The bite marks on his hand had faded by the time he half dragged half carried Vitalasy into their bed, doing his best not to upset the wound or tear the painstakingly made stitches, and covered him with a blanket. He went back into the bathroom, and shoved the towels and his own clothes into the laundry machine. There was so much blood. He was rinsing their bathtub when he suddenly caught sight of himself in the mirror. There was a drop of blood on his own face. He quickly scrubbed it off and refused to think about it, couldn't think about it really. He put on clean clothes and crawled into bed, expecting Vitalasy to be already asleep but to his surprise he was awake, watching him.

He blinked. He didn't know what to say. Years of friendship, his grandmother's ring in his sock drawer, and he was staring at the wounded man he'd loved ever since he set eyes on him and - he didn't know what to say.

"Do you need water?" he asked. It was as good as anything. But Vitalasy slowly shook his head, probably unable to do anything faster, and reached out to take his hand. Subz realized midway he was bringing it to his mouth and quickly said-

"Don't bite me again," and Vitalasy looked at him again for a moment, before bringing the hand to his lips and pressing a soft kiss there.

Subz just watched him.

"Go to sleep," Subz said, and so Vitalasy did, and so did he, too.

Their hands remaining clasped throughout the night.

Subz woke up, woke up, woke up.

It was Sunday morning and his object of worship was in bed, fast asleep, holding his hand.

It was the best sleep he'd gotten in a week. He rolled to his side so he could look at Vitalasy, not wanting to get out of bed and let go of him. To his surprise, Vitalasy was awake too. Sleep still clung to his barely opened eyes, paired with eye bags a dark shade of purple.

"Did you sleep?" Subz whispered, his voice hoarse from sleep.

Vi nodded. Subz noticed with a start that there was still blood smeared on his face, along his cheekbone, the events of last night rushing back to him. Well, now he was awake. There'd be no more going to sleep.

"Subz," Vi said, the first word he'd spoken to him normally that wasn't drenched in pain and delirium. "I'm hungry."

He was working on autopilot and he wasn't happy about it but he had to make breakfast. Vi was hungry and if Subz was honest so was he - but his appetite was gone. He tried his best to make Vitalasy his favorite meal but he was a crappy cook, even though Vi promised him he didn't mind the burnt edges of pancakes. He just scarfed them down like a man who hadn't eaten a thing in a week. Subz thought that maybe he hadn't, but he didn't know. He was too focused on making sure Vitalasy was safe and alright to ask. He brought a wet rag with him, soaked in lukewarm water and a little soap, and wiped the blood off Vi's face.

Vitalasy smiled at him, and it did something to ease the worry off of Subz' heart.

"Subz," he whined, dragging out his name. "You're fussing over me too much," he said, fondly. Subz could smell the pancakes and maple syrup from how close he sat next to him. He furrowed his eyebrows and fixed him with a glare.

"Your chest was slashed open by a wild animal, Vitalasy," he said bluntly, but Vitalasy only gently took his hand - the one that he'd bitten last night - and kissed it.

"I'm fine," he promised.

Subz still didn't let him get up unless he needed to use the bathroom.

"I'm still hungry," he said, and Subz shouldn't have been surprised. Vi had always had a big appetite, it fueled him throughout high-school where his metabolism burned through it faster than he could shove food down his throat, but he'd just been injured. Subz didn't want to leave him at home alone, he'd just gotten him back. Reluctantly, he left the apartment.

Subz' keys jingled in his jacket pocket as he jumped down the stairs. He noticed Vitalasy's car parked next to his, slowing down as he approached it. It looked... normal. Subz couldn't say it had the same layer of dust as it did in his 'dream' because most cars had that same look to them. He peeked in through the passenger's side window and noticed a stain on the steering wheel and gearshift. They'd have to clean that, too. He sighed and shook his head, it had only been a dream. He needed to focus and get food, he didn't want Vitalasy getting up and raiding the kitchen himself, at risk of irritating his already tender wound.

Reality weighed heavy on him, but he refused to acknowledge it. They were fine, they *will be* fine. Subz wouldn't accept anything else.

A week passed. Vitalasy's wound didn't get infected and Subz didn't need a medical degree to know that he was lucky, that they were both *so* lucky. The blood washed out of the towels, Vi managed to change his own bandages, Subz washed both their cars and even managed to get some coursework done. *Lucky*. He struggled to comprehend it. With everything that had gone wrong his entire life, with *both* their lives, that they should be considered lucky that Vitalasy was alive.

The only thing that was starting to bother him was how insatiable Vi had gotten. Their fridge struggled to stay full and Subz couldn't just let him walk around town with his injury so he was always getting food. He'd managed to calm down enough that Subz felt alright going back to work, and with only mild worry he walked into the workshop giving his boss only a small wave before he got started on fixing up the cars.

He came back home, pleasantly tired after a long day's work, and their fridge was empty. Subz checked their room only to find Vitalasy asleep. He sighed, got back into his car, drove to the grocery store. The tension in town had seemed to dissipate with Vitalasy's arrival, and it made him think that he'd been imagining it the whole time. Maybe it had just been stress. But then he met Parrot's eyes at the dairy aisle and knew things were still wrong, still off. Why else would he be looking at Subz like that? With a mix of fear and pity?

Subz wished he could say he was unaffected, but the store receipt listed the pack of cigarettes he bought, and he was shit at lying to Vitalasy.

Didn't mean he had to talk to Parrot though. Didn't mean he couldn't ignore it.

He came back home, ate and showered quickly, all the while Vitalasy hadn't woken up once. Once he crawled into bed he checked Vitalasy's temperature - normal. And his bandages - clean.

Satisfied, he took Vi's hand that had been looking at him since he'd joined him in bed, and fell asleep.

He woke up in the middle of the night, not due to a disturbance but due to an absence. Vitalasy wasn't in their bed, and he blinked slowly before pushing himself up to a sitting position. There was no light - not from the room or any light in the hallway. He was confused and disoriented and wanted to go back to bed but couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. He got up, swaying on his feet and holding the wall to stabilize himself.

"Vi?" He called, but no one answered. His first instinct was to go to the balcony, and once the glass door slid open a calm night greeted him. No coyotes howling, no cars on late night drives. The stars bloomed against an inky dark sky and there was nothing and no one out. He remembered bathroom's existed and so he checked it, only to find it dark and empty too. By now alarm bells were going off in his mind, and he was about to grab his phone to call Vi when he was startled by the sound of their front door being unlocked.

"Vitalasy!" He said, and it came out more accusatory than he meant to, but he was still half asleep. Vitalasy, to his credit, looked just as surprised as Subz was.

"I got hungry," he half-whispered, and true to his words he was holding a bag of takeout in his hand.

"Oh."

"I didn't want to wake you," he said, toeing his shoes off before he closed the door. Vi closed the distance between them, pressed a kiss to Subz' forehead. "Do you want any?" he offered, but Subz shook his head.

"I'm really tired, I have work in the morning," he mumbled, and pressed a kiss to Vi's cheek. "Good night," he said, and left Vi to his food.

Vitalasy liked to eat. Subz loved taking him places to eat. Those two statements had been true since the moment they'd met. But these days either Vi was eating on his own or he wasn't eating at all because whenever they went out to get food together he barely ordered anything. Even the waitress had expressed her concern, but he'd easily placated her by saying he was going on a diet and leaving a bigger tip than usual.

"My boyfriend likes to eat," that couldn't just go away all of a sudden, Subz argued with himself. But he didn't exactly know how to bring up the subject. Before he'd scarf down his food- wouldn't close his mouth when he chewed and now? Now he was the picture perfect example of manners and politeness.

It killed him a little. It felt like something had been taken from Vitalasy, like he'd been robbed in plain daylight and didn't even notice. His enjoyment, his pleasure, gone. Now he ate because he had to, because his body required nutrients.

And yet, some nights he disappeared and came back with takeout, some of his previous joy back with him. The Vitalasy that liked to drive around under the stars, the Vitalasy that would get frustrated with homework and bake muffins at two in the morning.

Sometimes he said he'd just been out to smoke, but he stopped saying that when Subz pointed out he didn't smell like cigarettes. Subz didn't want to say how he smelled like iron, like blood, because he himself didn't know how much of that had been real and how much of it was still the panic that caught him when Vi came home late.

They couldn't lie to each other, they'd never learned how. So Vitalasy knew Subz didn't believe him, and Subz knew there was something else. Some look in his eyes that he still couldn't quite discern. They'd lay in bed staring at each other and Vi's eyes would grow twice the size, sad and wet like a kicked puppy. There was more to it.

For a brief moment Subz considered the thought that Vitalasy was cheating on him, but dismissed it outright.

If he was he wouldn't be giving Subz this look right now, like he was begging him to follow.

Subz closed his eyes, opened them. Vitalasy was gone.

He got out of bed and put on some jeans and his jacket. He didn't bother taking a flashlight this time, knowing he couldn't see what didn't want to be seen, and only grabbed his keys instead. He rushed down the stairs after Vitalasy, just like he'd rushed after the creature he'd seen what now felt like a lifetime ago. But this time he didn't bring cigarettes.

Before, he saw the creature's shadow, its eyes blinking at him from dark corners. When he followed Vitalasy he could only rely on his ears, listening to the echo of his footsteps through town, struggling not to confuse him with his own. The night was quiet however, he hadn't heard a coyote in a while. The only creature he had to accompany him was his own jackrabbit heart, and he'd be damned if he listened to it. Instead he pushed forward, street after street, the street lights getting thinner and thinner, until the only thing he could rely on was the moonlight.

Slowly, it became easier to distinguish their footsteps, because Vitalasy's sounded less and less human. It sounded like claws scraping against pavement, but there were no scratches that Subz could see.

He followed and followed, expecting to end up in the desert again, expecting the same clearing. A part of him, terrified, kept waiting for him to find Vitalasy's corpse, a dead hare in the road. But to his surprise, the unnatural night gave way not to a desert but to the diner.

The neon sign burned bright in the night like a lighthouse, and Subz knew he shouldn't be here. Knew the things here were not for his eyes.

But he wanted to. He *had* to. Vitalasy had wanted him to.

He rounded the corner to the back alley, where the quiet night was broken by the terrified squeals of rats and the horrible squelch as teeth tore into meat.

There was a thing crouched behind the trashcan, the silver metal doing nothing to obscure its monstrous form, covered in fur and blood. And approximately fifteen minutes ago, Subz knew, that thing answered to Vitalasy.

A rat skittered away past his legs.

He wondered if that thing still answered to Vitalasy.

As if sensing his presence the monster froze, the rat in its hand wiggling free and escaping what was to be a certain and gruesome death. It didn't move, and Subz was reminded of all the times throughout the years that he'd found Vi rummaging through their fridge for a midnight snack, the way he stopped moving as if he was caught doing something wrong. Subz would shove him away and get a snack for both of them, calling him a thief and a rat all the while. "Who eats plain cheese singles at two in the morning?"

"I had a light dinner!" Vi would complain through a full mouth.

Subz was afraid what would come out if Vitalasy tried to talk right now.

Truth be told, he wasn't even mad. He was barely even afraid of the creature. He'd found in his life that he didn't have it in him to truly be upset with Vitalasy, he just wished Vi had taken a jacket. He must be cold.

"Vitalasy," he said, because he'd spent the last five years trying to keep him in his life, and he wouldn't let something like a strange appetite take it away.

The creature looked at him, and it was terrifying. It had the ears and snout of a coyote, mouth rimmed with blood and teeth dripping with it. It stood up, toppling the trash can and making Subz flinch at the noise, and it seemed to step back at that.

Well over seven feet tall, and it hesitated at Subz' flinch.

"I know you're hungry," he said, choking on his own words but taking a step forward anyway. He wouldn't let fear beat him. He would bring Vitalasy back or die trying. He shook off his jacket and the creature tilted its head in question.

"It's time to go home," he took another step forward, he had it cornered. It couldn't run away from him. "We have to go home," he said, as if that was the answer, as if that would solve anything. He offered up the jacket and it- *he* - crouched, letting Subz drape it over his shoulders.

Subz' eyes couldn't quite register it, because between one moment and the next, the creature turned into Vitalasy. He was in his pajamas, the jacket snug over his shoulders. Despite his human height returning and all the fur disappearing, his nails were still claws. Subz wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug. It was going to be a long walk home.

Once they made it home, Subz ended up having to help Vitalasy clean off. Fortunately, his stitches seemed fine. Subz pressed a kiss to his throat as he finished tying off the bandages, and Vitalasy still hadn't said a word but he seemed like he might cry. "Come on," he said, trying his best to be reassuring. He carefully took his clawed hand and tugged on it, but Vi didn't move, he just shook his head. "You uh... need a moment?" he asked, and Vi waited a second before responding.

"Yes," he said, and winced at his own voice because it sounded *wrong*. It sounded like an animal's. Subz remained unchanging, trying to prove that he didn't care, that he didn't mind. That he wanted Vitalasy, claws and all. He tried to convey all this and more, by squeezing his hand reassuringly, but Vi wouldn't budge.

Alright, Vi said he needed a moment, Subz could give him that. He left the bathroom and got into bed, waiting for Vitalasy to come back.

Once he finally did, he walked in slowly, clearly not having expected for Subz to be awake still. He just looked at Vi, unflinching.

"Are you afraid of me?" Vitalasy asked, and his voice was only *this* side of wrong. But nonetheless, it was Vitalasy's voice.

"No," he said, simply. He'd asked Vi not to bite him and he hadn't. He'd asked Vi to come home and he had. He trusted him.

"What if I said you should be?" The words hung in the air like a curse, and Subz, who had lived his entire life in fear leveled Vitalasy with something almost akin to a glare.

"Of you?" Despite it, his voice was soft. He didn't think Vitalasy would ask Subz to be afraid of him. He didn't think he ever could be.

Vitalasy seemed to realize this too, because he shook his head. He sat on the bed on top of the covers, his hands still stretching out in sharp talons, his teeth still longer and sharper than they ever had the right to be. But he was still Vitalasy. He sat up, anger boiling up inside him, but not at Vitalasy, no. Never at him. He was angry at their town, angry at fate. It was cruel and unjust, what had they ever done to deserve this? What crime had they committed to be stuck in this town? What kind of prison was this? Kind enough to give him a best friend and cruel enough to change him.

"I'm sorry we didn't make it out of this town," Subz said, because a part of him knew it was true. They were never getting out. It was over. They never even stood a chance.

This seemed to break Vitalasy, because when he spoke his voice was back to normal, sad, and pitiful.

"Oh, Subz," he said and reached out, his sharp claw ever so gentle across the skin of his cheek. Vi was crying. "It was always going to be one of us," and Subz knew it was about the coyotes and

monsters and leaving this town but he couldn't accept it. He couldn't stand it.

Subz got out of the bed, aware of Vitalasy's eyes on him all the while, and opened the sock drawer. Vitalasy's breath hitched despite the fact that they both knew it was there, that they'd agreed to keep it there. He sat back down, on top of the covers to match Vitalasy, knee to knee. "I made you a promise," he said, quietly determined as he opened the box. The ring glinted in the silver moonlight, it was a simple band with a starburst and an amethyst in the center. He slipped it on Vitalasy's talon and watched, mesmerized, as it turned into a human hand. "I intend to keep it."

And he kept it. Time passed, the wound healed, Subz removed the stitches he'd painstakingly done that terrible night. Vi was smiling more and more again, almost back to normal, though Subz knew they never would be.

He was fine with it.

The coyotes never came back, and although Subz never mentioned it, he'd seen Vi clean off blood from his shovel. He didn't want to know, he was glad they were gone.

They were sitting in their diner, as always, just some pancakes and a milkshake this time, when it happened.

There was that look in Vi's eyes, the one that meant hunger, the one that meant howling. Subz had learned to recognize it, learned to accommodate for it. Give him openings to run off and do what he had to, but he always came back. Although this time it was unusual. Subz followed his stare to where a blond guy was chatting loudly at the bar, and his stomach dropped. He knew that hair because it was trouble, he knew that laugh cause it was trouble, he knew the curve of that smile and those lips because before he'd realized he was into boys Subz had always liked Clown's brother.

He was talking to the waiter now, seeming low key but everybody in town knew that he had one goal and one goal only: find his missing brother.

Subz stop staring, only to notice Vi's eyes were on him.

Oh.

Out of nowhere, Zam was sliding into the booth, seating himself next to Vitalasy. And Vi had the audacity to wiggle his eyebrows at him, as a taunt, as a challenge. But Zam didn't notice this silent communication between them at all, and instead offered Subz a bright smile.

"Hi, I'm Zam, nice to finally meet you."

It was going to be a long summer.

// trigger warnings

smoking (cigarettes), animal death (roadkill, hare, eating rats), animal gore (non-explicit, blood and things referred to as "guts"), descriptions of injuries (not extremely graphic), blood, the fear of "someone being replaced and only you notice", someone coming back wrong, anxiety,

idk if this counts as a trigger but i did talk about the fic with my friend who has zero connection to fandom culture and he sent me a blowjob brothers meme when i talked about purple duo being boy best friends. he's not reading this but hi kevin.

// end

SUBZ ON HIS BELLA SWAN CORE ARC !!! waiting on vitalasy to come home . what's the ao3 equivalent of blank chapters just titled after months. i wouldnt know i didnt really read twilight

also i definitely bit my own hand to make sure that what i was writing was possible.

also the part where subz goes looking for the creature with the bright eyes in the desert is . a reference to "This is how you lose the time war", the scene where Red saw a wolf in her childhood, if you know you know. also it's a reference to the fact that he's white like boy who does that. stay inside !

peppered in a few 'bro's' in parrot's dialogue for flavor; uh what else what else

zam isnt speakign to subz btw. he's speaking to you. he's been haunting the narrative for SO long he's SO happy to finally speak

the actual meeting went more like

" me and my monster boyfriend saw you across the diner and we really like your vibe. he wants to eat you but I think your smile is cute so, wanna hang? :3"

/j/j/j

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