

“What are you doing?”

Cole gets pulled out of his thought process very suddenly, startled by the voice behind him. He almost slams his hand on the desk going to grip it to stabilize himself and whips around in his chair to see Hale hovering in the doorway. He’s still in the same clothes that he was wearing on their drive home (Cole makes a mental note to stop redefining “home” in this context.) Something about Hale makes it feel like he’s going to vanish into thin air if you were to reach for him. Not exactly fragile, something else.

Cole opens his mouth to say something starting with “I”, but loses the thought immediately, distracted by Hale clearly scanning the room he is in without moving from his spot in the doorway. Cole almost feels self conscious about it, but he’s not about to tell him to cut it out.

He finally collects his thoughts again. “Just— writing,” he says in the most casual tone he can manage.

It’s kind of hard to look away from Hale, so Cole doesn’t. As if letting him out of his sight will have consequences. Maybe he’ll blink and Hale will be gone, just a sleep deprived hallucination, something to push him towards the idea of sleep faster. He figures not, since Hale nods slowly and speaks again.

“Writing’s loud.”

Right. Right, of course. That’s why he’s here. Cole gapes at him as if he were expecting something wildly different to come out of his mouth. He’d smack himself on the forehead if he weren’t permanently shell-shocked at this point. Again — pause, mental reset, remember who’s in front of you? — Cole collects his thoughts.

“Oh, I’m— I’m sorry,” he says, though his tone is less apologetic and more surprised. “I get carried away with, um,” he shoots a glance and gestures vaguely, quickly, in the direction of the typewriter, “this thing. I forget that it’s kind of loud.”

Hale seems to very thoroughly consider his answer, which is, again, freaky. He has a way about him, where whenever he looks at you, it feels like you’re under the spotlight of the fucking Panopticon. He squints, and Cole briefly considers the idea that Hale might attack him, but discards it immediately. That’s not a thought he’d actually think, and Hale wouldn’t do that.

“Okay,” Hale says quietly. Cole thinks he caught him shifting his weight on his feet, but he’s not sure.

“I, uh.” There’s no reason for him to keep speaking, why is he talking? “I guess I’m just kind of used to no one really hearing me... type. In here— sorry for— for waking you. I was meaning to go to sleep a while ago now,” he finishes awkwardly.

There's a little pause before Hale furrows his brows and says, "You didn't." Another small pause. Then, "Wake me up, I mean. I was already awake." He reaches for something on the other side of the doorway, where the landline is, but Cole doesn't hear the plastic of the phone. He makes a mental note to check if the paint is peeling there. "You haven't slept yet," he says, and Cole can't tell if it's supposed to be a statement or a question.

Cole sighs. "No, I haven't. Not yet." He remembers he's still gripping one of the armrests so he releases it, putting both his hands on his knees instead.

Hale keeps frowning at him. For a moment Cole thinks of a disgruntled cat.

He pushes the thought aside and asks, "Why are you up? It's like three in the morning."

Hale's entire facial expression shifts from what in contrast looked like cautious and even mildly worried to completely *done* and Cole briefly wonders if he somehow missed a mark and asked him something terribly offensive. "I've been sleeping all fucking day and night," he says, flat. "I'm not tired." Before Cole can even open his mouth to defend his question, Hale adds, "Why the fuck are *you* awake. You look like you're dying. Or dead."

Cole cycles through a wide range of feelings, starting at fear of saying something wrong, then defensiveness, then finally he lands on the vague feeling of what it must be like to have your kids talk back at you. Then again, he wouldn't know. This isn't like that at all. He wishes it were that simple. He wants to say "*thanks for that*" with as much sarcasm as he can muster, but thinks better of it.

He stares back at Hale for a moment, frustrated, then less so. If these were different circumstances, he'd say, "*Are you always this rude?*" or, "*This is my house, I do whatever I damn please*", but these are not different circumstances. It's Hale. He knows Hale. Not as well as the other Cole, the one that is actually Hale's friend, but enough to know that he probably doesn't want to fight about something this insignificant.

He eventually remembers that he is still staring at Hale, who is still frowning in his office doorway. It pulls Cole out of his weird little internal battle and he looks away, eyes falling to his hands bracing his knees. He considers lying, saying he's just finishing up some work, but there's no point in it. And anyway, Hale would catch the lie.

"I'm, um," he looks back up at Hale, tired, "I can't sleep. When I'm stressed." His tone comes out surprisingly defeated, as if he were talking to a doctor. Shrink, I'm an insomniac. Then he adds, softer, "And you don't have to tell me I look dead, that's just what I look like."

It's one of his half-jokes, something he'd say to Amelia when he's doing bad to make her feel less bad about him, and she wouldn't find it funny at all. "*Self deprecation doesn't really work when you're close to being on suicide watch*," she once said. Anyway, it's never been that serious to him, it just comes out automatically.

By the time he's done talking, Hale looks like he's about to speak, but then he closes his mouth. He seems to be frowning even more and Cole would think he's angry if his voice didn't give him away. He's gotta give it to the kid, he really does look intimidating while still being approximately twenty

years younger than Cole. But at the same time, Cole doesn't really *feel* intimidated, not after everything they've been through, the need to protect him outweighing everything rational, but then again, it's not like Hale wouldn't be able to protect himself. And it's only been about a week.

Cole sees Hale move, and then seemingly make up his mind about it, like an aborted little step towards him. Pause. "It's not. You're not." He's not looking at Cole while he speaks, Cole catches that. "You're not supposed to look like that. You're..." Hale trails off, then presses his lips together. "You should go. To sleep. I can—I can keep watch. Just in case."

At that, whatever tension Cole was feeling melts away into something else, something deeply sad. Sometimes he forgets that Hale grew up in vastly different circumstances than most other people, but at this moment it's painfully clear again. It reminds Cole of war veterans that still think they're in the battle zone long after the war has ended. He wishes he could comfort Hale somehow. He wishes he was brave enough to just get up and hug him again, like he was in the motel room. But that's not bravery, he adds mentally. He wishes it was different. He wishes a lot of things in this moment, none of which he can get. He's sure you can see it all on his face, which is why he's glad Hale isn't currently looking at him. At the same time he somehow wishes he would look.

There's a lot he wants to say to that. What comes out is, "You don't—you don't have to. It's not..." he trails off, sounding a bit hopeless, a bit something else. "Hale, you're safe here. You don't have to keep watch." Then he adds, a little bit quieter, "No one's coming here." He hopes it doesn't sound as depressing as it makes him feel - he wants it to be reassuring, but it only reminds him of this self-made solitary cell he calls his home. Cole pushes the thought aside.

"Then go. It's safe." Hale crosses his arms and looks at him, stubborn. For a moment it blindsides Cole, the gesture reminiscent of Amelia. It's a weird feeling. He may or may not feel a little pang of guilt with it. Hale juts his chin out and waits.

"It doesn't-" Cole starts, wants to say "*it doesn't work like that, I'll just be stressed in bed instead*", but stops himself. He scoffs, which sounds more like a defeated exhale, no offense in it, and instead says, "Fine, I'll go."

He stands up, a little stiff in the joints, exhaustion catching up with him, and turns to take out the page from the typewriter, deciding it's done for the day. Or night. He puts it on top of the stack of the rest of the pages like this, at the corner of the desk. He decides he'll clean up the rest later and makes a mental note to actually store those pages somewhere, maybe a folder. He can't just have them lying around like that.

For a second he thinks of Hale potentially reading them and makes up his mind about leaving them on the desk, looks for the nearest folder that he could use. The one he grabs from the shelf nearby already has some documents in it, probably some old invoices, but they're barely taking up any space, so he puts his pages inside (maybe a little haphazardly) and puts it back where it was.

Cole turns back around to see Hale watching him intently. At this point — whatever. He'll get used to it. Cole assumes that's just what he's like. He probably is.

He leaves the office and Hale trails behind. At the very first step of the staircase he stops, one foot on the step, and turns to Hale. “Will you— are you gonna have anything to do..? I don’t really know what you... do.”

He looks at Hale, who is still silently staring at him. He guesses he doesn’t really take that as a question, then. Again, whatever. He needs to go to sleep. He feels a little guilty about leaving Hale with nothing to do, but he thinks he’ll manage one night. He turns and climbs the stairs, Hale behind him.

When he reaches the door to his bedroom, he says, “There’s food in the fridge. If you get hungry.” He meets Hale’s eyes. “Wake me up if you need anything, it’s really not a big deal, I promise. Alright?”

A nod. “Okay.”

Alright, then. Cole hesitates for a moment. He feels like he should do something here. He feels like he should hug him here, say goodnight. Instead he just echoes, “Okay,” and closes the door.

Cole falls asleep the instant his head hits the pillow. The only thing he dreams of is the feeling of lying in a hammock.