

“How’s your dad, Ace?”

Ace was too busy gazing up at the night sky to hear Maya call out to him. It wasn’t until Gordo shoved him that he snapped out of it.

“What?”

“How’s your dad doing?”

“Oh.” Ace pulled his knees to his chest and looked down at the bonfire in front of him.

“He seems fine. I’ve only seen him a couple times since he got moved.”

“Moved? I thought they just got rid of the prisons altogether?”

“Well, he’s not technically in a prison. They call it a rehabilitation facility. Although, if you ask me, it doesn’t seem all that different.”

“Then what was the point of that whole Prison Reform Act?” Gordo chimed in, taking a hit from the joint Maya handed to him.

“I’m sure it affected more than you think,” Maya replied. “The entire point was to help treat inmates with various mental issues so they can reenter society.”

“Your dad has mental issues?”

“No,” Ace said quickly, shooting Maya a look. “He’s fine.”

“Then what’s he doing at that facility?”

“I don’t know, alright? Can we talk about something else now?”

Ace gestured to the joint between Gordo’s fingers, who reluctantly passed it to him. Ace pressed the rolled paper between his lips and inhaled slowly. After exhaling a light cloud of smoke, Ace hugged his knees and stared into the flames. He felt his NeuroWatch buzz. He glanced down at the screen and watched as the little green bar began to rise. He smiled. *Green for dopamine!* He remembered his father saying when they’d first bought the NeuroWatches. *Everything’s easier to remember when it rhymes!* Of course, that’d been before he got locked up.

The three sat in silence for a moment before Gordo piped up.

“You guys know what time it is?”

“10:30?” Maya said, looking at her NeuroWatch.

“No, it’s time for the neighborhood watch party.”

A sly smile spread across Gordo’s face. He got up from his chair and started towards the large oak tree in his backyard. Maya and Ace glanced at each other before chuckling and following him. They watched as Gordo climbed the wooden planks nailed to the trunk of the tree that led to a small treehouse at the top.

Maya and Ace followed Gordo up the tree. Once he’d reached the top, Gordo opened the latch with one hand and climbed inside. Once all three of them were in the treehouse, Ace closed the hatch and looked around. Inside the treehouse was a wide variety of games and snacks. There was also a small window with a telescope protruding from it. Gordo took the telescope in his hands and directed it toward a neighboring house. Then, with a cry of excitement, turned back towards his friends.

“She’s there!”

Ace approached the telescope. Through the lens he saw Gordo's neighbor, Cynthia, sitting in her bedroom, facing her mirror. Ace felt a buzz from his watch and, without looking, knew the little green bar was rising on the screen.

"Isn't she something?" Gordo sighed.

Ace nodded as he peered through the telescope, watching Cynthia as she braided her curly black hair.

"You guys do realize how creepy this is, right?" Maya interjected.

Ace and Gordo turned away from the window to look at her.

"Yeah, so?" Gordo replied, before grabbing a pair of binoculars off a nearby shelf.

"Are you gonna join us or what?"

Maya sighed and bit her lip before snatching the binoculars out of Gordo's hand.

"That's what I thought," he said with a smirk, as Maya plopped down next to him.

"Oh, shut up," she replied, elbowing him in the gut.

As Maya peered through the binoculars, Ace glanced at her watch and saw the green bar rise a little. Gordo's numbers were no surprise, with the green bar on his watch almost touching the top of the screen.

"Ace, dude, you're missing it!" Gordo cried. Ace peered back into the telescope to see Cynthia changing into her pajamas. Ace felt another buzz on his wrist. He slept well that night, his head filled with dreams of Cynthia...

"Ace, wake up!" Ace's mother, Pearl, exclaimed the following morning. Ace murmured incoherently and pulled the covers over his head.

"You don't want to be late to see your father!"

Ace reluctantly rolled out of bed and took his NeuroWatch off his bedside table. He was met with a symphony of buzzing as he put it on. Same as usual: His levels were low. The contact information for his therapist, Susan, flashed on the screen, but Ace dismissed it. Instead, he trudged to the bathroom and washed his face. He opened the cabinet and took out an assortment of pill bottles. Vitamin A, vitamin B12, fish oil, and a GABA pill. He swallowed them all before changing and heading into the kitchen.

"Oh good, you're up," Pearl said as she paced around the tiny kitchen. "Grab something good to eat and meet me in the car."

Ace quickly made himself green tea in a to-go cup and swiped an orange from the fruit basket before joining his mother in the garage. They hopped in the car and drove off in the direction of the rehabilitation facility. Ace watched as the building peeked out from under the horizon line. Even in the light of the morning sun, the dreariness of the facility showed through. Ace sunk in his seat as they drove up to the building. At the fence that enclosed the facility, the regular guard, Fernando, was waiting. Pearl rolled down her window and smiled at him.

"Morning, Ms. Izak," Fernando said bleakly, waving them through.

"Good morning, Fernando," Pearl replied as the fence opened up and they drove past.

“You go talk to him first, I’ll park the car and sit in the waiting room until you’re done. I know how you two like to talk one on one.”

“Thanks mom,” Ace said as Pearl pulled up to the entrance of the facility. Ace left the car and walked up to the door. Once inside, the receptionist, Cheyenne, smiled at him.

“Ace, nice to see you! Your father’s in room 215.”

Ace went up the elevator and down the hall to room 215, where a guard was waiting.

“I’m Angel Izak’s son, Ace.”

“ID?”

Ace showed the guard his NeuroWatch as it displayed his driver’s license. The guard nodded and opened the door.

Inside Ace’s father was sitting at a table with an empty seat across from him. He turned when the door opened and stood.

“Ace, my boy!” He cried before wrapping Ace up in a tight hug.

“Hey dad,” Ace said before sitting down across from his father.

“Why so gloomy? Have you been monitoring your levels?” Angel eyed him worriedly.

“Yes, of course I have. I just, I don’t understand why you have to be here.”

Angel sighed and sat back in his chair.

“I told you, son, I need regular treatment.”

“It just seems like you’re still a prisoner.”

“Now listen to me,” Angel’s voice grew serious. “I was never a prisoner. Before the prison reform act was passed I was a criminal serving for my crimes, crimes I committed because I did not know how to deal with my condition. But now that this place is being used to support people like me, I am finally getting the resources I need.”

“Does that mean you’ll be able to come home soon?” Ace asked.

“I don’t think so,” Angel said, averting his son’s gaze. “I can’t support myself on my own. I need to be looked after.”

“But mom and I would look after you.”

“I wish, buddy, but these are medical professionals who treat me. They’re trained to work with people who have similar mental disorders. I have to stay here for them to help me”

Ace’s heart sank. He felt his NeuroWatch buzz against his thigh.

“Was that your watch?” Angel asked.

Ace nodded.

“Let me see.”

Ace showed Angel his watch, which displayed all three colored bars: yellow, blue, and green. They were dropping.

“I thought you said you were watching your levels?”

“I am,” Ace said. “But they’ve been all over the place lately.”

Angel stared at Ace’s watch with a sour expression.

“It’s fine, dad, really—”

“No, it’s not fine. You need to be careful, Ace, I don’t want you ending up like me. Your Serotonin, Dopamine, and Norepinephrine levels need to be kept in check. It’s a good thing we have this technology to help us monitor our brains. Too much or too little of these chemicals could cause dangerous imbalances, do you understand?”

Ace hung his head.

“I understand. I just wish I could spend more time with you.”

“I know. I wish you could too, but you need to be out in the real world. Now go get your mother for me.”

Ace hugged his father. He felt a buzz and saw the yellow bar, measuring his serotonin level, begin to rise. He smiled at Angel and turned to leave.

“Oh and Ace?”

“Yeah, dad?”

“Your mental health isn’t something you should be ashamed of. Be glad you live in a time when people pay attention to that sort of thing.”