

**Manny**

"Hey dude, you're like the only person ever in here ever, you know?" Manny coughed out while shuffling his way through the library door. He kept his eyes cast to his feet, making small movements and choosing his words carefully. A fight had happened, and he didn't want to upset Scott by doing something stupid. Manny shut the door behind him, spying the red stained tufts on the ground as it clicked closed. "D-dude, what?" he blurted out, picking up the damage and rushing to his friend with a little more urgency.

**Scott**

Scott sat at the same table he'd laid at as Emma walked out. He was trying to continue his place in his newest young adult novel, but his concentration had waned such that he hadn't turned as much as a single page.

"I was stupid," he croaked out, setting down the book and giving up the facade that things were okay, "I let my emotions get the better of me, and said some stupid things."

**Manny**

"Uhh, what's that saying about words not hurting?" Manny scoffed "What stupid shit could you have said that would make you bleed, huh?" He could see Scott's sweater speckled with blood soaking into the fabric from beneath. "Here..." He softened his voice and sat down next to the bird boy. "Let me see it."

**Scott**

"If you really want to," Scott mumbled. He really wasn't thinking anymore. Manny could have probably tried to do the same things that Emma had done and he probably wouldn't have minded.

He reached his arms back, wincing as he did so, and pulled the sweatshirt off over his head, revealing a large smear, crimson near the top of his shoulder and gradually turning to brown as it went down his pectorals onto his abdomen.

**Manny**

Scott wouldn't have seen Manny's eyes widen as he peeled the cloth confinement off of his wound. He wouldn't have noticed the way the boy's nostrils flared as a scent that only Manny seemed aware of stung his senses. The heavy sigh followed by a hard swallow of saliva flooding his mouth was completely ignored by Scott, who had enough problems on his mind. Manny clenched his teeth and stood from the seat he had barely gotten comfortable in, forcing himself back into his right mind.

"Jesus Christ, Scott. That's...that's a lot of fucking blood." Manny's hands moved over the feathered shoulder to inspect the wound, carefully making sure not to hurt him further, but also tactically resting his fingers over a particularly blood soaked area. "Here, let me get you a rag or something. Something to clean this up. Don't move, okay?"

He backed away to leave the library, wanting to be quick just in case Scott's feathered form was discovered by another halfway home resident. It wouldn't take long to rush to the bathroom and return with towels. Scott wouldn't notice anyway. Just as he wouldn't notice Manny sucking on his blood smeared thumb as he left.

### **Scott**

Scott heard Manny's footfalls get further away, followed by the creaking and slamming of the library door. The scene kept replaying in his head: Him screaming at Emma and pushing his bloody feathers in her face, her slapping him and screaming back. He had done literally everything wrong in the last few minutes of that exchange. Over what? A kiss? Was he that much of a coward that he couldn't even put up with her slipping a little tongue?

Yes. Yes he was.

He knew he needed to go talk to her. Apologize. Ask her to possibly forgive him someday for the horrible things he had done today. He had considered doing it for at least an hour now. He knew, however, that to go and apologize, he would first have to show his face to her. His bloody jacket. Remind her of the fight they'd just had. When he thought of that, he wished that she could just not know him at all again.

Maybe he would run away. System kids did that all the time. The police would find him eventually, but at least for a few hours, maybe a day, he wouldn't have to share the same building with her. He could always request a room transfer afterwards. Make some new friends. Meet a new girl someday.

But no other girl would accept him. He was shy, prudish, smelly, weak, cowardly, and above all else, a bird.

The pain came back. Not the pain in his shoulder, but one deep down in his heart. He had completely ruined everything he had with the only girl who had ever liked him. Though, wait, there actually was some pain in his shoulder, too: A heavy bit of pressure was coning down on it. It aggravated the burning pain and pulled him back to reality. His eyes came back into focus, revealing a pair of clawed hands frantically pressing a bath towel down into his shoulder.

### **Manny**

Manny may have been sopping up the blood with a little too much force, but dowsing the scent with the water soaked towel made him feel a little more calm. Once satisfied, he replaced the red rag with a clean, dry one, setting it gently on top of Scott's wound and leaving it for him to do whatever he wanted. Without a word he took the seat next to Scott again and sighed, wondering what to say next. What would Uncle V do in this situation? ...On second thought maybe his advice wouldn't be so good for this.

"Do you uhh...do you wanna talk about it now?" He shrugged. No use beating around the bush with this one. Scott seemed really out of it.

**Scott**

"Not really," he replied weakly, "But I'm gonna have to talk about it eventually. I'd rather my first time not be to her."

He put his hand over the new towel and put some pressure down again. It hurt, but it kept him here. Kept him grounded. He worked his way back to the beginning. Where to start. He couldn't think of anything. It all blurred together.

"Did she tell you anything?"

**Manny**

"No dude, she's in a mood or something. I don't know."

He leaned back, put his feet on the chair and crossed his arms on his knees. There wasn't much he could say without Scott offering information first, but prying too deeply might have upset him more. The kid was sensitive, Manny knew that, and he felt the same way too sometimes. But the rising tension between his friends over Emma bothered him. It was hard for Manny to imagine going crazy over a girl. Changing yourself for a girl. Hurting yourself.

"So did she do that or did you?"

**Scott**

"Me."

Scott could still remember everything about that moment. Things he had been unaware of in the heat of it all: The vigor with which he had to pull, the blinding pain telling him not to do it, the sickening wet pops as they came out. He felt nauseous every time it came back to his mind.

"It was part of a stupid melodramatic statement."

He looked to his injured shoulder. He never thought anything would drive him to do that again. The pain. The disgust. It took him back to when he saw the first downy quills appear on his shoulders. His shoulders. It was funny, really. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

"I got mad and lost control."

**Manny**

"Mad, huh?"

He turned he head to look at Scott's wound, glancing back from his shoulder to his face. "Man, when you make a statement you really make a statement. Hate to see you mad at me."

He flashed his teeth in a small grin, hoping maybe the lighthearted jab would be received well. Though if there was a time for seriousness, it would probably be when one of your best friends is bleeding in the library. After realizing that it wasn't going to work, Manny cleared his throat and tried again.

"Dude. You can't let her get you all fuckin'...worked up like this. Fuck dude, if she's driving you crazy enough that you're pulling yourself apart? Then uhhm, you know, you're gonna run out of blood before she runs out of crazy."

### **Scott**

"Yeah, I know," he said, giving he slightest hint of a laugh, "I was just as mad at me as I was at her. I'm pretty sure I hurt her worse than I did myself, though."

Scott realized he was getting to a point in this story that was going to get kind of awkward to try and explain. Manny was a good friend, though. He could probably handle this if Scott left out the specifics.

"She wanted to. . . get close. Like, really close. It was closer than I had ever thought she'd get. Closer than I ever wanted to be. It surprised me, and I freaked out."

Scott could feel the tears welling up again. He blushed and looked at his feet, trying to hide the tears from his friend. He needed to look strong. Needed, at least once, to avoid being the target of pity. He didn't deserve it.

"She *accused* me of pushing her away because of *her scars*."

He could feel the pressure building up at the base of his throat. He wasn't going to be able to keep up the facade of strength too much longer.

"And then. . ." he choked, "I tried to run away. I didn't want to hear what she was going to say. When that failed, I *sat* right *here* and *cried*."

The tears started to fall, and he didn't try to hold back any longer.

### **Manny**

"Hey."

Manny's voice was just above a whisper as he listened to Scott's sobbing. His shoulders dropped and he lifted his hand to rub through his hair. The devil child sighed a bit before extending that same arm around his friend's back, avoiding his injured shoulder to halfway embrace Scott as comfortably as possible.

"Hey...Im not gonna pretend I can give you advice on what to do with Emma. I don't know what her deal is, and if I sit here and try to tell you what to do like I know shit then that's just going to cause more trouble. So. Forget about her for a sec. Lets talk about you."

He stared Scott dead in the eyes, though he wouldn't have been able to tell. Manny sounded sincere and empathetic, different from his usual laid back joking tone.

"You have a lot of feelings. And you're crazy nice, even when you probably shouldn't be. Life just deals you shit cards and you take 'em like a man. Seriously. We all got our scars, bro. And if Emma wants to pretend that hers are deeper than everyone else's then let her."

Manny was surprised when those last words came out of his mouth. He sounded angrier than he meant to...maybe he was angry. Tired of watching Emma lead two of her friends on because she couldn't get her own shit together.

"I know you like her, man. But she shouldn't fuck with your feelings if they aren't convenient for her at the time. That's not love, that's controlling. If you don't want to rush shit, she shouldn't turn it into a way of putting herself down. That might not be Emma, that's probably all girls. Manipulative and shit. But like...that's what relationships are, you know? Taking the bad parts of the person you like, and putting it aside in favor of the good parts. Heck, sometimes the good parts make the bad parts seem not so bad, you know? Emma just needs to figure out that her bad parts aren't so bad to you guys-...I mean you. She's still pretty hung up on not being pretty. But...what's that thing Uncle V used to say? Your insides are prettier than your outsides? Something like that. I never knew what it meant, but I think it sorta works here."

### **Scott**

Scott eased up a little bit. He was actually a little surprised. Manny was telling him that he was... strong? He took things like a man? When he was sitting right here and crying his eyes out? He was right about Emma, though. Well, at least partly.

"You know. . . I've tried to tell her a couple of times. . . tell her a couple of times that I didn't care about the scars. That's what /this/ whole statement was about."

He felt a little anger return to him.

"I freaked out because I was surprised by what she did. It was probably rude to lead her on so much and then push her away right at the last minute. But when I tried to call her back, when I was trying to ask for her mercy in the situation," he muttered, bite carrying harder in each subsequent word, "She tore into me. She tried to tell me that I was disgusted by her scars, despite how I've been nothing but supportive of her."

Scott looked back to his wounded shoulder.

"And then i did /that/ to give myself some new scars. To show her that we all have them. That I've gotten over mine, and that I don't care about hers. Probably a bit more aggressive than I should've been, but her words hurt me."

He paused to wipe his nose on his arm. It was probably a bad idea, but he didn't care.

"Probably as much as I hurt her."

### **Manny**

"So you both got hurt. At least you can admit it. The hard part's over."

Manny took his arm out of the embrace and set it back on his knees. His smile had returned as well as his calm. Manny didn't realize how much watching Scott cry over Emma upset him. He felt anger burn his words as he spoke about it, and not until Scott seemed to return the sentiment did his own anger subside. Maybe that was how Nele felt when he thought Manny was in danger? The overwhelming sense to beat down whatever the caused the threat. Though beating up Emma wasn't an option, the problem was deeper than that anyway. If there was a way to destroy how hard it was growing up then he would have slashed it to pieces years ago.

"You eventually gotta patch things up with her, I guess. But let her let off some steam or whatever first. How's your shoulder? You feeling any better? I'm worried about you, bro."

### **Scott**

Scott hesitantly picked up the new towel. He could see a couple of red splotches where some follicles had been. He watched for a few seconds to see that the red wasn't expanding anymore, that there were no new beads of blood forming.

"It's not bleeding anymore. It'll hurt for a couple of days and then just be kinda gross and scabby for awhile."

He set the towel back down.

"It still looks kinda icky, though, so I'm gonna leave that there until I can put my shirt back on."

He turned his head back to Manny.

"Thanks for caring about me," Scott said, looking off into a distance and then coming back to meet Manny's general eye area, "I don't think I've ever acknowledged how much you do for me. You're always willing to come and help me out, or see things from a different light, or look after me when I don't look after myself. It makes me wish I could do something to pay you back."

He leaned in and put his good arm around Manny.

"Thanks for being such a good friend."

## **Manny**

“We can nab some bandages off of Jingles later. Keep lint and germs and shit from getting in there. Keep it from getting all gro-“

Manny’s sentence got away from him when Scott voiced his thank yous. The devil kid bounced these words in his head for a while. Scott was one of his closest friends...something that he couldn’t imagine having just a few months ago. He’d come to care so much about these people in a short amount of time, the idea of any of them being hurt tore his insides apart. Scott especially. The two shared a lot more in common than they realized at first. Scott understood his fears about the future. He understood what it was like to live as a monster.

“I-It’s cool, dude. Guys like us gotta look after each other...heh.”

He matched Scott’s one armed embrace with his own and leaned his head towards him. Smiling a bit as he thought, *I’m just trying to be a decent human being.*

“Thanks for being my friend too. One of my best friends. One of my only friends.”

Once satisfied that Scott was going to be okay the two would leave, go their separate ways in the house. Manny offered to take care of the towels they had ruined, urging Scott to worry about more important things. Intending to throw the bloody mess out...intending to.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.