Looking For Anything

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Summary: Some nights when Carl comes home, he seems like someone who's been crawling on his knees, looking for anything to keep him from drowning. Jasper thinks it's like this: If Carl showed everyone he could fly, maybe he wouldn't need anyone by his side. But Carl's wings are broken and Jasper doesn't know how to fix them.

Author's Note: Title inspired by Running Blind by Godsmack. This one hasn't been beta'ed.

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Jasper

Jasper knows something's not right. He's become quite good at telling when Carl's in a mood or not.

It's the things he doesn't say. The small things. The way he closes the door behind him with a soft click of the lock or the forceful bang when he kicks it closed. The way he hangs his coat slowly and deliberately or if he jams it up on the coat hanger like it's a soiled towel he wants to discard. The way he lightly places the keys on the table or if they land there with a careless jingly clank.

Tonight, it's been more of the latter, but worse. Tonight it's not the vicious, angry storm that whips the crowns of trees and sends loose items flying. It's a quiet intensity that's so loud that it fills up the room with a discordant hum you want to drown out. It's a deep hunch of shoulders and a gaze eternally averted because if you looked in Carl's eyes, maybe something would break and never fit together again. It's not saying a single word but wanting the whole world to listen.

It's one of those nights where Jasper knows he is better served hiding in his room and pretending he doesn't exist, where a single thing or a wrong sound could send Carl flying into a wild rage or maybe make him quietly break, and he doesn't think he could bear either of those things.

So he hides and pretends like this isn't unusual or this isn't fucking screwed up, until his throat gets all parched and he really needs a glass of water.

He tries not to be obtrusive, wordlessly fills a glass from the tap, takes a few quick gulps and is prepared to slink back to his room, but Carl is standing in the living room archway with one hand leaned against where the grille meets the wooden frame, his back towards the kitchen.

For all Jasper knows, he might have been standing there since he got home, trying to decide whether sinking down on the couch is a luxury he's allowed to afford or whether the dark clouds around him would swallow him whole if he took a single step further.

Normally Jasper doesn't get involved, waits it out until it passes. Carl once told him he's two people. This is the other one, the one who sees horrible shit and tries to compartmentalise it in some kind of unlabelled chest in a locked room with an impossible key combination only Carl will ever know. This is the person Jasper doesn't know what to do with.

And yet, something gives him pause, thinking that person must be fucking sad and lonely. Before he knows it, he carefully edges closer, says the name in a low voice. "Carl."

He doesn't move but there's the smallest twitch to his head. Jasper isn't sure if he's allowed to probe further, is allowed to invade that space that's filled with black fog wafting over the floor tiles around their ankles.

Carl doesn't acknowledge him as Jasper drifts closer but not too close.

Jasper swallows, hesitates, then asks, "Are you alright?"

It's a stupid question, might as well be rhetorical, because it doesn't take a fucking genius to know that Carl is a far cry from alright. Jasper immediately knows he shouldn't have asked, because now he'll just get a superficial look, a jerk that adjusts Carl back to the other person and a cursory, "Yeah, I'm fine," that'll send the dark fog into the other room where it'll fester and spread.

But that's not what's happening, and that scares Jasper just a little bit. He waits, sees if something will materialise, if it's just a two second delay, but Carl just stands there, fixing his eyes on Jasper for a split second and then back to the middle distance where there's nothing and everything at the same time.

"Something happened," Jasper says, as if that's not stating the fucking obvious. "Something bad…"

God, he hopes no one died. If someone on Carl's team died, or someone he cares about, it would… Shit. What if—

"Yeah," Carl exhales.

That's all he says. Jasper waits, but the dark fog just keeps spreading. "Did someone…"

"No," Carl says. It's barely above a whisper.

A pang of relief floods through Jasper. It's short-lived but that's something. Because he's sure that would have fucking destroyed what was left of Carl.

He inches closer, just a step, tests the waters. "Look, I know you said you don't want to talk about what happens with your… with your job. But if you…"

Carl lifts his gaze, looks at Jasper. There's something in Carl's eyes that Jasper has never seen before. A fragility that's raw, mingled with a tangible fear and weariness at the same time. Something that bleeds with the pain of a thousand lives and a thousand losses. Jasper looks more closely and feels a knot in his stomach when he sees that Carl's eyes are teary at the corners, that his chin is trembling ever so slightly.

Jasper doesn't know what to do with that, knows that Carl will never tell him what has him rattled like this, tries to decide if he's going to be okay with that, when Carl moves, closes the gap between them and draws Jasper into a hug.

Carl's bony arms are around his back, drawing Jasper close with both urgency and hesitation. Jasper feels the small tremors in Carl's chest as he's trying to hold something in that's ready to burst out but not quite free of its cage. Jasper lets his arms come around Carl's waist – tentative and ready to let go at a moment's notice.

There's not a word spoken, just Carl needing something more tangible, something to ground him and maybe give him a reassurance that he's kept at arm's length or that he's lost. Maybe he needs an anchor, or maybe the one he had dropped has come loose and he needs to re-moor it.

When Carl lets go, Jasper takes a step back, isn't sure what's going to happen. It's fucking awkward, because he and Carl never touch anymore, haven't for a very long time. Something in Jasper wants to flee to his room but something more important has him rooted to the spot.

Carl goes to the couch, deflates on it like there is no more life left in him. He angrily wipes his palm across his cheek at the lone tear there, then leans forward, drops his head into his hands with a gut-wrenching, "Shit."

Jasper finally moves, sits down on the couch next to Carl – close enough to be there, not too close to crowd his space. He isn't quite sure if the black clouds are still wafting or if perhaps they've softened to a dark grey.

He wants to offer something, wants to extend a hand or an olive branch or… just fucking anything. "What can I do?"

Carl sucks in a long breath. Jasper can hear the stutter in it but it's steadier when Carl exhales. Predictably, he says, "Nothing."

Then…

"Fuck, I wish I had a cigarette."

"Do you want one?"

Shit. It's out of Jasper's mouth before he's even thought about it. Carl's head whips up and the look he gives Jasper is half chastisement, half disbelief. "Where'd you get fucking cigarettes?"

The tone is sharp, and normally Jasper would flinch and start saying something defensive, but now he doesn't because it's the first time tonight that he's seen the normal Carl. The one who

comes home and sheds the skin of the other world by the door and leaves it on the coat hanger. The one who doles out unfiltered insults like they're love language, the one who gives you a stupid little smile when you've said something funny or clever, sometimes even an actual laugh that uncannily softens his rough edges.

So Jasper just says, "Don't worry. It's just some nights when we hang out. It's not that often. I don't even like it that much."

He's fully prepared for the barrage of reprimands, a lecture about health hazards, peppered with Carl's fresh pick of choice words of the day. Again, Carl surprises him. "Just don't get used to them. Fucking hard to stop, once you do."

Huh. Jasper didn't really have Carl pegged for a smoker, but it makes a certain kind of sense. "I've never seen you smoke."

"Yeah. Stopped when I moved in with you and your mum."

The statement is simple enough, but Jasper can read between the lines and it confirms what he's known all along but what Carl is absolutely fucking terrible at openly broadcasting. Somewhere beneath the hard shell and the dented armour, there's a quiet soul that attaches itself to people and wants to keep them safe.

Jasper vaguely gestures towards his room. "You want me to get you one?"

Carl shakes his head. "No." Then he adds, "Thanks."

He doesn't say that word very often. Like maybe he thinks it'll make him weak or mushy. Like it'll show people the cardinal sin of how much he actually cares.

Jasper doesn't know what to do, how to make the fog dissipate. So he does the only thing he can think of, he reaches for the remote control, points it at the TV. "You wanna watch something?"

Carl lets out a grunt that sounds like it hasn't quite decided yet if it's also a sigh. It might be a yes but it might also be a 'I'd rather be alone right now'. Except in Carl's words it would be flavoured with more f-bombs.

Jasper tries again, "We never finished the *3 Body Problem*."

"That what we watched when I was ill?"

"Yeah. The one you fell asleep over after 10 minutes."

"I was fucking out of it at the time."

Jasper smiles, recalls how wrecked Carl had been. "I know."

"Okay," Carl then concedes. "Might as well."

Jasper knows that's going to be the best he'll get from Carl, that it's actual endorsement. He switches on the telly, finds the show in the Netflix menu, adjusts his position and hooks his feet

into the stretcher of the coffee table. Carl leans back next to him and puts his gangly legs up on the table, one slung over the other.

It's good, Jasper thinks. The fog might still be floating around down on the ground, but now it's light grey at best and they've both escaped from it for the time being. Maybe they're safe for a while and maybe, with enough patience, a light breeze might sweep in and blow it away entirely.

Carl

As Carl trudges up the stairs and unlocks the door to the flat, he thinks how wrong this all is.

It's fucking ironic that this place once used to be a home, a safe haven where he could hang the outside world on a coat hanger and step into a different one. He remembers how different things were in those days as he toes off his shoes.

He'd enter and be greeted with a warm welcome and a soft touch on the shoulder to brush away the day, with an excited tale told by a barely teenage boy that would open more doors to the other world, with an occasional glass of wine and a surreptitious look that would more often than not lead to subsequent intimacy. He liked this world, it used to make the dark less intimidating, used to help steer the ship to safety, its lighthouse flame flickering in a soft, orange glow.

But then—slowly, steadily—the light had dimmed and the darkness had crept in and Carl hadn't noticed until it was too late. He'd tried, he'd fucking *tried*, but his feeble attempts at lighting torches out at sea had been too little too late and he eventually crashed the boat that split into a hundred splintering pieces upon impact. He's been trying to swim to shore ever since, and some days it's just endless treading of icy water.

His bone-deep sigh as he contemplates stepping into the kitchen does nothing to alleviate the weight of withering memories and a day in the trenches of hell. What lurks here these days is a derelict anchorage that's degraded to brackish brown pools of stagnant water in between patches of sludgy mudflat. Some days he knows how to step on the solid ground to navigate a safe path, some days he sinks ankle-deep and comes out with shoes soaked and filthy. Tonight, his feet are too numb to even notice which it is.

The soft thud of a closing kitchen cupboard tells Carl he's not alone. It's Jasper, giving him a look as if he's trying to judge something, or maybe to pass judgement. It's hard to tell these days, they are both eternally attempting to locate the stepping stones that are safe to tread.

Carl tries not to look too closely, puts the keys on the table where they give a gentle jingle and tries to steel himself for a conversation he isn't equipped to have. The weight on his shoulders grows from heavy to crushing. And then Jasper wordlessly takes the packet of crisps to his room and relief eases the weight back from crushing to heavy.

He steps over the living room threshold, not quite sure where he wants to land today. Some days it's hard to moor his anchor, to find the right place to drop it. He's spent too many nights in a vacant bed whose sheets still carry the faint smell of broken promises. The couch is just another depressing reminder of why the bedroom has become a graveyard for a marriage that hasn't been buried long enough to not still fucking smart.

So he just stands in liminality, the cool touch of the archway frame against his palm offering a vague reassurance that he's still here, that this place still exists and holds him upright – if only just barely.

He's tried to shed the ghosts of the case they wrapped up today. On the way out of the basement, to the car, along the windswept Edinburgh streets that glistened with the headlights of oncoming traffic. He's tried as he unlocked the front door, walked up the steps that creaked with years of sordid history, but now that he's here, he's nowhere closer to actually fucking succeeding.

After a decade and a half of locking up the scum of humanity for taking innocent lives in the worst imaginable ways, he figured he'd seen it all, but this one ploughed into him like a fucking 16-tonne lorry. The moment they opened the file, it wound dark, writhing tendrils around him that stuck and squeezed and locked themselves into place.

Three months of hard, grinding work culminated in the arrest of a serial paedophile for murders spanning twelve years, only to find out that he was going to die of terminal pancreatic cancer before he'd even be sentenced.

Carl knows justice doesn't always come in neatly packaged boxes, has seen it often enough that he's grown too cynical to give all the fucks he could or maybe should, but this one screamed injustice so loud that it drowned out the noise of the blackened world around it. His team had laboured so hard, had turned over every stone, only for it to spit bile in their fucking faces when they realised they were just an hour or two shy of saving the latest victim's life.

During the arrest, they stumbled right into the aftermath, saw the horrors of a teenager's life being forced out of him in the vilest and most violating ways possible. The job rarely fazed Carl anymore, but after he left the abandoned farmhouse on unsteady feet, he stumbled across the drive and retched the little he had in his stomach into a strip of grass behind their car.

When they got back to the office, the only thing that kept Carl from violently throwing inanimate objects through the basement was Hardy's steady hand on his shoulder, Akram's quietly grounding presence and Rose's "Carl…" that hung there like a triumvirate of crucible, concern and solace as she held out a tennis ball to him. Somehow, miraculously, he kept the primal scream caged in his chest and transmuted it into a rhythmic squeezing of the tennis ball. The disquieting squelching sounds wrung whatever energy he still had left out of him.

That scream still sits in his chest even now, and as hard as he tries, the canvas of the images he's seen today are too large and unwieldy to fit into that lockbox he maintains. The one where he stores all the torments away before he's ready to cross the threshold that separates his two worlds that have now melted into the Venn diagram he's fought tooth and nail to prevent.

Through the noise of the raging storm that has been following Carl all the way home, he hears the gentle tap of socked feet behind him, a soft clank of a glass, running water. He's afraid that if he steps out of the eye of the tornado, the cyclone will sweep him up and swallow him whole. He's going to just wait it out, it'll pass. It will, if he waits long enough. He's been here before.

But then there's something. The familiar Scottish lilt that says his name. It's low and soft today, laced with concern and the heaviness that matches that in his chest.

“Carl.”

Jasper is right there, and there’s that other question that could easily break him in half if he let it.

“Are you alright?”

Carl swallows, wants to tell him that, yes, he’s fine, but clearly he’s as far from fucking fine as he will ever be. He lifts his gaze, lets his eyes flit to his stepson for a short second before he averts it again, if not for the simple reason that he just… can’t. He can’t because Jasper is here, and he’s safe, and it kills him that no matter how hard he tries, Carl won’t be able to shield him from all the terrible shit that lurks out there, ready to pounce like a pride of lions on an antelope youngling.

Jasper’s voice breaks the heavy silence. “Something happened,” he says, as if it’s not stating the fucking obvious. “Something bad…”

“Yeah,” Carl exhales.

“Did someone…”

‘Die?’ Carl thinks. Yes, someone died. Someone always dies. Everywhere, every single fucking minute.

But that’s not what Jasper means, because he’s all too aware of the risks that Carl and his team are exposed to, caught a glimpse of it and lived through it first-hand after Leith Park. Carl fucking hates that this is their new normal, that the worry is always there, like the subtle taste of salt on your lips when you’re out at sea for too long.

“No,” he says quietly. If not himself, at least he can give the boy some relief.

Jasper inches closer, just a step, as if he wants to test the waters. “Look, I know you said you don’t want to talk about what happens with your… with your job. But if you…”

There’s something poignant in the offer and Carl lifts his head, locks eyes with Jasper, sees the youthful innocence there that’s hardened around the edges with dread and an empathy Carl doesn’t think he deserves. Suddenly there’s a pain in Carl’s heart that hurts from a thousand lives he’s failed to save and a thousand losses he’s had to witness.

He feels his chest constricting with a raw ache and something intense and unnameable that makes his chin quiver and his eyes fill with tears. The scream inside him turns into a fear of another crushing loss, of the low tide dragging him under, and the thought of it is more than he thinks he can bear.

Before he knows it, before he even consciously realises, he closes the gap between them and draws Jasper into an embrace, pulls him close with both urgency and hesitation.

Jasper stills for a moment, then Carl can feel his arms come around Carl's waist in the kind of tentative manner that gives Carl an out if he wants it.

Carl holds on longer than he probably should, but he needs the tangible reminder of Jasper's presence, of the reassurance that—for now—he's here, and he's safe, and the boat they're in isn't sinking.

When he lets go, Jasper takes a step back, and there's something bashful there, a touch of embarrassment, and suddenly Carl wishes he hadn't… he hadn't fucking done that.

He doesn't know how to salvage this. Maybe there are cracks in the boat now and the water is seeping in. Not yet visible but the first indicators of the inevitable.

He steps over to the couch and deflates on it, his very last reserves of energy depleted. The lone tear that's sliding down his cheek is quickly erased from existence with a swift motion of his palm. He leans forward, drops his head into his hands.

"Shit."

Carl thinks that maybe Jasper will flee, will take the easy way out because he doesn't have the faintest clue how to deal with Carl's bullshit. But he doesn't. He sits down on the couch next to Carl – close enough to be there, not too close to crowd his space.

Carl is prepared for silence, would be perfectly content with silence, because that's better than the clumsy choreography of a half-cooked apology or an awkward stutter of some meaningless fucking platitude, or—

"What can I do?" Jasper asks, and the question is as beautiful in its simplicity as it is unfetteredly disarming.

Carl sucks in a long breath that stutters in his chest but becomes steadier on the exhale. What can a 17-year-old do to stave off the depravity of humankind?

"Nothing," Carl answers, even though he knows that Jasper's concern is with the person next to him and not the whole fucking world. God, he wishes he could still…

"Fuck, I wish I had a cigarette."

"Do you want one?"

The… *what*? His head whips up. "Where'd you get fucking cigarettes?"

Carl fully expects Jasper to give him some feeble, defensive refutation that Carl will see through anyway, but Jasper's tone is surprisingly even-keeled and confident. "Don't worry. It's just some nights when we hang out. It's not that often. I don't even like it that much."

Carl thinks he should probably say something parent-y, like how that's fucking unhealthy and how he's way too young to start with that shit, but it'd make him a fucking hypocrite, wouldn't it? So he says, "Just don't get used to them. Fucking hard to stop, once you do."

Jasper seems taken aback. “I’ve never seen you smoke.”

“Yeah. Stopped when I moved in with you and your mum.”

Jasper vaguely gestures towards his room. “You want me to get you one?”

Carl shakes his head. “No.”

He steals a glance at Jasper, thinks how messed up this is. He should be the one responsible for steadying the ship. Somewhere along the way, he’s apparently stopped sailing it alone without even noticing. And maybe that’s just as well. Maybe he and Jasper need each other as much as Jasper needs him to be the best version of a father he can try to be.

He adds, “Thanks.” Because, really, he *is* grateful. He’s grateful that Jasper is here, that Jasper chose to reach out and throw a lifeline as he was floating aimlessly and adrift.

Jasper reaches for the remote control, then points it at the TV. “You wanna watch something?”

Carl lets out a grunt that might as well be a sigh because he doesn’t know. Watching TV is way too fucking mundane for the nightmare he lived through today. It feels like betrayal, like the day needs to end on something more pivotal, something less trivial. Like maybe a good drunken stupor or sitting in the corner of your shower with your knees drawn close to your chest.

Jasper probes some more. “We never finished the *3 Body Problem*.”

It may not be hard liquor or a cold fucking shower. It may not even be the next best thing. “That what we watched when I was ill?”

“Yeah. The one you fell asleep over after 10 minutes.”

Christ. Yeah. He’d been so wrecked then. “I was fucking out of it at the time.”

Jasper smiles. “I know.”

“Okay,” Carl decides, because fuck it. “Might as well.”

There’s perhaps the smallest of smiles playing at the corners of Jasper’s mouth, although it’s also possible Carl is just imagining it as Jasper switches on the telly, finds the show in the Netflix menu, adjusts his position and hooks his feet into the stretcher of the coffee table. Carl leans back next to him and puts his legs up on the table, one slung over the other.

It’s good, Carl thinks. The storm is slowly passing, the thunderclaps now a rumbling echo ebbing away into the distance. He’s climbed aboard the raft and the waters are smoother and easier to navigate. The harbour is in sight.