

“Hello, ma’am, have you seen this man?” Virgil asked frantically, pointing at the poster in his hand. The woman eyed him warily.

He was a mess, and he knew it. His hair was tangled and disheveled, stuffed hastily under a woolen hat. A heavy *Slytherin* scarf was tossed around his neck and over a black ski jacket. Then there was his face. He hadn’t slept in at least two days, and showers had been taken to the back burner recently.

The poster in his hand- one of the thousands he had printed- hosted a large picture of a smiling Valentine with Virgil’s fluffy cat. Below it read: *Missing: Valentine Davis Sanchez* along with some basic information. The woman inspected the picture then shook her head apologetically.

“No, I’m afraid that I haven’t. Sorry dear.” She strutted off, and Virgil clenched his gloved fists. He looked down at his hands.

*“Don’t you think it’s stupid to wear fingerless gloves in winter? Like, don’t your fingertips get cold?” “You’re the one who helped me pick these out at HotTopic!”*

Virgil bit his lip and stuffed the poster into his bag. He pushed forwards into the cafe, the warmth doing little to soothe his frantic mind. He ordered drinks and sat down, taking out and smoothing the poster. He stared down at Valentine’s smiling face, amber eyes warm and unguarded. His lungs clenched painfully, the taste of faded memories on his tongue.

“Oh Valentine, where are you?” he muttered, eyes distant.

Memories swirled in his head, pushing through the static that had plagued him ever since Valentine had been declared missing. The times they had spent together.

Their first date. God, they’d been so stupid. When Valentine had closed his eyes for a goodnight kiss, and then he’d accidentally kissed Virgil’s glasses instead of his mouth- that was adorable.

And there was that time when they’d gone to the amusement park together and made that ridiculous bet on who could eat the most fried dough (it had been a tie) then they went on all those roller coasters... bad idea.

And that time on Christmas break when they’d went shopping together and Valentine had tripped and fallen into the fountain at the mall and when Virgil was laughing Valentine had pulled him in too and that time at the observatory where they’d snuck in and tried to see who could count the most constellations and their French project and then... and then there was the time at the river. With the stolen champagne. And the sunset. And then... and then they’d...

“One black coffee, one vanilla latte two percent milk, whipped cream, and chocolate drizzle,” a barista listed, placing two drinks down before Virgil. Virgil took a cautious sip from the coffee and placed the other in front of the seat across from him.

“Just for you, Valentine. It’s your favorite.” Virgil let out a hollow laugh.

His eyes dropped back down to the poster. To Valentine’s smiling face. God he missed that face. Those shimmering brown eyes, his dark soft hair, his laugh, all of it.

Ever since Valentine had gone, it was like everything had shifted to black and white. There was no color. No happiness. Virgil's grades had dropped and so had his moods. Everything faded to static. Nothing mattered anymore. All he was focused on was finding his boyfriend. Once they were together again, all would be right in the world.

Virgil gulped down the last of his coffee and stood, exiting out onto the snowy street, leaving Valentine's missing poster pinned beneath the abandoned latte.

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*"Wow. You're really gonna drink that? You're so vanilla," Virgil said.*

*He laughed and knocked into Valentine's shoulder playfully. Valentine grinned and bumped him back. They stepped out of the coffee shop and into the town square, steam curling up from their cups and their mouths. They looked up at the falling snow and the golden Christmas lights, soft holiday music playing in the background. The endless night above was filled with stars and ice and hazy, thin clouds. Virgil slipped his gloved hand into Valentine's. It was freezing, but standing by Valentine was like standing by a radiator. He filled Virgil with an addictive sense of warmth.*

*"God that pun was awful. You're lucky I love you so much," Valentine giggled.*

*"You're lucky you're so cute."*

*"You're lucky you're so amazing."*

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"Wow. You look like shit."

"Thanks Ash. You look great too. Now listen- last night, I came up with this perfect theory for how Valentine vanished."

"Oh boy."

"So, first of all, y'know video games? Well I was thinking, what if we're in a video game and then our chunks aren't loaded so slowly the world's dissolving and Valentine was-"

"Virgil..." Ash finally looked up from their book, a piteous expression adorning their face. Virgil glared at them and tacked another sticky note to his massive ever-growing wall of theories, all surrounding a single polaroid of his boyfriend like a blizzard around a lamppost.

"You don't understand, Ash! You didn't love him!" Virgil yelled, tears filling his eyes.

"You're right. I didn't. But I know you. And this is tearing you apart! You've been a mess all year! Have you even *started* your science project?!" Virgil shook his head. "See?! You're falling apart! Listen, at this point there's nothing you can do about it. Yes, I know you miss Valentine, but you can't do anything. It's been months. All you can do is move on. You know that's what Valentine would want," Ash reasoned.

Virgil stiffened up, then slowly, like a balloon letting out air, he deflated. Tears filled his eyes and trickled down his cheeks like crystals melting under heat. He let out a tiny, stifled cry, collapsing to the ground. Ash dropped their book, unsure of what to do. Nervously they approached him, patting his shoulder reassuringly. Virgil sniffled and stood up, brushing away Ash's hand. Virgil's face was placid perfectly calm.

Then he rounded on the wall by his whiteboard and slammed his fist into the it. Ash jumped. He punched the wall once. Twice. Three times. Over and over rapidly, until finally he stepped away, a hole in the wall and the beginnings of blood on his knuckles. Ash tensed up, eyes filled with a concoction of fear and worry. Virgil turned back to them, face full of betrayal and loss. He glared down at them, and raised a bloody, trembling hand towards the stairs.

"Get out of my house."

"Virgil..."

"Get out."

Ash scrambled to collect their things. They shoved their books and papers into a bag and stood up, rushing towards the exit. Virgil glared after them, eyes flat and blank.

"And don't forget, you don't know how I fucking feel."

Ash's face paled and they sprinted down the stairs and out to their waiting bike.

Virgil watched as they left. He looked down at his hand, vision swimming. He stumbled over to his beanbag, collapsing down and curling up on the blue fabric. The tears were falling freely now, just like the blood dripping from his split knuckles. Pain was resonating from his hand in waves of searing heat, but Virgil ignored it. All he felt was hollow. Hollow and covered in the sticky shadows of Valentine's absence.

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*"So you like The X-Files, right?" Valentine asked, pulling Virgil down the hall. Virgil ducked his head and followed, pulling the hood of his sweatshirt up.*

*"Yeah, why?" Virgil muttered.*

*"I have a friend I think you'll like! They love conspiracies too!"*

*Then Valentine had turned and the sun had caught his hair just right and he was wreathed in gold. His skin shone and his eyes had shifted into the endless warmth of a Cape Cod sunset. Virgil's heart was lost. He'd do anything for Valentine, even talking to someone new. Valentine led him forwards and Virgil came face to face- or rather, he had to look down quite a bit- with a short, brown-haired student.*

*"This is my friend! They love all that conspiracy theory junk. You should tell them about your alien-cryptid theory," Valentine said happily. Virgil held out his hand awkwardly.*

*"Hi. I'm Virgil Knox, Valentine's boyfriend."*

*"Ash Lydell, nice to meet you."*

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Virgil stood once more at the corner outside the coffee shop, this time pinning up posters to telephone poles and lampposts. A woman stopped to look at it. She smiled sweetly.

“You’re such a nice young man. Is that your friend? Step-brother?” she asked. Virgil handed her a poster with a hollow smile.

“Boyfriend. He disappeared last spring. Have you seen him?” he asked. The woman’s eyes hardened. She raised a cold eyebrow and Virgil’s hand faltered.

“No. I’m afraid not. Good luck finding your *friend*.” She strutted away, the snow swirling after her like sharp stars of ice.

Virgil grimaced and stared down at Valentine’s smiling face. Pinning up more posters was doing nothing. He’d been putting them up all summer, all fall, and now it was almost Christmas. Maybe he could go check in at the police station to see if they’d found anything else. They *had* to have. Virgil shoved the posters into his bag and climbed onto his motorcycle, clipping on his helmet before starting up the motor.

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*“Oh my God oh my God oh my God- I’m so nervous!” Valentine sputtered. Virgil glanced over his shoulder and sent Valentine a cocky grin. His boyfriend’s brown eyes were wide and filled with fear, hair messy from the helmet. He was radiant.*

*“We haven’t even started yet,” Virgil said, voice teasing. Valentine rolled his eyes.*

*“It’s still pretty fucking scary!” Valentine whimpered. Virgil laughed and started the engine, reveling in warmth as Valentine squeezed his torso tighter. He pulled out of the school parking lot and slowly eased his way through the turnaround.*

*They reached the street and Virgil gunned the engine, quickly racing around the entire block, Valentine screaming the whole time. He turned into the parking the Mexican restaurant and Valentine leapt off the bike, cursing loudly. Virgil unfastened his helmet and turned, laughing. His boyfriend was currently blubbing loudly in Spanish and hugging himself.*

*“Jesus Christ, we were barely going thirty,” Virgil said. Valentine glared at him.*

*“It was scary!” he cried. Virgil smiled and wrapped an arm around Valentine, pressing a quick kiss to his temple. Valentine’s breathing slowed and he relaxed into Virgil’s touch.*

*“Sorry, babe. I promise we’ll go slower on the way back,” he said soothingly. Valentine took a deep breath and smiled, taking Virgil’s hand.*

*“Alright. But we can worry about that later. We have a date to enjoy,” Valentine exclaimed. He started forwards, pulling Virgil towards the restaurant.*

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Virgil sped down the street, silently telling himself that maybe if he went fast enough he could leave all his guilt and sadness and pain behind. It didn't work. The freezing air bit at his skin, soft snowflakes like shards of ice stabbing into his flesh. These weren't good conditions to drive in but Virgil couldn't bring himself to care. He stopped at a light. At the end of the street was the police station. He'd been there so many times even after they closed Valentine's case.

But one more time couldn't hurt.

Behind him a car honked and he looked up. The light had turned green. He sighed and started down the street, swerving into the police station's parking lot, not even bothering to put on his turn signal. He didn't give a fuck anymore.

He parked and hopped off his bike, clipping his helmet to the back before pushing open the doors to the station. The heat hit him like a wall and he let out a deep breath. God that felt nice. He walked up to the front desk and the secretary, Tom, took one look at him before letting out a long, sad sigh. He shifted the papers and raised an eyebrow at Virgil.

"Are you back to ask about the Sanchez case?" he asked. Virgil nodded.

The secretary sighed and rolled his eyes. "Just go in. But don't throw me under the bus when he yells at you," Tom said. Virgil shot him a thumbs up before walking behind the front desk. He pushed open the large, wood door to Detective Lydell's office. The detective looked up sharply and his face fell the second he spotted Virgil. He sighed. He set down the files he had been reading and stood up, stepping around his desk to come face to face with Virgil.

"Virgil... you're here about Valentine again, aren't you?" he asked.

"Of course I am! My boyfriend's missing and you're all here sitting on your asses while he's out there going through hell!" Virgil yelled. Detective Lydell rubbed his temples, wincing.

"Son-"

"Don't call me son."

"*Virgil*- we looked for four months. There were no leads. It's a cold case. My hands are tied. There's nothing I can do," Detective Lydell said.

Virgil bit his tongue, clenching his hands into fists as rage filling his gut. The world around him seemed to tilt and sway like a wobbly planet on a skewed axis. Everything was getting blurry and Virgil wasn't sure whether to blame it on the tears filling Virgil's eyes or the fact that Valentine was still *out there* and Detective Lydell was doing nothing.

Valentine was out there. He had to be. Virgil was sure of it. There was no way Valentine was dead. And even so, they hadn't found his body. Virgil needed closure. He at least needed to know what had happened, and not just that Valentine had disappeared off the face of the planet. His theories could only take him so far. He needed proof. He opened his mouth and faintly he could taste blood on his tongue. The price for his attempt at containing his rage.

"You don't know anything," Virgil hissed. Detective Lydell sighed tiredly.

"Listen son, I've had a long day. I know you're concerned but-"

Virgil lunged forwards and cut off his words with a solid punch to the jaw. Detective Lydell stumbled backwards and held up his arms. Virgil swung at him again, fist making contact

with the older man's nose. The detective let out a cry and grabbed Virgil's wrist, blood beginning to drip down his nose. Virgil struggled to break free, kicking and screaming.

A few seconds later two deputies rushed into the room. They pulled Virgil off Detective Jenkins. Virgil flailed and managed to slam his elbow into the left guard's eye. The man grunted and the woman unclipped a pair of handcuffs from her waist and wrenched Virgil's hands behind his back.

They dragged him down the hall and threw him into one of the three jail cells. Virgil gritted his teeth and kicked the bars, pacing around for a few seconds before plopping down on the small metal cot.

"Kid- what's your parent's number?" she asked. Virgil sighed resentfully.

"Fuck you," he spat.

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"Five hundred dollars. Five hundred dollars, Virgil! That was your bail bond! Are you happy now? 'Cause when mom gets home you're getting your ass handed to you. And on top of that-" They stopped at a light and Jason turned towards his brother. He let out an aggravated sigh at the sight of Virgil staring numbly out the window. "Are you even listening to me?!"

"Not really," Virgil mumbled.

Jason muttered angrily under his breath and Virgil carried on ignoring him. The light turned green and they drove down the street until they turned into their driveway. Virgil barely waited for Jason to stop the car before hopping out and stomping towards the house. He'd have to pick up his motorcycle tomorrow. He pulled open the door and dumped his coat on the radiator before stomping upstairs. He could hear Jason enter behind him.

"Virgil! Don't you dare walk away you little shit! This is not over-"

"Fuck off Jason!" Virgil screamed. He glared at Jason and flipped him off before stomping up to his room.

He slammed the door and rounded on his wall, anger sparking in his heart. All he could feel was a volatile cocktail of anger and sadness. He slammed his palm into the wall and let out a sharp cry as tears slipped down his cheeks. He stepped back and deflated, insides coated with tingling sadness. He stumbled over to his bed and flopped down on it, tears soaking into his pillow. His eyes drifted over the room and all he could see was traces Valentine.

Because Valentine was everywhere. The houseplants on his window sill had all been presents from his boyfriend. Just as the crystals on his shelf had been. And the string lights. And the stuffed turtle Valentine had won him at the fair that now sat on Virgil's bed. And the glow in the dark stars pressed to the ceiling in a myriad of constellations. It all screamed Valentine. Virgil turned over on his side and his eyes landed on a small framed picture.

It was of the two of them, a few summers back. The day they had gone into Boston. They were standing in front of the aquarium. Valentine was wearing a pair of blue shutter sunglasses

and a rainbow squid hat. He was dressed simply, in a blue and white short-sleeved baseball tee and jeans, a purple sweater wrapped around his waist. Virgil had been wearing a short-sleeved red shirt, black jeans, and a choker with a tiny planet charm dangling above his pale collar bone. He had a pair of red sunglasses and a pink octopus hat. Valentine had his left arm slung around Virgil's shoulder and both of them were posing ridiculously.

They had been so young back then, only sophomores. Now, three years later, Virgil was broken and Valentine was missing.

Fresh tears rose to Virgil's eyes and he sniffled, a small, bitter smile growing on his face. Valentine had loved the aquarium. All the fish, the water, the gift shop- he'd loved it all. There had been so much Valentine had loved. He'd been- *was* the most vivacious person Virgil knew.

The smile faded from his face, replaced by waves of tears and the crash of sobs. Virgil sniffled and rolled over to face the wall, looking anywhere but their happy smiling faces.

He reached over and pulled the stuffed turtle to his chest, throat tight and edged with ice. After a few seconds of shuddering silent sobs his lips slowly formed words, eyes universe's away.

"Where are you, Valentine?"