The Eleusinian Mysteries
by lynadyn

Summary

"If there were any other way to have you," Sombret said, stopping Michel, who had one hand on the door. "Then that's how I would have you. If I could court you, even trick you, I would. But this is not an ideal world, Lord Howard. Not even a polite one. If I am to keep you, it cannot be by polite means."

Michel woke in an unfamiliar bed. It was too comfortable to be his own, more akin the furniture in his parent's estate. The thought prompted a memory - his last memory before unconsciousness - and fear bloomed in his mind like a drop of blood dissipating in water. Michel struggled to sit up.

"Hello, my lord," said a little voice. Michel looked down. A small automaton - no higher than Michel's knee - gazed up at him with red eyes. It was not designed like any serving piece with which Michel was familiar. "Hello, my lord," it said again in a half-note mechanical sing-song, seeking voice recognition.

"Hello," Michel said with a dry throat.

"There is tea to ease your headache on the table," the automaton said. "There are clothes for you in the wardrobe. When you are dressed, you are to come with me to meet the Duke."

Michel now knew where he was. He swallowed with difficulty.

Despite having pointedly turning his back on the peerage, his childhood lessons on kidnapping protocol came back to him now and he was thankful for society's forethought. Michel did not struggle or protest. He poured himself a cup of tea with shaking hands; it was foul but his headache...
lessened significantly. Considering his location, it seemed pointless to ask the robot to arrange for more light while he dressed. He could see now that the dim, blue glow was provided by luminescent crystals arranged artfully in the corners of the room. A chandelier made of the phospherants hung above the bed, arranged in the French style. While he had been sleeping, the point of it must have been poised directly over his throat.

The automaton rolled over to him, wheels catching slightly on the carpet, as Michel fumbled out of bed. The blow to the head had hurt his equilibrium and he stumbled, catching himself on the little device, as he made his way over to the wardrobe. It was full. Clothes for a wide variety of circumstances, in an estimate of his size. Michel dressed himself poorly, unused to putting on formal attire without the aid of a valet.

The hallway confirmed he was not in a building. It was carved from rock, a tunnel through rock, that had been painstakingly smoothed and carved but maintained the rounded edges of whatever bore it. Crystals had been installed in even interval, casting shadows. Michel supported himself by resting a hand on the wall, the automaton squeaking industriously ahead. Michel drew comfort and clarity from the cool stone to fight his disorientation. There were no guards that he could see and he allowed himself a moment to feel insulted.

 Eventually the automaton stopped. Michel squinted, peering ahead. The corridor widened into an antechamber. At the far end was a door made of good, heavy wood. Michel could only imagine the expense of fine timber down here in the Underneath.

Michel looked at the automaton, but it remained silent. Likely, it had not been programmed with anything else to say. By reputation, Duke Sombret was not a man accustomed to an effluence of words. Michel squared his shoulders, marshalling the strength in himself, as he opened the door.

He was a gentleman. Disadvantaged and exploited, but a gentleman preparing to negotiate with another gentleman, nothing less. Michel had told himself this on his walk down the hall, echoing some forgotten tutor, but the room on the other side of the door had clearly been designed to eradicate any sense of equality and his anger and dismay were almost on level with his awe.

It curved in a gentle oval. The near side, the side through which Michel had entered, was bookshelves floor to ceiling made again of good, hard wood. But the first thing Michel saw was the far wall made of glass - entirely of glass - thin and even as Michel had never dreamed glass could be, and curved, which should not even exist. It muffled the noise that would otherwise have been overpowering - the room was perched on the cliff of a waterfall. The width of the river was twice as thick again as a man was tall. Underground, all of it, because this was the crest of the Niegdon Falls, which powered the generators that powered the Underneath. Michel could almost make out miners working below and inched closer, transfixed. He almost did not see the Duke until the man closed the ledger in which he had been writing.

"Lord Howard," Sombret said mildly. He stood gracefully for such a large person. The man had the look of a miner, was always the dinner party joke. A square frame, trimmed of all fat. His mouth sloped downward and his cheekbones were painfully sharp. "You are welcome."

"Is there a ransom?" Michel asked. He was proud of his tone, arrogant and clipped.

The corner of Duke Sombret's mouth twitched. "I would have hoped for a kinder greeting from you, Lord Howard. Sit down, you must be tired. I can arrange for a light tea for you, if you wish."

"We are both practical men, your Grace," Michel said. "We should dispense with pleasantries. I have been kidnapped. What are the terms of my release?"
Sombret moved slowly, deliberately, in this as in all things. His habit was to stare at his subject for several seconds before answering, unblinking. His eyes, which Michel knew to be a light brown, looked the color of ash in the light provided by the phosphorescent. He spoke as he walked to the window, only a foot or two away from where Michel stood. "We are practical men," he agreed. "So I will not condescend to you. Upon my order, several trusted citizens of the Underground took you from your university. I have sent word to your parents and the Kings of England and France that you shall be returned to them, safe and sound, for five hundred million pounds."

Michel felt himself grow pale. "Are you mad? That's impossible! There isn't that much capital in all the world, let alone in England!"

"Five hundred million pounds," Sombret said, looking out at the view below, "Is a rough estimate of the income the Underneath has contributed to the crown, without parliamentary representation, in the last ten years. Considering it was founded over a century ago, I would consider that a bargain."

"You mean to start a war," Michel said.

"We are practical men, you and I." Sombret turned to face him, staring down until Michel looked away. "I saw a potential solution to two problems that have been troubling me for some time. I consider you a treasured guest. As long as you behave as a gentleman, you will not be guarded. The whole palace is open to you."

"A very nice prison," Michel said, sneering. He was light-headed and clenched his hands into fists.

"Nicer than most," Sombret said. "The world of the Underneath can be very lovely. I hope to show it to you."

"You said there were two problems," Michel said. "You've declared war - an insane war, one you have no hope of winning - for independence. What was the second?"

Sombret cupped Michel's chin in his hand, drawing Michel's head up to meet his gaze. His eyes were flat, assessing, reptilian. Michel flinched despite himself, wondering if his heartbeat would be louder due to the acoustics of this underground place.

"I did not have you with me," Sombret said. "Now I do."

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Michel was the product of either love, madness or an unauthorized transaction between England and France, depending on the commentator. His mother was a French princess. Through some cosmic accident, she met his father, a minor British lord, at the age of seventeen. It had been a whirlwind romance and the two had eloped, not without some danger, to Lord James Howard's small estate in southern England. Princess Magritte renounced her right to the throne upon marriage. She was, to begin with, the fourth of fifth children and the only daughter, so Michel was no threat to the French court. Still, it had been an incredible scandal, and Michel had a reputation as an iconoclast before he was even born. Because he grew up handsome and well-reputed for being intelligent and agreeable, society was willing to overlook some of this and paint him as a symbol of faith and favor between empires constantly on the brink of war.

If Michel's very existence was a metaphor for peace, his parents had done their best to shield him from politics during his childhood. Particularly his mother: Magritte had given him a French name and thorough lessons on French history and culture, but the princess was devoted to her new country with the zeal of a convert. The land itself, in particular, in both a symbolic and concrete sense. She loved their small estate in Wiltshire and took pains that Michel loved it too, spending summer days
together on rambling walks through the forest and fields. Michel had helped the farmhands feed the pigs and groom the ponies since he could walk, and though he had wintered in London for the season, toured the rolling hills of Cornwall and the sun drenched valleys of Marseille, nothing would ever be so beautiful to him as the country surrounding his ancestral home of Longleat House in early spring.

Although a keen student, he viewed his years at Oxford as a particular trial, the land dull and gray beside the sluggish and stinking Thames. He had longed for the days his studies would be over and he could retire to Longleat to begin a life of eccentricity and meaningful, necessary work. He was serious by nature, sometimes accused of being grave, and perhaps due to the heavy expectations assigned to him by his unusual station, hungry to be useful.

Michel was returned to his room with little ceremony. He found a chair, sat, and wiped his brow. Realized he had been sweating and scowled. He rested his chin on his steepled hands, and thought.

The crucial thing would be not to lose hope. It would be very easy to give into despair. The Underneath was notoriously difficult to leave. There were only seven ports to the outside world, placed strategically throughout Britain and, as a token of goodwill, France, and since the Trisdale Act citizens of the Underneath could not leave without special dispensation from the crown. Doubtless this castle was likewise heavily guarded, and even if he escaped these walls, it would not quell an angry populace or serve his own ends if he disappeared in the Underneath to live out his natural life.

Politically, his abduction was clever. When England would neither pay the ransom nor emancipate the Underneath, as certainly parliament would consider neither a valid option, his fractious mother would appeal to France. Magritte, despite her rebellion, was a favorite of her father's, as was Michel himself. King Henri was always a savvy politician more than a loving relation, however, and this would be a wonderful excuse to invade England, perhaps even allying themselves with the Underneath and Sombret's bid for independence. Even without formal aid from France, England would be pulled apart fighting wars both across the sea and below the ground. As profitable as the Underneath and its reserves of coal and crystal were to the crown, ceding to Sombret would be far easier than ceding to Henri. And Michel, who had fought his own bitter and difficult war against being used as anyone's political pawn, was directly at the center of it.

No, he could not give into despair. Dignity must be his watchword now. He must maintain his sense of himself and his purpose during this dark time. Politics were not his strong suit, but if the Duke played at being taken with him, Michel must do what he could to bend his ear.

Still, when an automaton came to the door and asked Michel to dinner on behalf of the Duke, Michel declined. He lay in bed that night unable to sleep, his stomach twisted with hunger and fear.

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His first move the next day was to disassemble the little automaton that had been assigned as his valet. Without proper tools, the task took hours and Michel's nails were bent and bleeding from working the screws. Still, it proved fruitful. The technology of the Underneath was still woefully behind what Michel had been working on at Oxford, even significantly inferior to that of the most ramshackle factories in London. As a servant piece, the automaton should be of the highest quality, but once the thing was deconstructed it was clear that it was repurposed mining equipment, with a large containment unit likely meant to carry displaced earth. No radio that Michel could cannibalize to contact the surface, unsurprisingly. Still, this clear indication that the Underneath was so technologically lacking made rescue or even escape seem less impossible after all and cheered Michel considerably. He reprogrammed the little thing to key into his voice command exclusively.
After that, he could rely on it to be loyal to him alone. When he put the automaton back together, he patted it on the head in a fit of relieved whimsy and named it Percy.

He refused two more meals with the Duke before the man himself came looking for him. Michel was acquainting himself with the small selection of books in his room (three novels, two political treatises - one frothing and insane, the other reasonable - and an exploration of the effect of dirigibles on trade with the Americas; Michel settled on dirigibles, although he found the book's conclusions cursory at best) when he heard a knock on his door. He considered being sullen, refusing to answer, but Sombret entered without permission given.

He was carrying a silver tray, contents concealed with a domed cover. Something in his expression settled when his gaze found Michel although Michel would not have previously considered it anything but still. Michel put down his book and stared back.

"The automatons tell me you have not left your room," Sombret said, after a time.

"No," said Michel.

"You must be hungry," Sombret did not sound apologetic, only sensible, genteel. If Michel was angry, it did not mean he could force himself to be paranoid. He believed the Duke was a principled man, perhaps honorable in the savage way afforded to the denizens of the Underneath, even if it would be more comfortable to paint him as insane or without reason. All the more need to be civil, to be charming, but Michel raised his chin stubbornly and did not answer.

Visibly undaunted, Sombret removed the cover. There was a selection of cheese and fruit. "I thought something light, to tempt you to the kitchens."

"I'm content here," Michel said, stiffly. "Treating me as your guest is artifice at best. If I am a prisoner, I am a prisoner. Please dispense with this farce."

The Duke looked at him skeptically. "I choose not to take offense at that because I know you have never truly suffered."

Michel shut his book, affronted. "And you have, your Grace?"

"More than some," Sombret said. "Less than most. Certainly less than the rest of the Underneath. My station in life has granted me comforts they lack."

"Perhaps that's why you seek independence," Michel said. "To assuage your guilt."

"I'm not guilty," Sombret said. "I'm angry. At the moment, I am also hungry and I wish you would join me for dinner." He sat across from Michel, putting down the tray. There was a small cluster of fruit, small and prismed like a jewel and flushed dark red. Sombret popped one into his mouth, eyes going half-lidded.

"What is that?" Michel asked, wary but curious. As an agriculturalist, it had been aggravating him since Sombret had displayed the fruit that Michel could not identify it. He was also ashamed, slightly, of allowing himself to be baited by the Duke and baiting him in return. More ashamed that his eyes had tracked the motion of the Duke touching his fingers to his lips.

"Those are the seeds of the akui fruit," Sombret said. "The flesh is inedible, but the seeds are a delicacy in the Underneath. Our name for it translates to 'pricked heart'"

"I didn't know fruit could grow in the Underneath at all," Michel said, interested despite himself.
Sombret put down the tray. "That's why it is a delicacy. Please, Michel, eat. You will not serve your country by starving to death."

Michel blushed that Sombret thought his motives so childish. He picked up a piece of cheese and studied it. "I wouldn't waste your supplies on pleasing me, if I were in your position. When England cuts off trade, it won't be long before your subjects begin to starve."

"We've been preparing for this for some time," said Sombret. "We have supplied stored. There are countries who see the value of trade with the Underneath. The Americas in particular."

Dirigibles, Michel thought. Changing the face of commerce forever. He put down the cheese again.

"I know you are a gentle creature," Sombret said. "And have no interest in war. I hope you will use your particular areas of expertise to help the Underneath thrive in its independence when the bloodshed is over, my prince."

"I'm not a prince," Michel snapped. "My mother was disinherited. Holding me captive is not the brilliant maneuver you seem to believe it to be."

Sombret took Michael's hand in both of his. His skin was calloused - unfamiliar callouses to a farmer's son, perhaps less unfamiliar for a miner. Certainly nothing like an aristocrat, like a tyrant. His grip was gentle. Michael felt his fingers uncurl from a fist, reacting unconsciously to the first real warmth he had felt in days.

"Perhaps I have not made my intentions as clear as I hoped," Sombret said. "I meant that you are my prince. If you will have me. I can imagine no one else I would allow to share my throne."

Michel blinked, swallowed, looked away.

"As for the political machinations you suspect of me," Sombret said. "Revolution or not, I would have moved heaven and earth to have you by my side."

"You barely know me," Michel said. It came out in a whisper, hoarse.

"I saw you and I saw a flower blooming in a viper's den," Sombret said. "The loveliest thing I had seen on the surface. I thought to myself, if he can grow here, imagine how he will thrive in the soil."

"Pretty words," Michel said, "can make for clumsy metaphors."

Sombret rose, fluidly. "Think on it. I would never dream to force you, but it does not suit your own purposes to hide away in this room. Especially when the Underneath has such need for intelligent, capable men."

Michel ate with his fingers, like an animal, after Sombret left. Everything but the pricked heart. Anything grown away from sunlight would have to be unpalatably bitter.

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Michel ventured outside his room the next day. He considered it a mild form of espionage. What better way to spend his time in the Underneath than to learn its secrets and report back to the crown when he had been rescued? It would also quell any possible rumors that he had gone native, surrendered to the Duke's advances.

Percy led the way, beeping softly to himself. At first, Michel allowed the automaton to tag along out of amusement but quickly became grateful for its presence as it navigated the vast and winding
catacombs with ease. Dark as they were, with little distinguishing features beyond the slope of the incline or decline, the hallways were disorienting. A thoughtless man could die down here easily, forgotten by the outside world.

Michel's first few trips led him nowhere of real interest. The hallways would occasionally part to display an empty bedroom or parlor, sumptuously if eclectically decorated. The solitude of the place had Michel initially scurrying back to his room every few hours, haunted by the beat of his own footsteps. Occasionally he would run across an automaton - some the standard household models found on the surface, most of them bastardized mining equipment like Percy - who would politely inquire after his health before going about its duties. Besides Sombret, Michel had yet to see another living person.

He could not help but wonder how intentional this was. How pliable the Duke would think to find him after weeks of isolation.

Michel found himself, somewhat to his own surprise, longing for his mother. He had an uncomplicated and affectionate relationship with his father, but his connection to his mother was both more fractious and profound. Lady Magritte Howard was a woman of fierce temperament and fiercer devotion. She had high expectations of Michel always, believing him to have the best of blood and upbringing. Michel's thoughts of the future had always run along hazy lines of designing automata that would revolutionize the practice of farming while he and his father orbited around Magritte, as she lived out her days in their beloved Longleat. He had not missed or, to his own embarrassment, thought of her often at Oxford, but in the Underneath where it was always the color of dusk, where the air was cold and wet and nestled into his bones, he considered his mother, of the life and passion that followed her like the train of a gown, and tried to imagine her advice.

She would scold him for being standoffish to Sombret, he knew as much. Her views of sodomy were much more French than English. Michel was hesitant to tell her of his own proclivities because of this, knowing she would fight like a demon for his sake against an English system that would hold them both in disgrace for such a display. She would tell him to use the weapon women had been employing for years, as it was the best he had in his arsenal. She would tell him to ignore the state of his heart until the rest of his body was safe above ground.

Sombret brought him another tray the next night and Michel ate. Sombret appeared pleased and dined with him again for supper. The meal was superb - they all had been - this one some variation on boeuf bourguignon with, as always, a side of that odd native fruit.

"We prefer hearty foods down here," Sombret explained as Michel laboriously chewed a thick crust of bread. "With the chill of the tunnels, it helps keep one warm enough to work."

"Have you ever worked in the tunnels?" Michel asked. He had rumors, of course, of the Duke's past. Everything from Sombret's having been the lowest of mine boys to his having lived all his life in catamite splendor. But Michel viewed himself as a man of reason and required evidence.

The Duke wiped his mouth fastidiously. His mannerisms could almost be considered effete if they weren't conducted so calmly, if they didn't bely a roiling inner life and raw physical power. "I was lucky. A foreman took notice of my intellect when I was eight. I was educated as an engineer until the old duke took interest in me."

"An engineer?" said Michel. "I had no idea."

Sombret scooped a sizeable amount of pricked heart onto his own bread with a knife, crushing the seeds as he spread. The end result resembled jam. "It is never a wise idea to reveal all your strengths to an enemy."
"Am I your enemy?" asked Michel. "Or do you mean the English?"

"The English," Sombret said. He took a bite.

"Are we truly your enemy? England has sheltered the Underneath from invasion for nearly a century. The Underneath is unorthodox, but it is still a colony. You are all English citizens."

"Citizens with no vote in parliament," Sombret said. "Citizens who are not allowed to leave. Do you know what happened when the Trisdale Act was passed?"

"I have always supported greater representation of the Underneath in parliament," Michel deflected. "I would never say that the good men and women of the Underneath lead similar lives to their counterparts on the surface and reform must occur, but war--"

"After the Trisdale Act passed, we rioted," said Sombret. "We tried to storm the exits. The English marched their army down and over three hundred of our good men and women, as you called them, died. And then the troops marched back up, so carelessly, free to go wherever they wish while the very act had just been criminalized to my countrymen. That's when we realized we were not English. We were slaves of the English."

Michel asked coldly, "You intend to gain my sympathies regarding your confinement by confining me as well?"

"I intend to fuck you," Sombret said. "Until you beg. Until you don't even know if you're begging me to stop or begging me to continue." He offered Michel his bread with the crushed pricked heart.

Cheeks inflamed, Michel stood. "I will take my leave, Your Grace."

"If there were any other way to have you," Sombret said, stopping Michel, who had one hand on the door. "Then that's how I would have you. If I could court you, even trick you, I would. But this is not an ideal world, Lord Howard. Not even a polite one. If I am to keep you, it cannot be by polite means."

Michel could feel himself shaking but made his voice firm. "I'm not asking for your apologies for making me uncomfortable, Your Grace. I object to the assumption I am to be kept. I am not a concubine or a songbird. I won't sit by your side and smile vacuously while you play at being king."

Sombret stood and backed Michel into the door. Michel's shoulders hit the wood hard and he winced. He cupped Michel's neck, stroking with his thumb. He murmured, "You are exquisite," and took Michel's mouth.

Michel kissed back instinctively, with the same panicked, dazed intuition his body would have used to orient itself in stormy seas. He gripped at Sombret's neck, clutched a handful of his waistcoat in his other hand. Sombret board down on him as they kissed as if he meant to drive Michel into the wall or into himself. His mouth was clever, sucking on Michel's lower lip, biting softly.

Sombret kissed down his neck and up again. Michel gasped, something low in his stomach pulsing darkly, and slumped backwards against the door. Sombret made a low, pleased sound. He murmured, "I will make you beg to be kept," and took Michel's earlobe into his mouth.

Michel was shocked back to himself, almost nauseated. He lurched to the side. Sombret, out of surprise, loosened his grip but just as quickly redoubled it. Reacting truly out of instinct now, Michel punched blindly. He connected to the Duke's jaw. Sombret let go and Michel fumbled for the door and was out it.
Michel had met Duke Frederick Sombret once previously, a year before his kidnapping. Lord and Lady Cheswick's ball was primed to be the highlight of an otherwise dull season. Michel had been at university and blissfully unaware of the status of the season until his mother had demanded his presence. The Duke of the Underneath would be in London for the week and had accepted the invitation to the Cheswick's ball.

The current Duke of the Underneath was a figure of mystery and speculation, threatening and romantic in equal measure. The former duke had been known for dangerous proclivities in his youth. Approaching the middle of his years, however, he had abruptly sequestered himself in the Underneath castle he had previously seldom visited. As the duke was childless, the duchy had been expected to be bequeathed to a shiftless nephew until, three months before his death, the duke had formally adopted an unknown but presumably penniless and untitled native of the Underneath.

Promptly upon receiving his inheritance, Duke Sombret had dissolved several trusts in the duchy's name to found a university in the Underneath, began formal relations with France and the Americas and encouraged the distribution of disgruntled political pamphlets. The Duke of the Underneath was the only of its citizens to be exempt from the Trisdale Law, but emerged to the surface twice a year at most. At first to act as ambassador and petition parliament, but more and more - as civil unrest and his own clout grew - to negotiate directly with the prime minister. He was certainly not expected anywhere as frivolous as a dance. There were rumors (according to Lady Magritte) that he was going in some capacity as a spy.

Michel had argued that if, indeed this were a matter of espionage, it would be sensible for the Howards to politely mind their own. When this held little interest for his mother, Michel cited the importance of his studies, a recently sprained wrist and - in a weak moment - his fear of the Baroness Fielding and her daughter as reasons he was incapable of attending. Magritte sailed above these concerns like a skip on a fine day, writing that the affair would only be complete if her own reclusive son were to join the festivities. So it was that Michel took an unpleasant motor carriage ride from Oxford to London, his wrist still wrapped in plaster.

The Duke had arrived late, long after Michel had considered the relative values of discretion and valor and found an unobtrusive corner to wait out the evening. Michel had been awed, embarrassingly so, at his first glimpse at Sombret. The Duke was simply but finely dressed, no retinue by virtue of position, held himself like a pillar in a soft and lazy world. Michel was keenly aware that his own infamy was largely due to the unusual story of his birth and, to a lesser extent, inheriting his mother's sweet features. Other men though, this man, deserved their power and fame entirely due to presence, implacable and undeniable as a vacuum.

Michel had escaped to the balcony where the Duke, by accident or design, came across him. The conversation quickly turned lively and Michel forgot to be nervous, if never quite to whom he was speaking. They spoke of London, which neither confessed to enjoying, and Oxford. Sombret expressed a particular interest in Michel's area of study. Michel considered this unusual, as it must have been so far from familiar to Sombret.

"That is why it interests me," Sombret answered when Michel said as much. "To my ears, it's unbearably exotic. I confess I have never seen a farm, let alone automata designed to run it."

"We could replace the horse-drawn plow in ten years," Michel said. "I'm certain of it. Automata for textiles and building construction have revolutionized how cities operate. And yet agriculture - the very basis of our survival as a species - is still so backward. Farmers are using implements their great-great grandfathers employed. It's ridiculous."
"I share your frustrations," Sombret said. "Although we have mining automata in the Underneath, it could be much improved. Our engineers have designs but there have been obstructions to our moving further."

"Is that on the agenda to discuss with the Prime Minister? Would it simply be a matter of funds or are there legal issues preventing the building of automata Underneath?" When Sombret did not answer, simply staring at Michel as unforgiving as the sun, Michel hastened to apologize. "I understand, forgive me, that was inappropriate."

"Not at all," said Sombret. He paused, taking a sip of his wine. "They say you could be king of France, if you wished."

Michel scoffed. "They have a flimsy understanding of the French court, if that's what they say."

"No, I believe them," Sombret said evenly. "The crown prince is an oaf and your other uncles are busy whoring. You are an intelligent, reasonable young man. You look like a prince from a fairy tale. The King dotes on you. It might take a civil war or two but the throne could be yours."

Michel blushed, took in the view from the balcony. He had been approached in such a manner before but where others were conniving and cajoling, Sombret appeared simply curious. "Politics does not agree with me."

"No," Sombret said. "You are a scientist. You think of yourself as a man of ideals, do you not?"

"That seems to amuse you."

"I think ideals are a fine thing, if one can afford them," Sombret said. "But they can also throw up a very convenient smoke screen over more uncomfortable truths. The handsome son of a princess, the heir to his own sizable fortune. Tell me, Lord Howard, how many mothers have paraded their daughters before you? How many have failed to catch your eye? It can be argued the only real duty of a monarch is to produce an heir."

Michel had been more angry than frightened. This accusation, thrown from some corner, had only been a matter of time. "I will not stand to be spoken to in such a manner. I must return to the house."


"I do not intend to give you the pleasure of denying anything you may be insinuating," Michel said, heart racing. "I will not be bullied or threatened. Or sneered at by a politician who thinks he can gain leverage by browbeating me like a child. France will not be your ally with my help and I grieve with your people that you are their best hope for freedom. Release me."

Sombret wheeled him around, wedged Michel in the corner of the balcony next to the doorway, effectively hiding them from view from anyone inside. Michel struggled but Sombret's grip was like iron. He murmured in Michel's ear, almost marveling. "You're shaking. You're shaking so badly and yet listen to you, roaring like a lion."

"Let me go!" Michel hissed.

"I apologize if you felt threatened," Sombret said, ignoring him. "I would do nothing to endanger you. Exposing a man's weakness simply is a good way to test his mettle. You are all fire, aren't you, Lord Howard? And here you try so hard to hide it."

Michel sputtered and would have said more, but Sombret bent down to kiss him.
The students at Oxford and even some of the farmers' sons of Longleat were not all strangers themselves to Michel's inversion. Opportunities had arisen. And yet this was Michel's first true kiss and he melted into it, despite the absurdity and danger.

Sombret was aggressive, calculating and ruthless. Experimenting with what touches would make Michel stifle a moan. Michel hated him and clung to him, drunk on this. Sombret's mouth was unyielding, insistent. The back of Michel's head hit the stone wall and his legs spread.

Sombret fit his large, cool hand around Michel's cock. Michel bit his lip to keep from crying out.

"It's very tempting, my Prince," Sombret said. He took a step back and Michel crumbled in his wake like linen. He traced Michel's swollen lower lip with his thumb. Michel's mouth went slack.

Sombret shook his head and stepped back. He straightened his jacket, composed himself. "Meet me tonight."

Michel was still dazed - relieved and disappointed and painfully aroused. "Meet you?"

Sombret straightened Michel's curls. "After the ball. I am lodging at the embassy. We will not be disturbed. Our first time will not be some furtive tumble."

Michel stared at him. He felt drawn in, used up, by the man. He was disturbed at how much he enjoyed it. Before he answered, he heard - of all possible things - his mother calling his name.

"I'm on the balcony, Maman," he said, still meeting Sombret's eyes. Challenging. Sombret did not look away until Lady Magritte entered, when he gracefully edged back and once again became a creature of society. Michel stood up straight as well.

Lady Magritte had a champagne flute in one gloved hand. She was wreathed in smiles, gliding over, until she caught sight of the Duke. She nodded. "Your Grace."

Sombret bowed. "Your Royal Highness. It is an honor."

"I hope you have been suitable entertainment for my son," Magritte teased. "This is always his pattern. I bring him to astonish the crowd with his brilliance and charm and he always hides away with the most interesting person in attendance."

"You flatter me, your Highness. I know it must be the truly exceptional person young Lord Howard finds interesting."

"What's wrong, mon petit?" Magritte asked, checking his forehead and cheeks for fever, as Michel was flushed and sweating, momentarily forgetting her gloves. "I hope you are not ill."

"I'm fine, Maman," Michel said, taking her hand in his. "Too much to drink, that's all."

"Good!" Magritte said. "You are finally acting your age. But I hope you are not too far gone! Mary Fielding has invited us back to their flat for cards. You must come!"

Not breaking her gaze, but with a pointed edge to his voice, Michel said, "I cannot think of anything I would enjoy more."

There were a few more minutes of desultory small talk before the Duke had excused himself. Michel was not sure if he regretted his decision, if he had ever thought it would have consequences. It was a moment upon which he could ill-afford to dwell, unsafe as it was. Perhaps rashly, or foolishly, Michel had made himself nearly forget meeting the Duke until two thugs, unusually pale for the
August day, struck him on the head and covered his mouth with a sickly sweet rag on his way to dinner.

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Michel spent the first few hours after his flight wandering the halls, mind leadened with panic. Sombret was not capricious in Michel's experience, but Michel had intimate knowledge of powerful men. It was always a matter of time until their tempers changed. Michel may have proven he was not the creature Sombret had believed him to be, whatever feted and gamine soul that was.

When he returned to his room, the Duke was gone. Michel sat down heavily against the door, arms wrapped around his knees. Percy rolled up to him, beeping for all the world like a fretting pup. Michel chuckled despite himself.

"You're an obedient little thing, aren't you," he said, tapping it between the eyes. "And pretty clever for being hollow inside." He frowned. "All that empty space - Percy, what could you hold?"

Michel slept fitfully that night, alive with the thought of generators and transmitters, head stuffed with plans.

***

The Duke appeared at his door the next morning, his jaw mottled dour yellows and plums. Michel winced at the sight, bracing himself. Sombret was not carrying a tray. "Come with me, Lord Howard."

Seeing no other option, Michel followed him out into the hall. The Duke walked with a clipped, military pace that he struggled to match. They were going on a route Michel had not explored before, downhill, deeper into the patient mouth of the Underneath. The light from the phospherants became sparse, more a trail marker than illumination. It made Michel discomforted; he felt unaccountably young. How flimsy were the trappings of modernity? Could a moment in the dark reduce a man to his primal self or would he retain the reason and civility of millennia of progress?

He did not pose the question to Sombret. Michel suspected the Duke's opinion would vary greatly from his own.

"Our journey is almost complete," Sombret said abruptly, as if sensing Michel's unease. He had not turned back to look at him since they had began. Michel looked up from the floor, where he had been counting the paces between crystals, as the Duke rounded the corner. The hallway widened - the first room he had seen without a door - and Michel had to squint against the wild influx of light.

He had a moment of giddy hope before his vision adjusted. The room was still underground, the grey stone walls dripping with condensation, with a higher ceiling than any he had seen so far, at least one hundred feet. The mimicry of parlors ended here. This was a cave, and stalactites hung above them like a warning. Around the edges of the cave, giving it its light, were flowers. They looked of wild violets, weedy, pretty, inconsequential things, except they glowed the same color as the crystals, possibly brighter.

Michel would have been more taken with them except he was standing on soil. Perfectly tilled rows of the stuff, waiting for planting, at least fifty square feet of it. And next to it, a greenhouse. Architecturally daring, with a curved roof and etched glass. Michel stared at the tableau, dumbfounded.

"I meant it to be a wedding gift," Sombret said, to his silence. "But I hope it may serve as a peace
offering. I was much too forward last evening. Please take this garden as a gesture of respect. It is meant to be your place and I will not enter without your express invitation."

"It's... very pretty," Michel said.

Sombret studied him. "You're displeased."

"It's lovely. It is. But it's, it's useless." Michel tried to explain rather than dismiss. "The soil, it's crushed rock, isn't it? Nothing will grow in that. We're not close enough to the surface for worms, it's the wrong textured to have been fertilized."

Sombret blinked. "The greenhouse, at least--"

"Greenhouses intensify light, it's true," Michel said. "But it must be sunlight. The nutrients a plant needs come from the sun's light itself, not just any light source. Nothing growing on the surface could thrive down here."

Sombret paused, the quality of silence different from his usual intimidation tactics, more reflective. Michel found himself unaccountably embarrassed, as if it were his fault this experiment had been designed to fail. "What are the glowing flowers?" he offered, lamely. "They're very nice."


"I would enjoy studying it," Michel said. "I cannot begin to fathom how it functions."

"The inability to thrive away from the surface," Sombret said abruptly. "Do you believe that true of yourself as well?"

Michel swallowed, taken aback. His mind flashed to the clumsy blueprint he had drawn last night and hid between the frame and the mattress. When he spoke, it was done harshly and through an aching throat. "I miss my mother. I miss my work. Can you even feel the damp here or are you too accustomed to it? I would spend hours in the fields as a child. It would make Maman furious, I would become so frightfully burned."

The Duke touched hair. "You must have been such a lovely child. I find myself jealous of all the years you existed and I did not know you."

Michel shook his head. "Why do you--"

"You think the Underneath has weakened you somehow," Sombret said. "That we have diminished you. You are nothing so fragile as a plant, Michel. If only you could see yourself. You are so vivid. So bright."

"You can flatter me in every conceivable way," Michel said. "But it will not make me forget how I came to be here."

"You're here because you're perhaps the first true equal I've ever known," said Sombret. "You once accused me of being a bully, Lord Howard. I hope, if nothing else, I have disproven this assumption. I would not keep you here one second longer if I believed you truly wished to go."

Michel flushed high in his cheeks. "How dare you! I--"

"You're homesick," Sombret continued. "And you are furious at me, which you have every right to be. But I do not flatter myself a fanciful man when I say you return my affections. Even now your body moves towards mine."
It was true. Michel's back was arched like a cello string. He flattened himself against the wall, realizing even as he did it that he only made himself more obvious. He said through gritted teeth, "That does not mean everything you hope it to mean."

Michel knew it was a mistake even as he said it, that it conceded far more than it upheld. Sombret's smile was a slow-moving thing, like a leaf unfurling, and made Michel shudder with some confused muddle of emotion. When Sombret reached for him this time, stroking the corded line of his throat, Michel's pulse quickened beneath his thumb. The rest of his body remained perfectly taunt, perfectly still.

Sombret's mouth on his was a whisper of a touch, an implication. Enough near-kisses and Michel whined with frustration, grabbed Sombret by the back of his head, pulled him in for a kiss that was full and deep. Sombret responded like a switch had been flipped, growling deep in his throat. Michel did not protest when the Duke began to undress him, smoothing his hands over the newly exposed skin of Michel's chest. Michel made a small sound of surprise when Sombret sank to his knees, but found his vocabulary had fled when it came to describing the low thrill of confusion and dread and excitement low in his stomach.

Sombret freed Michel's cock from his trousers, lowering them to mid-knee. He examined it the way a collector might view a rare coin, frank and delighted, holding Michel in his rough miner's hands. Michel shuddered, felt his cock twitch. "Oh, pretty lad," the Duke said softly and took him in his mouth.

It was immediately overwhelming, an electricity his body was unequipped to conduct. Michel cried out and tried to free himself, but the Duke was implacable, sucking in even pulses. The only respite was his occasional pause to dab the head of Michel's prick with little cat licks, which only left Michel impatient and feverish. There seemed to be no pattern to the change in the assault and Michel could not get used to one kind of sensation before being overpowered by the other. He came in Sombret's mouth much quicker than he ever had in his own hand. The experience left his dazed, weak, his muscles soft and sore from clenching.

The Duke kissed Michel's thigh and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. Michel realized two things at once: Sombret was still completely clothed and Michel's hand had wrapped themselves around hunks of Sombret's hair tightly enough to hurt. Sombret unpeeled his fists gently and with patience guided Michel to lie down on the bed of the akui fruit flower.

Michel watched Sombret undress as if in a fever dream, loose and damp from sweat. His orgasm had left his body feeling peculiar, anticipatory of some new purpose or function. As if it were not just the flesh automaton that housed the truth of Michel but was capable of producing its own pleasure. He felt heavy and indolent and knew he should be terrified.

Sombret disrobed calmly but left his clothes crumpled on the ground. He watched Michel as he worked, expression blank with hunger. His body, revealed, held all the strength, all the menace, implied when he was clothed. He seemed part of the rock; the only curved lines of him were of his erect cock, graceful as a crescent. Before discarding his pants he removed a small vial of clear liquid from the pocket. Michel made an inquiring noise and Sombret hushed him, soothing.

Sombret knelt, covering Michel like a cloud. Michel felt a quick palpitation of fear which must have shown in his face as Sombret kissed him again, slow and thorough as he now knew Michel liked. Michel felt ashamed of Sombret's new intimacy of him, confused as to the nature and appropriateness of the shame.

"This will feel strange at first," Sombret said, warning. He was moving Michel's legs, planting his feet on the floor so they bended at the knee, and tilting his hips. "But then it will start to feel very
good." He poured some of the liquid - viscous, Michel could see now - into his palm, slicking his fingers. Michel felt another deep note of fear that could easily be anticipation.

The first touch of a finger inside him made Michel gasp. It was not out of pain, but almost at the oddness of an absence of pain. Invasion into the very depths of him should be painful, and while it was shocking and strange he could feel his body respond. The Duke added another finger and then, oh, and then. Michel's prick began to swell again, almost too tender to do so, and the Duke took his mouth again when he moaned.

The Duke fucked him with two fingers and the burgeoning sense of response inside Michel grew into some thrashing, hissing thing. Michel clutched vainly for the Duke, cursing. Flower petals clung to the sweat of his back. "Please," he finally begged. "Please." And in his victory, Sombret was kind.

Being penetrated, being overtaken by another man, was one of the most exquisite pleasures of Michel's life. As Sombret began to move, Michel turned his head away, shut his eyes, surrendering to the shame of this new knowledge. Michel had known this about himself for years, had felt the truth of it in dark, private moments, that his body would sing with love of this, that he could be reduced to a receptacle. He bit at his hands to keep from whimpering.

Sombret stilled above him. Michel looked up and Sombret's face was drawn, thunderous. "No," he said, sternly. He pulled Michel's fingers from his mouth, tilted his head so their eyes met. He put his other hand on Michel's cock, which flexed at the attention. "No," Sombret said again and did not thrust until Michel nodded.

They rode to completion in this way, Sombret coaxing another orgasm out of Michel, who whined and went limp when Sombret's thrusts became ragged and desperate just before he came.

***

Michel awoke to the sweet, musty smell of crushed flowers. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the light and he sat painfully, wincing. He was covered with Sombret's good woolen coat. Michel had not realized at the time that during their lovemaking he had been, singularly during his stay in the Underneath, comfortably warm.

Sombret was by Michel's feet, dressed, his sleeves rolled to his elbows. He was holding a large red fruit. Dirt clung to it, and there was also dirt beneath the Duke's nails. He looked over at Michel, taking out a pocket knife and slicing the fruit in half and revealing the seeds inside. "How do you feel?"

Michel thought it over and shrugged, hoping to convey his current lethargy, his desire to postpone any soul-searching this encounter might precipitate. It likely only made him look young or absurd, hair matted to his head, chest covered with petals and semen. The flowers stopped glowing, he observed, when broken from the stem.

Sombret smirked and ate pricked heart off the flat of his knife, staining his mouth red. He handed the fruit to Michel. After a moment's pause - less hesitation than mental preparation - Michel scooped the seeds in his fingers and ate. The taste was tart but not unpleasant and the juice burst in his mouth.

***

The days, difficult to count as they were, began to pass with a dreamlike quality. Individual moments would elongate like sap dripping down a tree while hours disappeared in a blink. When the Duke was otherwise engaged, Michel furtively and feverishly worked on Percy, cursing his lack of interest
in transmitter technologies at school. When the Duke was not indisposed, Michel was with the Duke.

"You must do very little in the way of actual governing," Michel observed at some point, lying filthy and satisfied in Sombret's bed. Sombret was dressing at the foot of the bed and Michel nudged him with his toe.

Sombret smoothed back Michel's hair, kissed him. "I require less sleep than you. I often attend to affairs of state when you are here."

"Where do you attend to them?" Outside of Sombret, Michel had still yet to see a living person in the castle.

"All in good time," Sombret said. This was a thing that gave Michel pause, Sombret's obtuse hints of some defined later date when he would trust him. The thought of what Michel would do or have done to him in order to earn that trust. "Sleep for now."

"You want me in your bed when you return," Michel said, playful.

"I want to think of you in my bed when I am away," Sombret said. "Waiting for me."

Michel forced himself to lie there for a half hour after Sombret left. Then he fled.

Michel was particularly successful that day. He found one of the more sophisticated automata, ordered it to his room and disassembled its communication system. He had barely enough time to install Percy's own, much cruder system in its place, as to avoid suspicion, before the allotted three hours he gave himself for these missions expired.

In his more rational moments, Michel told himself that submitting to the Duke's desires was an attempt to keep him off his guard, unsuspicious. He told himself his actions were as simple as submitting to the Duke's desires.

He would find himself procrastinating on the transmitter, give himself a scolding and work twice as hard the next day. Often he worked with juice-stained fingers, having adopted the Duke's habit of eating pricked heart with every meal.

Oblivious of Michel's internal struggles, Sombret's appetite was voracious. Michel had worried, at first, that his appeal for Sombret was only that of the forbidden or the pure, that once taken he would lose luster in the Duke's eyes. In actuality, Sombret's attention only became more focused. They fucked several times a day; Michel was always sore, often limping. The use of Sombret's bed itself was almost quaint. It seemed a particular desire of his to take Michel in every room of the palace. Michel had not said aloud, but perhaps his favorite had been pressed against the glass of the observatory overlooking the waterfall, the thrum of power behind him, the irrational sense of danger that either he or the window was destined to break.

***

When he finished the transmitter, poor little Percy stuffed to capacity with crude wire work and jury-rigged components, Michel wept for the first time since entering the Underground, bitterly, for he found he had forgotten the frequency of the Parliamentary Communications Center. Sombret told him he would be gone for the day and Michel had spent hours pacing wildly, muttering like a madman, furious at himself and at the trivial cause of his defeat.

In the end, there was nothing for it. He sighed, sank to his knees and programed in the frequency for
The butler himself, Wilkins, was on shift for Michel's transmission, and cried too with relief, having known Michel since boyhood. He sent for Lady Magritte before Michel could protest. As much as he yearned to hear her voice, Magritte was not the natural choice for furtive communication.

Still, when he heard her voice - sounding older than she ever had - say, "Michel?" he put his head in his hands and his shoulders were wracked with silent sobs. He had been in the Underneath for nearly two months.

"I'm here, Maman," Michel said, after a time.

"And you are safe?" she asked after making a small sound like a bird. "You are well?"

Michel smiled mirthlessly to himself. "As well as can be expected."

"Mon petit," she said. "I am sorry. I am so sorry to have forced this kind of life on you." Michel protested and she continued. "But stay strong, you must stay strong! We are coming for you."

Michel wiped his eyes. "Parliament--"

Magritte made a noise of disgust. "The English are useless. Your grandpapa will see that everything is made right. But listen to me, Michel, I am so glad you called. There is something very important you must know."

"What is that, Maman?"

"Have you eaten or drunk anything strange?"

A ball of ice sunk down the well of Michel's stomach. "What do you mean?"

"There is a fruit there you must not eat. I only know now, after your grandpapa told me the Duke's demands-- Curse him! The blackguard! Oh my child, what has he done to you?"

"The fruit, Maman," Michel reminded her.

"It is a little seed. Have you seen it? It is highly addictive."

Michel's throat went dry. "Addictive?"

"Yes," said Lady Magritte. "Like tobacco or opium, but far more serious. If you eat too much and then stop eating, you vomit and shake, see visions. Some have died. It is imperative that you don't eat it!"

Michel sank against the wall, staring at nothing. Until a movement in the shadows caught his eye and Sombret stepped into the room.

Michel turned Percy off, interrupting his mother mid-word. He and Sombret were silent for some time.

"You told me during my early days here that you would trick me if you could." Michel's voice sounded distant, almost conversational.

"Yes," said Sombret.

"Am I addicted?" asked Michel.
"Yes," said Sombret.

Michel pounded his fist on the floor. "You scoundrel! What right did you have--"

"You think my fate is any different?" Sombret asked. For the first time in their acquaintance, he sounded genuinely angry. "You think you could be afforded privileges denied to the rest of the Underneath? This is how they control us. Not the doors, not the Trisdale Act, this. Pricked hearts loses its properties when it is preserved, and it rots quickly. The old duke had every child of the Underneath addicted before they could walk, until I slipped enough of the juice in his wine that he was trapped as well. This is life for us here, Lord Howard."

"So now the whole world will know of this outrage," Michel said. "Because Lady Magritte's son has been afflicted."

"If they do not care about our struggles," Sombret said, "perhaps they will care about yours."

"How much of this has been a lie?" Michel asked. "How many of the things you've said to me have been empty words?"

"None of them," Sombret said, as if oblivious that this was either hypocrisy or madness. "I meant from the beginning to keep you. My intentions were plain."

"Leave me," Michel said. "If you ever touch me again, I will do everything in my power to kill you."

Expression dark, troubled, Sombret bowed his head and left Michel to his own dark and troubled thoughts.

***

Michel fell back into the habits of his first days in the Underneath - forgetting to bathe or change, retreating to his room. Sombret - Michel would not begin to guess at his reasons - left him to his malaise. An automaton (not Percy, whom Michel had not had the heart to use since the initial transmission) brought him his food. Pricked heart, as always, accompanied each dish.

Michel refused to eat it initially and was wracked with cramps and fever. He vomited for several hours before crawling to the plate, scooping the fruit into his mouth, disgusted with himself. As far as he could recall, opium addicts were encouraged to simply to stop, to wait out the wretched itch. This addiction, though, he had trouble perceiving as a matter of moral fortitude. Still, he hurled the next two rations of seeds out into the hallway, crushing them under his boot as to not be tempted. The vomiting stopped, but Michel feared it was because his body had become too weak.

Michel felt numb and hopeless, too discouraged to contact Longleat. It seemed more a sophisticated form of torture now, a meager form of access to a world that would never again be his own. Would he grow pale, he wondered? Would he fall into the same trap as before and become complacent?

He was furious at himself for feeling betrayed. To have been so naive as to believe in the artifice of the Duke's passion. To think passion meant more than an immediate slacking of thirst. This must be why man strove to rise above his basic impulses, when he realized they were so greedy, so selfish. So blind.

Was he thinking of Sombret or himself? Michel could not be truly sure.

When the Duke visited him again, Michel barely had the energy to raise his head from the pillow, hair matted to his scalp. Sombret was holding a small bowl of pricked heart, examining it in a rare moment of indecision. Michel looked at it longingly, feeling himself salivate.
"How do you fare?" Sombret asked, after a time.

"Far from thriving," Michel said.

The Duke sat on an overstuffed chair next to the bed. His expression was grave. "You are suffering," he said, as if just now, finally, coming to this conclusion.

"I think I am angriest," Michel said, sad and dreamy, "because I could have adored you. Part of me loved you from the moment I saw you, when we met at that ball. I could have loved you entirely, given time."

"I came here today of two minds," Sombret said. "I had two options, both difficult for me. I could tell you that withdrawal from pricked hearts is lethal, and you must eat some at once if you wished to live."

"And the other?"

Sombret met his eyes. "The truth. Withdrawal only could become fatal after an addiction of five months or longer. To stop now would be difficult and perhaps the craving would never truly leave you, but you would survive."

They were silent for a moment, the only sound Percy humming his mechanical song to himself.

"The name pricked heart is rather fanciful," Michel said.

"I always thought so as well," said Sombret. "They say the seed looks like a drop of heart's blood."

"There's nothing so unusual about heart's blood," said Michel.

"It's from an old fairy story," said Sombret.

"What would be the advantage," Michel asked. "Of the second option?"

The Duke sighed from his shoulders. "Perhaps that way, one day you would forgive me."

"That matters to you?"

"Of course," Sombret said, sharply. "This was never the plan. You weren't to find out until you loved me as I love you."

"Listen to me," Michel said, putting weight on his forearm as he tried to lift himself up, trembling. "I beg of you, hear this. I can never love you, not truly, until you release me."

Sombret pursed his mouth. "I cannot lose you."

"You are impossible!" Michel exploded. "You stupid man! If you had ever thought of working with me instead of against me, I could have reminded you that I am an agricultural engineer. That my study and the study of my colleagues is plant life. I could work with my peers at Oxford to synthesize the addictive compound. It would not be a cure, but it would make it portable. Your people would be free to leave the Underneath, given a large enough supply."

Sombret said, suspicious, "You would do this?" and Michel was shocked with understanding that the Duke was not a man accustomed to kindness. That he had fought for everything he had. He had approached Michel with the tactics he had employed for every previous battle. This new stillness to him was partly bewilderment that Michel had not conceded gracefully. It was not epiphany enough for affection, but Michel felt something soften that had been beaten rigid by anger.
"Yes," said Michel. "I would."

The Duke steepled his hands together, resting his chin on the point of his fingers. "Then, Lord Howard, let me propose a compromise."

***

Describing withdrawal as difficult had been a cruel underestimation. Michel spent a week shaking apart, soaked with sweat, crying and clawing at the ground. Sombret stayed with him, bathing his face and stroking his hair, ignoring Michel when he cursed him or begged for the fruit. Michel would fall asleep with his face pillowed on Sombret's thigh and wake up, drink the cool water Sombret would give to him, and feel unaccountably shy.

It was three weeks total before the doctor gave Michel permission to travel. It was startling, seeing another person after all this time. Michel had the ungentlemanly impulse to touch the man the entire time he was being examined.

When the day came, Michel washed, shaved, dressed himself in the finest clothes in the wardrobe. His face in the looking-glass was pale, thinner, more adult. Perhaps not yet the face of a statesman, but it could become so given time.

Sombret met him on the way to the lift that lead to the London entrance to the Underneath. The Duke looked slightly gray, as if he had spent a sleepless night. The air between them had been strained since Michel's recovery. Sombret had not touched him and Michel had not sought him out. Now, Sombret nodded to him, an acknowledgement between equals.

"Ambassador Howard," he said.

Michel returned the nod. "Your Grace."

"I expect your return will be met with something of a furor," Sombret said. "I hope to hear of your progress in Parliament within the week."

"I will contact you tonight," Michel said. They had discussed the particulars of Michel's appointment as ambassador of the Underneath in detail; Michel had dossiers upon dossiers of agenda, parliamentary procedure, hidden weaknesses of each minister. This conversation, he suspected, Sombret dragging his feet. It did not fill him with as much apprehension as it would have a month prior.

Sombret stepped forward, giving Michel ample time to object. He fit a hand to Michel's cheek, expression wistful. "I will miss you every day."

"The session will be over in six months," Michel said gently. "I'll return."

Sombret smiled wanly. Before he could examine the desire, Michel kissed him. Sombret's mouth fell open in surprise.

"I promise you," Michel said, and then he stepped into the lift to the surface.

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