How To Make a Marriage Work

by captain_trash, SadSeaChild

Summary

One kingdom offers their only Prince.
“I, Aaron Burr of the Burr family, Crowned Prince of the Kingdom of Tyst, and Second of his Name, give my consent to be married to General George Washington of the Kingdom of Frihet.”

Another offers their top General.
“General Washington, do you willingly give a part of your soul to Prince Aaron Burr of the Kingdom of Tyst in order to become one?”

However, no one told either of them how hard it is to be married to a stranger. They will simply have to figure it out themselves.

Notes

Time for a new story!!!

I'll be posting this one on Saturdays only. At least that's my hope right now. I have a lot planned. I'm not going to list out every single relationship and character in this story because there are too many. The major one is listed and that's all that really matters.
Thank you to SadSeaChild for being my awesome beta for this story! I've now listed them as a co-author because they have done SO much for this story! They've helped me come up with major plot ideas, wrote dialogue, and made this story what it needs to be. So thank you for everything, my friend. I couldn't have done this without you.
“What’s taking so long?” Sally demanded as she paced back and forth in front of the large wooden door, her footsteps echoing off the stone walls. The guards shared a look with each other, but neither of them said a word about the Princess’ attitude. Aaron didn’t blame them. Sally had a fiery temper and now was not the time to criticize her actions.

“I’m sure Uncle knows what he’s doing. Will you please sit down? You’re making everyone nervous. Including me,” Aaron pleaded with his sister, ready to take on her anger if he needed to.

“They should be nervous! There’s no reason we should have lost!”

“Sometimes these things just happen.”

“Not to us! Father would have never-” Sally pressed her lips together and looked away. Aaron turned his eyes to the floor. Their father. God Aaron missed him more and more every day. He had been so young when their parents died, but he grew up listening to stories about them. If they were here, if his father was still King, maybe things would be different. Maybe things would be better.

“Uncle will guide us, but we must stay strong and stand with him,” Aaron muttered. “We are the hope of our people. We must not let them see our fears or worries. Nor our anger.” Sally let out a loud sigh before taking a seat next to Aaron. She leaned against his shoulder as they stared at the closed wooden door together.

“I don’t understand. Why now? Why would Frihet attack us in such a way? What was the point of all this? What do they gain?” Sally asked. Aaron understood her frustration. None of this made any sense to Aaron either, but he didn’t have the answers. No one did.

Frihet was one of the largest kingdoms in the region, running along the coast and stretching down into the Himmel Mountains in the south. They had vast amounts of land and people, great for for farming and mining. They had a large number of ports that allowed them to trade with other kingdoms far across the sea. Overall, they shouldn’t want or need anything from a small kingdom like Tyst.

Tyst, which was just a sliver a land between Frihet and the kingdom of Morker to the East, only had five port cities and a small foothold in the Himmel Mountains. They made most of their fortune by trading weapons and other supplies with the tribes and kingdoms of the Northern Islands. They weren’t a threat to anyone, and certainly not worth trying to conquer.

Yet, four weeks ago, a wagon crossing the border between Tyst and Frihet carrying food and normal supplies was attacked by Frihet soldiers. At first, it was believed that the attack was an accident, a misunderstanding that lead to unnecessary bloodshed. Both kingdoms denounced the violence and promised to communicate better. However a day later, one of Tyst’s biggest ships was sunk just off the coast of Frihet before it could dock. There was no way to claim that the attack was another simple misunderstanding. Not when so many lives were lost.

Frihet had attacked Tyst’s people. Not once, but twice. In retaliation, Tyst started to prepare for war. Men and women alike cleaned their armor and volunteered to fight. Others who couldn’t fight, or weren’t old enough yet, collected as many supplies as possible to turn their homes into fortresses.

Their Uncle, King Timothy, summoned his generals and the battle plans were drawn up within hours. Sally and Aaron were ready to fight, ready to defend their home and their people. This was
what they were trained for, what they were meant to do. Sally specialized in offensive magic with a heavy focus on elemental warfare while Aaron was better known for his defensive skills. Together, they had planned to prove their worth to the people of Tyst. To show that the deserved their titles.

However, King Timothy surrendered after only a few weeks of war. Everyone was stunned by the news. The very idea of surrendering was outrageous, yet it was true. The pride of the kingdom was wounded and everyone was angry, no one more than Sally. She screamed at King Timothy in private until her voice started to crack, but their Uncle wouldn’t listen and the treaty negotiations quickly began between the two kingdoms.

Aaron kept his own thoughts to himself. He felt betrayed by his Uncle, but also relieved. Only a few hundred people died on both sides, which was still too many in his mind, but if the war had continued, more people would have died. More families would have been destroyed and that was the last thing Aaron wanted. Though he wasn’t going to say such things to Sally, or to the King. They wouldn’t see it the same way.

“This is taking too long,” Sally grumbled, getting up from her seat to start pacing once again. “Why aren’t we in there with him? We should be helping! Not just sitting here like children!” Aaron sighed, but let his sister rant as she walked.

“You’re highness?” a soft voice asked. Aaron was relieved to see his friends standing a few feet away. Theodosia, his personal maid, curtsied gracefully while Bellamy, his personal guard, gave a stiff bow.

“Yes, Theodosia?”

“Do you need anything? Perhaps a drink while you wait, your highness?” Theodosia wondered, keeping her voice light and proper. She eyed his sister nervously, an understandable reaction to her presence. Sally didn’t approve of Aaron’s causal relationship with the servants, telling him repeatedly that it was improper and cause them to forget their place. She also had a bad habit of taking out her rage on them.

“I’m alright, but thank you for asking,” he replied, offering them both a soft smile to hopefully ease their worries.

“Are you sure, your highness? Perhaps some water would be-” Theodosia trailed off when Sally paused mid step to give her a disapproving look.

“Maybe later,” Aaron suggested, meeting his sister’s eyes with a look of his own. Sally huffed before turning away. Aaron was truly grateful to have both Theo and Bell at his side.

Theo’s and Aaron’s friendship started when he was only six years old and she already eleven. One night, while Aaron was sneaking around the kitchens looking for late night snack, Theo caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. Instead of reporting him to her mother, the head chef, or telling Aaron’s Uncle, Theo had helped Aaron find the best snacks in the kitchen while they swapped stories.

Aaron had never really had any friends other than Sally. The other noble children didn’t like him, claiming he was too small to keep up with them or too weak to handle their roughhousing. Aaron had been worried that Theo wouldn’t like him either, but instead she had been kind to him. She let him ramble about childish dreams and worries as he followed her around the room.

Aaron had been in awe of Theo’s wisdom. She had the answers to all his questions, passing on what she knew to Aaron without hesitation, and telling him exciting stories about the amazing things
magic could do. Aaron yearned to hear more, never wanting to leave the kitchen. Theo was also an expert climber, able to reach all the high shelves where the best treats were hidden.

Theo’s mother, Ann, tried to act angry in the morning when she found them sleeping on the floor, but she couldn’t hide her smile. She allowed Aaron to continue to visit the kitchen as often as possible as long as it didn’t distract him from his lesson, nor get her daughter in trouble. Aaron took great care to focus on his lesson as much as possible to ensure he would be allowed to visit his new friend. He avoided informing his Uncle of his dear playmate, worried that they would be separated.

With each visit, their friendship only grew stronger and stronger. They shared their dreams, kept each other’s secrets, and listened to one another’s worries. Aaron wished they could spend more time together, but there were invisible lines that neither of them could cross, at least not publicly. Half a year after meeting Theo, Aaron met Bellamy and added another friend to his small group.

Aaron ran into Bellamy, who was wearing a guard’s uniform, during one of his late night trips to the kitchen. Aaron had been scared that Bellamy would tell on him, after all he looked like a guard and all guards reported to the King about every move Aaron made. However, Bellamy had only smiled and shown Aaron a secret passway through the castle that led straight to the kitchen from his bedroom.

It turns out that Bellamy’s mother, Sarah, was one of the head guards at the castle and knew about Aaron’s late night adventures. She wanted to make Aaron’s journey both easier and safer. The tunnel made it easier for Aaron to travel while Bellamy was ordered to keep Aaron safe at all cost. Sarah figured that since Bellamy was one day going to become Aaron’s personal guard anyway, it would be good practice for both of them.

Their relationship was rocky at first. While Theodosia had been thrilled at how fast Aaron could get to the kitchens, she still eyed Bellamy with distrust. Aaron had similar feelings. He feared that Bellamy would report Aaron’s activities to the King or try to control what Aaron did. He tried to keep Bellamy out of the loom to ensure the safety of Theo and himself.

However, over time Bellamy proved that he cared little for the rules as long as Aaron was happy and safe. He was more than willing to help Aaron sneak out, even helping him visit the locate city on three different occasion. Bellamy was also a big fan of pranks. Together with Theo, they pranked some of the more annoying court members and even got Sally once. Bellamy always had a wild story to tell, making Aaron laugh even when things in the castle got tense.

Theo quickly got used to Bellamy as well, though they sometimes would fight for Aaron’s attention. They grew up together and shared countless adventures as they aged. Bellamy was promoted to Aaron’s official personal guard while Theo earned the title of his personal maid when he turned fifteen. They were there for Aaron through everything and he relied on them for guidance. He loved them like family no matter what Sally or his Uncle said.

“Aaron, Aaron the door is opening!” Sally said urgently, grabbing his arm tightly and chasing his memories away. Aaron gasped as heat shot through his arm. He knew Sally didn’t mean to do it, but that didn’t stop the pain.

“Control yourself,” he begged as he shoved her hand off. Sally didn’t pay him any attention while she watched the door. Someone whispered to the guards, who then looked over at Sally and Aaron with blank expressions.

“Prince Aaron, your presence is needed,” one of the guards declared. Aaron’s mouth dropped open in shock. Him? Why was he needed? Sally was the eldest, the next in line. Shouldn’t she be summoned first? Sally pulled him to his feet, digging her nails into his arm, and marched him
towards the door.

“You better tell me everything,’ she hissed as she let go and stepped back. “Everything!”

“I will,” he promised, glancing back at her to meet Bellamy’s eyes over her shoulder. Bellamy gave Aaron a single nod, which did more to help ease Aaron’s nerves than anything Sally could have said. Aaron took a deep breathe and made his way into the large meeting room. The room used to scare Aaron as a child. Being summoned here meant he was in trouble. He hope that this time would be different.

The room was the oldest room in the castle, built when the first king and queen were crown and the kingdom officially created. The rest of the castle had been built around it. The ceiling of the room was covered in an old wooden paneling that looked like it had seen better days, yet it had never been replaced. The walls created a circle room and were formed using cut stones and thick, strong white plaster while the floor was a single slab of stone. The magic that ran through the ceiling and down the walls sent a chill down Aaron’s spine.

A stone, round table made up of ten, carved triangles sat in the middle of the room. Each triangle’s carving depicted a major event from the kingdom’s history, starting with the legend of the First Tribe and ending with the Southern Expansion. For each triangle and event there was a matching chair with the seat covered in light grey fabric, one of the kingdom’s primary colors.

On the back of each chair was a carving dedicated to a class of people in the Kingdom. There were the farmers with their vast fields of food and large herds of animals. Next, were the teachers and scholars that gathered up information to pass on to the masses. Miners, who traveled deep into the mountains to collect valuable materials, sat next to their cousins, the smiths, who worked such materials into even better weapons and tools.

The bakers with their bread, butchers with their collection of knives, and cooks with with their pots, those who take care of feeding the people, were all featured in the same carving. Similarly, the weavers, shoemakers, jewelers, and other such trades were bunched together on the next chair. The dock workers and sailors were depicted in front of their tall ships with the waves crashing up over the rocks, one of Aaron’s personal favorites. Guards, soldiers, and local enforcement demonstrated their armor and skills on the back of their own chair.

The second to last chair, the King’s favorite, featured the men and women of the law. Lawyers, judges, and the other people who kept order throughout the land carved in their elegant, long, hooded cloaks. The very last chair was reserved for the royal class, however, instead of having an intricate design like the others, the chair had only a single crown in the center.

Aaron had each carving memorized, knowing the meaning behind them and why each class was just as important as the others. Together, the ten chairs represented the people of Tyst and everything they built over the years. It was a reminder to the leaders of the kingdom. A reminder that they were simply one part in something much bigger. The choices they made affect everyone from the lawyers to the farmers. A good leader kept such things in mind, like the King did.

King Timothy Edwards, Aaron’s Uncle on his mother’s side, was seated in the royal chair across from the entrance to the room. The King wore a dull blue jacket with a dark grey shirt underneath. Their family’s crest was sewed over his heart. A plain, golden crown, created from natural materials found in the Himmel Mountains, sat on top of his head.

On his right stood the King’s personal guard, William, in his large suit of armor with his favorite sword tied to his hip. Aaron never liked the man, never. There was just something dark surrounding him that made Aaron stay far away. On the King’s left was his most trusted advisor, Rebecca. She
was a highly skilled potion maker and a brilliant negotiator, though she always favored Sally over Aaron when it came to giving them lessons. Neither of them showed an ounce of emotion as Aaron stepped forward and bowed to the King.

“Good morning, your majesty,” Aaron said politely before turning to offer a bow towards the three representatives from Frihet who sat on the left side of the table. Two women and a man eyed Aaron curiously, each of them dressed rather odd. The man in the middle wore only black from head to toe and seemed to have a serious aura, but he gave Aaron a soft smile when their eyes met. Both women wore matching purple dresses and golden necklace, however one had a white stone and the other’s was navy.

The women exchanged a look with each other before whispering in the man’s ears together. The man frowned for a moment, then waved the women away. The King watched everything with a calm expression on his face, but there was a calculating look in his eyes. Aaron knew that King Timothy was thinking carefully about the next move he would make.

“How old are you, your highness?” the man asked.

“Twenty-six, sir.”

“Twenty six? That’s a twelve year difference!” the woman with the white stone exclaimed, giving King Timothy a fiery glare.

“Oh please, you make it sound so scandalous yet the Queen of Morker is sixteen years older than her husband,” Rebecca pointed out. Aaron glanced to the right where the representative from Morker was seated. The older woman didn’t seem to mind the comments made about her Queen. She was here to help maintain peace during the negotiations.

“Still,” the first woman muttered, shaking her head. “I don’t think this is the best idea.”

“The age difference doesn’t concern me, nor does it concern my nephew,” King Timothy declared. “Am I correct, Prince Aaron?”

“Yes, your majesty,” Aaron replied without thinking about the question or what he was agreeing to. When the King asked if he was correct, you said yes. That’s what he had always been taught.

“While Prince Aaron is not in line for the throne, he is still an amazing warrior and worthy of such an honor,” Rebecca said proudly. Aaron’s eyes widened in shock. Rebecca had never praised his skills. Never. “We are sure that he will do well in such a position. He will make his kingdom proud and cause you no issues.”

“He is of age,” the man muttered, reaching up to rub his chin as he studied Aaron’s form. Aaron tried to keep still under his gaze.

“Have there been any other offers?” the other woman, the one with the navy necklace, wondered.

“None,” King Timothy assured her. Aaron looked around in confusion. He had no idea what they were talking about. What position? What such offers? What had he agreed to?

“Very well. We will send word to King Gilbert as soon as possible,” the man decided, clapping his hands together. “If he agrees to these terms, then we may sign the treaty at first light tomorrow.”

“Sir, I still don’t think—” the first woman protested.

“Enough, Angelica. I have made my decision. There is nothing else t-.”
“Wait,” the representative from Morker finally spoke up, cutting everyone else off. “I wish to hear from the boy. We had deciding his future and he should have a say.” Aaron glanced around the room, taking in his Uncle’s face. King Timothy’s mouth twisted in displeasure at the suggestion, but after a moment he gave his consent. Aaron turned to the representative and bowed respectfully to the woman. He had seen her at public events before, Lady Kitty if he remembered correctly. She appeared tough on the outside, but she had a kind heart.

“Yes, my Lady?”

“Do you wish to be married, your highness?”

“I-” Aaron paused, glancing at his Uncle for help, but King Timothy only stared at him with his lips pressed in a hard line. What was Aaron supposed to say? He didn’t want to get married, at least not yet. He still too young in his opinion and he wanted more time to explore the world before he was tied to a single person, but he knew that wasn’t the right answer.

“I do wish to be married, my Lady,” Aaron lied, “I hope that one day soon my uncle, the King, will be able to find me a good match that helps ensure the safety and prosperity of my kingdom. It is my duty as a Prince of Tyst to serve in the best interest of my people.”

“Such a diplomatic answer,” Angelica, the woman with the gold stone, muttered. King Timothy smiled, looking pleased. Aaron’s shoulder slowly relaxed. He could do this. He knew how to play his part.

“So you would be happy to marry anyone your King tells you to?”

“Yes, Lady Kitty. I trust my King’s judgement.”

“Would you take the marriage seriously, putting your heart and soul into any match?”

“Yes, my Lady. Any marriage I enter into is for the good of my kingdom and It is up to me to ensure that such a marriage is successful.” Aaron was suddenly very thankful for the lessons he had been forced to attend as a child. All the answers he needed had already been provided for him. He simply had to recite the same words his teachers drilled into his head.

“What makes a good marriage?”

“Trust. Communicate. Sacrifice. Understanding. Hardwork. The list can get rather long, Lady Kitty, but I believe that the biggest one is communication.”

“Do you believe-”

“Are we really going to do this all day?” Rebecca protested. “The Prince understands his duty to his kingdom, I don’t believe we need to question him any longer.” Lady Kitty stared at Aaron for a long moment before nodding her head.

“Very well then,” she agreed, sitting back in her seat. “Lord Schuyler, you should tell the Prince more about the treaty agreement.”

“As you wish, Lady Kitty,” the man in black replied, giving King Timothy a bright expression. “To ensure that the horrific events that occurred over these last few weeks do not repeat themselves the Kingdom of Frihet has proposed a marriage between our two kingdoms. King Lafayette and his Prince Consort have yet to name an heir, however, they have offered the hand of their General, who is both a master spellcaster and a well known hunter of magical creatures, in place of a prince or princess. King Timothy has offered your hand in return.”
“But, we need your consent on such a matter, young Prince,” Lady Kitty added. “This is your life, your future. You must agree to the marriage by your own free will. No one may force you, nor threaten you.” Aaron almost laughed at the idea. How could he say no and live with himself?

His kingdom, his family, even his friends would all know that he had refused, that he was the reason the treaty had fallen through. Aaron could never do that, never be the cause of his kingdom’s suffering. The war would go on unless he accepted his fate. It was his duty as a Prince to marry someone to help his kingdom and he always knew this day was going to come.

He had been hoping that he would have more time to prepare, more time to get to know his potential match before the ceremony, but he was used to not getting what he wanted. He shut his eyes for a moment as he tried to calm his speeding heart. What if he was forced to marry a horrible man who was cruel and harsh? Or a woman who didn’t like him at all? There were so many possibilities, so many things that could go wrong.

“May I know the name of the General, my Lady?” Aaron asked softly, praying that knowing the name of his future spouse would ease his worries.

“Washington. General George Washington,” Lady Kitty answered. Aaron’s eyes widened at the name. General Washington was famous, known throughout the land for his many victories in multiple wars and wild adventures. He was a man of great strength and powerful magic. A legend. Such a marriage would be a valuable relationship for his Kingdom. Aaron knew what he had to do.

“I, Aaron Burr of the Burr family, Crowned Prince of the Kingdom of Tyst, and Second of his Name, give my consent to be married to General George Washington of the Kingdom of Frihet.”

“It is decided then,” Lady Kitty announced, pushing back her chair to stand up. Everyone followed her example and rose from their own seats. “I will allow this negotiation to end for today so that Lord Schuyler may inform King Gilbert of the Prince’s consent. However, for safety and to ensure that no one attempts to sabotage this treaty, Prince Aaron is not to leave the castle for any reason until the document is officially signed by all parties.”

“Agreed,” King Timothy stated.

“Agreed,” Lord Schuyler echoed. The two men shook hands, then Lord Schuyler bid the King a fond farewell and followed a pair of guards to the door. One woman followed him, but the other, Angelica, stayed behind for a moment. She stared at Aaron with a torn look on her face. Aaron stared back in confusion, unsure why he had caught her attention. She opened her mouth a few times as if to say something, but nothing came out.

“Angelica!” Lord Schuyler called from the doorway. The woman ducked her head and quickly left the room right. Aaron watched her go, wondering what she was so upset about. Lady Kitty gave Aaron a lovely smile before taking her leave.

“Give me a moment alone with my nephew,” King Timothy said to the others. William and Rebecca bowed as they stepped back and started for the door. William placed a hand on Aaron’s shoulder as he passed. Aaron tried not to shudder at the heavy touch.

“You’ve done good today, boy.” William muttered.

“Very good,” Rebecca added. “You made your Kingdom proud.” Once the room was clear, King Timothy made his way around the table and placed his hands on Aaron’s shoulders, staring straight into Aaron’s eyes.
“You did the right thing, Aaron. Your parents would be so proud of you,” he said softly. Pride swelled in Aaron’s chest, remembering the stories that the others had told him throughout the years. He thought about the painting of his parents that stood in the Great Hall. His father’s bright, wise eyes. His mother kind, but knowing smile. He wished he remembered more. He wished they were still here.

His father, who shared Aaron’s name, was a well respected leader who tried to avoid battles at all cost. He focused instead on healing the sick and repairing old wounds between different parts of the kingdom. His goal was to bring everyone together, to unify them all. He also created forty new potion recipes that healed fatal wounds, repaired broken bones, and even cured dark curses. He always wanted to help those who couldn’t help themselves.

Aaron’s mother was a dragon rider, a real one. She hatched her first egg at eight years old, raising the ice dragon until it was old enough to fend for itself. Then she started the process all over again with a new egg, however her first stayed with her until her death. She would ride it around the kingdom to visit other dragon trainers, offering advice and assistance when she could. His mother trained each dragon on how to handle people, teaching each one to avoid destroying villages, but also how to defend itself against those who might wish to hurt it.

According to everyone Aaron looked just like his father, which was why they shared the same name, but he had a personality similar to his mother. Aaron had always wanted a dragon egg, hoping to one day become like his mother, but his Uncle never allowed it. He said it was too dangerous and no one could handle them the way Aaron’s mother did.

Aaron’s parents had been the hope of the Kingdom. Everyone loved and adored them, believed that they would lead the Kingdom into a new age. It broke the Kingdom’s spirit when they both got sick and died so young. All hope seemed to be lost. King Timothy took the crown soon after and promised to continue what Aaron’s parents had started, but everyone knew it wasn’t the same. It would never be the same.

“Thank you, your majesty,” Aaron replied. “I hope I can serve my kingdom well.”

“You will, we all know you will. I am sorry that you weren’t given more of a warning before being asked so many questions. We had to move quickly with the agreement, and I didn’t expect Lady Kitty to demand your presence so soon. I hope you understand,” his Uncle said. His tone lacked all remorse or concern, after all a King never truly apologized for anything. They do not make mistakes.

“I understand, your majesty.”

“Good. Very good. I’m sure you have questions, and I wish I had more time to explain in depth, however I need to go meet with the rest of the court to make sure no one will object to the treaty. I’ll talk to you more after dinner tonight.”

“May I ask one?” Aaron begged as his Uncle stepped around him towards the door. King Timothy paused before sighing loudly, clearly disappointed by the small request. Aaron held his breath and prepared himself for his Uncle’s reaction. He prayed it was a good one.

“Very well. But only one.”

“Will you be able to attend the wedding, your majesty?” Aaron asked. He wasn’t too hopeful about his Uncle being present, however he still felt as if he should ask. It was better to know ahead of time then to be disappointed later. He had learned that lesson the hard way many years ago

“No. I have too much to do and now is not the best time for me to be traveling. But your sister will
be going in my place,” King Timothy answered, moving towards the door.

“Of course,” Aaron muttered softly.

“Follow Rebecca’s instructions,” King Timothy ordered, “and everything will go planned. I am very proud of you, Aaron. This marriage will be the start of something wonderful.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Aaron said, but his voice lacked any excitement. He watched his Uncle leave before looking back at the table and chairs. Would this be the last time he ever saw this room? Would he ever be allowed to return? Countless questions bounced around in his mind, but he doubt Rebecca would be kind enough to answer them. Everything was happening so fast, yet Aaron had no control over anything.

“Aaron,” Sally called as soon as he stepped out of the room. She rushed forward and grabbed his hands tightly. “What happened?! What’s going on?” Aaron looked over his sister’s shoulder at his friends, who stood only a few feet away. Theodosia and Bellamy both looked extremely worried as they stared back at him. Reality started to weigh down on his shoulders.

“I’m getting married.”
The General I

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for the comments! I love each and every one of them!

Also, make sure you thank my amazing beta, SadSeaChild, for everything they do! Seriously. You’d be shocked how many ideas come straight from them. They are the muse that keeps me going.

I hope you like this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Stop messing with it,” Alexander ordered, slapping George's hands away when he tried to fix one of his buttons.


“He’s making it look worse!”

“You’re not helping!”

“I’m not nervous,” George protested, but neither of them paid him any attention. They continued to bicker while straightening his collar and over shirt. George sighed as he looked at his reflection in the large mirror in front of him. Hopefully, today would go quickly without any delays or problems.

He wish he had chosen to wear his uniform instead of accepting King Lafayette's offer of a new outfit. Perhaps then he wouldn’t feel so out of place, as if he was a character in a play where he didn’t know his lines. His military uniform would have been good enough for the event, yet George was unable to refuse the King’s lovely gift. He was unable to refuse a lot of things when it came to the King. George’s mind drifted to the past, to how everything around him came to be.

Queen Marie Louise, Lafayette’s mother, had been a respected and strong ruler; however, she was also quite protective of her only son and heir. She wanted him to be safe, to live a full and happy life, but Gilbert Lafayette refused to be kept locked away. At the young age of eight, the young Prince ran away from his home in the capital city of Seger and appeared on George's doorstep demanding that George teach him how to be a soldier.

George tried to refuse. He claimed that Lafayette was too young and should return home to his mother until he was older, though the appearance of Alexander and John, who were both only eight at the time, ruined his excuse. Alexander was an orphan from the local village who had caught George’s eye after he took down a thief by himself in order to return a woman's purse. He had a fire like temper, wanting to prove his worth to everyone around him, yet there was a true hunger for a family hidden underneath.

John was of noble birth and had been sent away to train with George as soon as he was old enough to be on his own. His father wanted a soldier for a son, but he sent John to the wrong man. George refused to make children into mindless soldiers who kill for no reason. No, he simply taught his students skills that they could use however they saw fit while also allowing them to have their
childhoods.

Lafayette easily forced his way into their home, their lives, and their hearts. George tried time and time again to get him to leave, but Alexander and John took a liking to the young Prince and refused to let him go. Lafayette was shy at first, not use to children his own age wanting his attention; however; within days he started to come out of his shell and join the other boys in their wild games.

Within a week a letter arrived from the Queen. George expected her fury and displeasure, but was instead shocked to find that she would allow her son to be trained as a soldier. But only as long as George didn’t treat him any differently than the other boys. No special privileges. No easy ways out. If Lafayette wanted to learn how to fight, then he would learn the same way everyone else did. Through blood, sweat, and tears. George agreed with the terms and Lafayette’s training soon began.

Alongside Alexander and John, Lafayette learned the basics. How to hold a sword, how to shoot a bow, and ride a horse, but he also learned key survival skills. Starting a fire without magic. Finding water in the worst conditions. Healing small injuries or using the right plants to cure illnesses. Overtime, Lafayette started to turn his attention to potion making more than the others and George allowed him to learn as much as possible about the craft while Alexander dedicated his time to the elements and John to magical creatures.

When they were ten, Eliza Schuyler joined their small group. Already a master of long ranged spells, she quickly overtook the boys and carved a place for herself as George’s student. The four of the grew together. George watched each of them find their speciality and thrive in it. All too soon the boys turned into men and Eliza turned into a woman. As they all got older, they started to help prepare Lafayette for the day he would become King. George thought they had all the time in the world. But by the Gods he was so very wrong.

Queen Marie Louise died suddenly just after Lafayette’s twenty first birthday. No warning. No sign. It just happened. The world stopped for only a moment, allowing them to hold the funeral before Lafayette was shoved into the spotlight without his mother to guide him. However, he was never alone. Against the wishes of the court, he declared Alexander, John, and Eliza his advisers. George was appointed as his General and together they started to build on the Queen’s legacy and ideas.

Hercules Mulligan, a student under Henry Knox, came to court to offer his own assistance and plead his loyalty to the new King around the same time. Though things didn’t quite go as planned, at least George didn’t believe that Hercules came to court with the sole intention to fall in love with their young king. Now Hercules and Lafayette were happily married and known throughout the kingdom as a strong team.

Watching Lafayette get married, walking him down the aisle, and laughing as Hercules shoved cake in his face were some of the happiest moments of his life. Alexander, John, and Eliza brought George equal amounts of joy and pride. These were his children, his family, his life. He wouldn’t trade any of them for all the riches of the world.

However, he wasn’t sure he could do this. He wasn’t sure that he could marry a foreign Prince in order to ensure peace for the kingdom. Lafayette didn’t want a war. He never did. George didn’t want one either and tried as hard as possible to help Lafayette avoid such horrors. The first incident on the border between Tyst and Frihet had been an accident. A miscommunication between the incoming travelers and the local city guards had led to innocent lives being lost. Neither group was innocent, but tension started to grow between the kingdoms.

Morker was watching, waiting to see what happened like a vulture watching a creature take its last breath. Their allies had countless questions, but they had few answers. Lafayette started to worried about looking weak or cowardice against such a small kingdom like Tyst. George had hoped that
everyone would be able to move passed it. It was one accident. One time. He hoped that Tyst would let it go. That no one else would have to die.

Then the Tyst ship blew up in Frihet’s harbor without warning. Lafayette hadn’t given any orders. George didn’t even have men stationed out in the harbor anymore. Only the local guards and normal authorities patrolled the waters. There was no logical reason for a Tyst ship to be attacked, but within minutes it sank along with every last crew member. They were on their way to war with no hope of looking back. Years of peace shattered in a matter of minutes.

Tyst attacked within a few hours. They pushed into Frihet like a hot knife through butter. Lafayette had no choice but to respond with his own troops. George and Alexander led the counterattack, praying for a short war with few casualties. Surprisingly, they got their wish. The King of Tyst surrendered after three weeks when a Frihet charge pushed the Tyst troops back within their own borders. George had been wary at first. Peace so soon sounded like a trap. Nevertheless, Lafayette sent Lord Schuyler and his eldest daughter, Angelica, to meet with King Timothy to discuss their terms.

Lafayette didn’t want land or ports. He didn’t want weapons, minerals, or gold. He only wanted peace. He suggested a political marriage and Tyst agreed, offering up their Prince. It was a solid idea. War was less likely to happen again if the two kingdoms were connected through marriage, and now Tyst’s allies were also Frihet’s, but George didn’t know why Lafayette picked him for such a task.

George never gave much thought to the idea of marriage. He never dreamed about finding his one true love and settling down. Never chased after one person in hopes of spending the rest of his life with them. Instead, he focused all his attention on his military career and magical skills. He joined the Queen’s Copper Troops at sixteen, just two years after his father passed, wanting to protect his home and learn how to keep other people safe from harm.

George quickly moved up the ranks as he dedicated all his energy to honing his skills. He practice spell after spell until they were perfect. He pushed his body and mind to their limits and then overcame those obstacles. By nineteen, he was promoted to the Queen’s Silver Troops. Just in time for the Northern Islands to attack.

He went to war with bravery and excitement in his heart. He was more than willing to fight and die for his people. To die on the battlefield seemed like the greatest glory. He would be a legend. A hero. But George quickly learned what war truly meant. It meant watching his friends die. They weren’t heroes. There would be no songs about them. No stories. Nothing. They were only a small part of a bigger picture. A picture that grew every single day.

War meant watching city after city burn to the ground, leaving nothing behind. It meant watching people run past them screaming with their bleeding children in their arms. It meant ruined farms, countless orphans, and a lost of hope. After each battle, George thought about giving up. How could he go on like this? What was the point? Hope had seemed so far away.

However, he refused to allow the darkness to destroy his heart. He refused to give into his fears. He pushed himself harder. He focused on why he joined the military in the first place, to keep people safe, to stay true to the stories his father had told him as a young boy. George developed new defense tactics to help evacuate towns during a battle, created new relationships with the local creatures to aid in protecting orphans and elders, and pushed himself harder each and every day. This war had to end. It would end and George would help ensure that a lasting peace came afterwards.

He came back as a hero, just like he wanted, but it wasn’t enough. He hadn’t done enough. At twenty three, he was offered a place in the Queen’s Golden Troops, but he turned in down in favor
of starting to train his own students. He wanted to pass what he knew to the next generation. Now, fifteen years later, after training countless students and helping guide Lafayette, he was going to give it all up to marry a stranger.

“Smile, George,” Eliza ordered, snapping him out of the past as she put the finishing touches on his outfit. “Remember to smile. This is a happy day.”

“Or don’t. Just scare your new husband into submission before your honeymoon,” Alexander suggested with a smirk. Eliza pulled on his ear until he squealed. Alexander tried to get her back, but she danced away from his flailing hands. Usually, his students teasing would make him feel better, but it did no such good today. George ignored their antics instead as he ran his hands over the crest resting above his heart.

He wore a deep blue over shirt that went down to his knees with a white shirt underneath. His trousers, hidden under the long shirt, were the same deep blue color. A gold color belt wrapped around his waist. George had forbid Eliza from attaching the matching cape, instead letting her pinned a bright red flower right underneath his family crest. It was a truly beautiful outfit, and it fit his body well, but he still felt uncomfortable looking at himself in the mirror. At least after today he would never have to wear such an outfit again. He could go back to his uniform and avoid such an unsettling feeling.

“A happy day,” George muttered to himself. That’s what it was meant to be. It was the end of the short war and the start of a new alliance, yet George was unable to feel any real joy.

“A very happy day indeed,” a strong voice echoed. A smile quickly grew on George’s face as he turned to see King Lafayette standing in the doorway. His presence helped to chase some of George’s fears away.

“Lafayette!” Alexander exclaimed in excitement. He make his way over the King and pull the man into a hug. “You look great. Is that a new shirt?”

“It is. Hercules made it for me. You know how he is with his gifts,” Lafayette replied, ducking his head at the attention as he ran his hand over the item. George’s smile grew. He could only hope that his marriage turned out as well as Lafayette’s.

“He’s ready, Lafayette,” Eliza declared, placing a hand on George’s shoulder and giving him a pleased smile before moving towards the King. “As ready as he’s going to be.” Lafayette pulled her close and placed a kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you for all your help. Can you give me a moment with him? I wish to give the groom some key advice,” Lafayette teased, wiggling his eyebrow suggestively. George rolled his eyes.

“Of course!”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Lafayette. He’s still quite nervous,” Alexander warned, squeezing the King’s arm before slipping out the door after Eliza.

“I’m not nervous!” George called after them. He could hear them laughing in the hallway as the door closed. Lafayette chuckled and shook his head as he walked towards George.

“You look quite handsome,” Lafayette commented. “I didn’t think you could clean up so well, but somehow they were able to clean all the dirt and grime off your face.”

“Ha. Very funny, boy, but I remember you on your wedding day. You fell into the foundation in the
morning and nearly gave yourself a chill. I was fearful that we would going to have to call the whole thing off,” George replied, grabbing Lafayette and pulling him close enough so he could steal his crown before messing with his hair.

“Hey! Hey!” Lafayette protested. He fought George off and reclaimed his crown with a pout. “So rude! Is this how you treat your King?!”

“This is how I treat my student. You still have much to learn apparently.”

“You are growing bitter in your old age.”

“Is that a grey hair?” George faked a gasp.

“Don’t you dare! I’m not even twenty five yet! And you don’t even have hair! I bet if you did it would be all white!”

“You sound as if you're thirteen instead of twenty three.”

“Well, you sound like you’re eighty.” Lafayette went so far as to stick his tongue out to go along with his insult.

“Then perhaps I’m too old to marry a young Prince,” George muttered, regretting the words as soon as they left his mouth. Lafayette’s smile vanished and a serious expression took over his face.

“I won’t force you to do this. You know I won’t. Say the word and I’ll cancel the wedding right now,” Lafayette reminded him. It wasn’t the first time they had this conversation. When Lafayette told George of his plan, he almost refused. He almost said no, but how could he do that? How could he let everyone down? Peace would never last unless he married the Prince. This was the best choice. The right choice. For everyone.

“No no. I can do this,” George assured the King, and himself. “I want to do this.” Lafayette took his hands and squeezed them tightly.

“This is the last time I can ask you this, George. The last time. Do you truly wish to marry the Prince of Tyst? There is no backing out after the ceremony starts. There is no chance of a divorce. This is a till death do you part union. I need to hear you say it. I need to be sure.”

“I truly wish to marry the Prince of Tyst. Lafayette, don’t worry about me. I can do this. This may not have been what I wanted at first, but it’s for the good of the kingdom and that’s good enough for me,” George replied, making his words sound strong and true.

“I’m so sorry,” Lafayette whispered. “I fear that I’ve stolen your chance of having real happiness.”

“That’s a lie. You don’t know what the future may bring. The Prince and I may be able to find peace with each other. We must be hopeful. Tomorrow is another day to see what the world might bring,” George promised. Lafayette smiled sadly before throwing his arms around George’s neck.

“I pray to the Gods that you will find happiness, that you will find love. It is what you deserve. That and the world. You have done so much to me. I will never be able to thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I am honored to serve you and you have brought so much joy and happiness to my life. I’m proud of you Lafayette. Your mother would also be proud. You have become an amazing King and a brave man.”

“George I owe you so-”
A knock on the door cut their conversation short, a signal that it was time for the ceremony to start. George was going to do this and he was going to do it right. He straightened Lafayette’s crown and offered the King a soft smile.

“I’m ready,” he whispered. “And don’t worry so much. This isn’t the last time we’ll see each other. This is just another chapter in our book of adventures.” Lafayette couldn’t hide his grin, understanding George’s reference.

“You’ll be a great husband, George. I just know it,” he said before clapping his hands. “Get everyone to their places! Start the music! It’s time for the wedding!” He made his way to the door, opening it and waiting for George to follow. George glanced back at the mirror one last time. This was it. There was no turning back now. No second guessing. He reached up and unbuttoned the top button on his undershirt. That looked better. More like him.

George turned away and followed Lafayette out of the room. Alexander and John soon appeared at his sides, silently walking with him through the halls of the castle. Lafayette had insisted that they hold the ceremony in the Great Hall. George had agreed as long as he didn’t have to handle any of the details. With only seven days to plan the ceremony and the reception, Washington didn’t need the added stress. Though, he had to give Lafayette credit, the Grand Hall had been transformed into a beautiful venue.

A long, narrow blue carpet divided the room in half. People from both Kingdoms stood on one side or the other with their allies and close friends. George took his place at the front of the room while Alexander and John joined King Lafayette and Prince Hercules on the Frihet side. High Priestess Maria greeted George with a single nod of her head. George felt at ease by her presence.

Over their heads, huge chandeliers covered with candles light up the room. George felt bad for the poor servants who had to light each and every one. He hoped that Lafayette gave them more than a day off. They deserved at least a week for such a task. The right wall displayed a large banner with George’s family crest while the left held the crest of Prince Aaron’s family.

A group of musicians were set up in the back left corner of the room. They played a soft song as everyone found their places. George noticed that Princess Sally Burr was already standing in the front row on the Tyst side wearing a light grey dress. Strange. George had been told that King Timothy would be unable to attend the wedding. He had assumed that the Princess would be walking her brother down the aisle in their Uncle’s place.

Suddenly, the music started to swell. Everyone stopped talking and turned around as the doors to the room started to open. George squared his shoulder and lifted his chin, creating an aura of power around himself as Prince Aaron stepped into the room. He was alone, no one at his side to hand him off. It was a clear break from tradition.

George’s eyes widened in shock. The portrait that King Timothy provided had not done him any justice. The young Prince was quite handsome with good features and a body that seemed to fit perfectly between muscular and lean. He was wearing a black overshirt with a matching black shirt underneath. A plain golden crown sat on top of his head, but there was no other color mixed into his outfit. No family crest. No bright flower in his pocket.

In Frihet, black was only worn for funerals or sad events. It was a color for mourning, for reflection, but overall, it was seen as the color of death. Yet of all the colors Prince Aaron could have worn, he went with black over the others. He had to know about Frihet’s color traditions. He had to understand the message he was sending to George and the rest of the Kingdom. Prince Aaron was not happy about this wedding and he was making his feelings very clear before the ceremony even had a chance to begin.
Alexander looked over his shoulder and gave George a sad, knowing look. George tried to ignore his student and his growing fears as the Prince started to walk down the aisle, but his mind drifted to all the rumors he had heard. His stomach twisted as the thoughts grew. George had never met Prince Aaron before today, however he heard so much about him through other people.

According to Alexander, who met the Prince at a birthday party two years ago, the Prince had a terrible attitude and an even worse personality. Prince Aaron had refused to eat any of the food offered at the party, though no reason for his lack of appetite was provided, then he gave the young princess of Morker a set of thick books. The girl was only five years old. A doll or even a young horse would have been more appropriate.

Alexander went so far as to complain that the Prince was a boring conversationalist. Alexander claimed that he never added anything of importance, hardly paying attention while others talked around him. Alexander said he tried his hardest to pull Prince Aaron into a debate, hoping to hear the young man’s opinion on the latest trade measures, but the Prince quickly turned the conversation towards a dull topic about the weather. Overall, Alexander deemed the Prince as a bland person who lacked any substance and was too awkward to handle people.

The Prince was also said to have a fierce temper, snapping at servants and cursing out visitors for no reason. John heard a horrific tale about the young prince making a maid cry after the last Summer Festival. George couldn’t stand such people, those who look down on others just because of their status or occupations. Such stories led to George having great worries that the Prince would be hard to get along with. He feared that they would butt heads, unable to see eye to eye about anything. Thanks to the Prince’s dark outfit, George’s fears only grew. They were clearly already off to a bad start.

The Prince’s eyes darted around the room, only meeting George's at the very last second. George took a deep breath and forced himself to smile. He had to focus on easing the tension between them. This marriage had to work. It was for the good of the Kingdom, for the good of everyone. George offered the Prince his hand.

Prince Aaron looked over his shoulder nervously, probably waiting for Maria to give him instructions. His eyes were full of terror. He clearly didn’t want to do this, but he slowly took George’s hand and moved to stand by George’s side. The Prince’s touch was as light as a feather, as if he didn’t want to touch George anymore than necessary. George’s heart sank, but he pushed the thought away and turned his attention to Maira.

The High Priestess looked at George first, sizing him up before her eyes shifted over to the Prince. George watched Prince Aaron out of the corner of his eye, waiting for him to protest or something. After a long moment of silence when the music had finally faded away, Maria raised her arms in the air and started the ceremony.

“Behold! Today, we will bear witness as two souls become one!”

George tuned out Maria’s voice, focusing instead on the worries that tried to gain his attention. What if this was a mistake? What if the Prince hated him and turned his life into a living nightmare? He told himself to stay hopeful, begged his thoughts to turn back to the events at hand, but his fears refused to back down this time.

George had marched into countless battles, seen horrors beyond anyone’s imagination, and raised children into adults, yet a simple wedding ceremony terrified him more than all the rest. As the ceremony went on, his stomach twisted itself into knots. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he couldn’t do this. But Lafayette had said that it was too late to turn back. If George tried to stop the ceremony now, war could break out again within minutes.
“General Washington,” Maria’s strong voice cut into his thoughts. “Do you willingly give a part of your soul to Prince Aaron Burr of the Kingdom of Tyst in order to become one?” George tried not the flinch at such a question, avoiding the Priestess’ eyes. He spared a single glance at the man next to him before nodding his head.

“I do.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget, if you want to talk to me directly you can check out my tumblr
@holdthesewords

Thanks for reading!
The Prince II

Chapter Notes

Posting this early because I may or may not be home tomorrow and I don't want to forget!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Aaron used his fork to push his food around on the plate, making it seem like he was eating even though he had yet to take a single bite. He knew that everyone was staring at him, watching his every move with eyes that judged his choices and kept track of each mistake. The table that he was seated at, with his new husband to his left, was on an elevated platform. The wedding guests had a perfect view of the new couple. There was no hiding. No getting away.

Aaron tried to find his sister in the crowd, but it was nearly impossible to find her face among all the people. Everything in Frihet was bright and loud. Everywhere Aaron looked there was a mixture of colors. It hurt his eyes to look up for too long. If that wasn’t bad enough, he could barely hear his own thoughts. People popped bottles of wine as others cheered. They laughed loudly. Called out to one another across the room. Children and adults alike raced around with no regard to order or manners. It was overwhelming and unsettling.

“Aaron, you need to eat,” Bellamy insisted over his shoulder, “Try to take a few bites. It will make you feel better.” Aaron shook his head. His stomach had tied itself into knots and the very idea of putting in his mouth made him feel ill.

“Do you want me to get Theo?” Bellamy offered. It wasn’t a threat, though it could sound like one at times. It was an offer. Theo always knew how to calm his nerves. Aaron shook his head again. Sally had stolen Theo away for the night, claiming that she needed the maid’s help during the party. It was best not to bother Theo while she was working. Sally wouldn’t be happy about it, and Aaron didn’t want to cause any problems.

“What are you-”

“To the newlyweds!” someone called out. Everyone in the room cheered. Suddenly, the people from Frihet started to tap their forks against their wine glasses.

Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.

Aaron looked towards the General for an explanation, but the man was too busy looking out at the crowd to notice Aaron’s gaze. What was the point of all the clicking? Was it a signal for something? Aaron even glanced over his shoulder Bellamy, hoping that maybe his guard knew the answer, but Bellamy only shrugged with a similar look of confusion on his face. Aaron scanned the crowd as people started to call out orders.

“Kiss!”

“Make it a good one!”

“Give us a show!”
Without a word of warning, General Washington grabbed Aaron’s chin, turned his face to the left, and placed a soft kiss on his lips. Aaron froze in shock by such an open display. The kiss they shared during their wedding was part of the ceremony, meant to bind their souls together, but this kiss was a clear show of affection in a public space. It was inappropriate, yet the crowd cheered them on.

Aaron didn’t know what to do, so he did nothing, allowing the General to kiss him for a long moment before he pulled back with a soft smile. Aaron had seen smiles like that before. The General was doing his duty, playing the part of a good husband. Aaron knew better than to trust such smiles.

“No tongue, George? What, are you suddenly a shy person?” a man, Aaron believed it to be Lieutenant Hamilton , snorted as he leaned against the table on the other side of the General.

“Quiet,” General Washington hissed as he shifted in his seat and returned to his meal, the smile vanishing off his face. Aaron looked back at Bellamy, begging his friend to save him, to take him far far away from here.

“Is there something wrong with your meal, your highness?” Lieutenant Hamilton asked, a sneer appearing on his face. Hamilton clearly didn’t like him. He never had, but Aaron wouldn’t let him get under his skin.

“No, Lieutenant,” Aaron replied, “The meal is wonderful. I’m simply too excited to eat right now.”

“Too excited he says.”


“I’m not sorry.”

“You’re not helping.”

“I’m not here to help.”

“Then go bother John.”

“Lieutenant Hamilton?” Aaron spoke up, verbally stepping into their conversation. Both men turned towards him. Hamilton’s eyes narrowed, but Aaron forced himself to keep going. He had to try to build a bridge between them. “How is your history book going? Do you have more of it written now?”

“My book?”

“The one about mental magic-“

“How did you know about that?” Hamilton snapped, cutting him off.

“Hamilton!” George growled.

“You told me about it three years ago at a party. Sadly, I don’t remember which one. I’ve had Th-my maid keeping an eye out for any new books on the subject just in case,” Aaron confessed, ignoring Hamilton’s aggressive behavior and the General’s outburst. The idea of psychological magic wasn’t new, though it wasn’t spoken about often. Psychological magic was used to target a person’s mind and emotions. The idea was to take over their thoughts and twisted them into what you need. It was a dark magic that few people wanted to acknowledge. No one had ever tried to write a book on the subject. Leave it to Lieutenant Hamilton to be the first.
“I can’t believe you remember,” Hamilton muttered.

“Of course I do. I hope to read it as soon as you finish. I trust that you will put all your effects into it. From what I’ve heard, that’s how you are with everything.”

“I...Thank you?” Hamilton said, clearly confused. Aaron didn’t understand why. He had no reason to lie to the Lieutenant Colonel He really was looking forward to the book and he met Hamilton enough times to know that the rumors about his work ethic were true.

“You’re welcome.”

Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.

“Again already?” General Washington complained, setting down his fork.

“Just humor them,” Hamilton suggested, “It’s only for a little longer.” The General sighed before turning towards Aaron.

“What is-” General Washington cut him off with another soft kiss. It only lasted for a second this time. Again the crowd cheered and the clicking stopped. Aaron reached up and pressed the tips of his fingers against his lips. There was no emotion in the kiss, nor did they cause any feelings to stir inside Aaron. All he felt was emptiness.

“I don’t understand,” he muttered.

“They’re doing it to make you kiss,” Hamilton answered, “It’s an old tradition. When they click their glasses, you’re supposed to kiss each other. They can do it countless times throughout the night.”

“Why?”

Hamilton turned his attention to the General with a pinched look on his face. The General shook his head and waved Hamilton away. The Lieutenant Colonel quickly took his leave without answering Aaron’s question. Aaron frowned as he glanced out towards the crowd. Clearly, building bridges was harder than he thought it would be.

He wanted to make this marriage work, wanted to help foster peace between their kingdoms, but he didn’t know the first thing about relationships. Aaron had never even kissed a person before the wedding. He didn’t know what he was supposed to do or say. Theo told him to be himself, yet he couldn’t do that. Not really at least. He was never allowed to be himself, not around people like General Washington or King Lafayette. Aaron hoped and prayed that he would figure out how to handle this soon before he messed everything up.

“Settle down, settle down,” King Lafayette ordered the room as he walked towards their table. Two men followed him carrying a large crate. The King nodded his head first at General Washington before offering Aaron a low, over the top bow. “With your permission, Prince Aaron, General Washington, I wish to present you both with my wedding present.”

“You have m-our permission,” Aaron quickly replied, nodding his head towards the King to show his respect. Aaron had kept his title while General Washington was elevated to a Duke, though everyone continued to refer to him as his military rank. He hoped the General didn’t mind him answering for both of them. He didn’t want to offend the King by making him wait too long for an answer.

King Lafayette waved the men forward. They placed the crate in front of the table before lifting the lid to show everyone what was inside. Aaron leaned forward for a closer look as his eyes widened in
shock. A large, silver egg covered in scales sat in the very center of the crate surrounded by soft hay. It couldn’t be, could it? Would the King truly give one away as a wedding present? No. No, it was impossible.

“Is that really a dragon egg?” Aaron asked.

“It is,” the King assured him, “I grew up hearing stories of your mother, your highness, and I hope to one day be able to tell others about your new adventures once this egg hatches. It’s a small gift, but I hope you will accept it.” Aaron sat back in his chair in stunned silence. A real egg. The King had just offered them a real dragon egg and hoped that Aaron would be able to hatch it. He couldn’t believe this. It had to be a dream.

“We do accept it,” General Washington answered, “It’s a wonderful gift, your majesty. We will be sure to take good care of it.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” King Lafayette replied before nodding to the men. They closed the crate and started to carry it away.

“Where are they taking it?” Aaron wondered, a hint of worry bleeding into his voice. What if something happened to it? Someone stole it or it broke. It was still fragile right now.

“Don’t worry, your highness. They will take it to the General’s estate in a special carriage to ensure that it arrives safely,” the King replied.

“Thank you. A thousand times, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I wish you both a long and happy marriage.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

“Your highness,” Bellamy muttered in Aaron’s ear as the King was whisked away by one of the party guests, “Perhaps now is the best time to give the General your wedding present?” Aaron thought about the small, simple gift he picked out for his husband and started to regret his decision. It was nothing compared to a dragon egg, but it was too late to go back. He would simply have to hope that the General wasn’t too disappointed with him.

“Now is the best time,” Aaron agreed. Bellamy called to another Tyst servant, a younger boy Aaron hadn’t gotten the pleasure of getting to know. The boy quickly rushed over and handed Bellamy a small wooden box.

“Thank you,” Aaron told the boy, who froze in terror at the attention before bowing his head and scurrying off.

“He works for your sister,” Bellamy explained in a low voice as he passed Aaron the box. He looked around carefully, making sure no one could hear him speaking so casually. “He’s still not used to her temper.”

“Then please write to your mother as soon as possible. Ask her to keep an eye on him, on all of them,” Aaron ordered.

“Yes, your highness.”

Aaron looked down at the box in his hands. The wood was carved with an old style pattern, one that
Aaron was extremely familiar with. When he glanced over at the General he noticed a young woman leaning over to whisper in his ear. General Washington nodded his head on occasion, but didn’t say a word. Aaron waited patiently for the woman to be done, not wanting to interrupt their conversation.

“General Washington?” Aaron said as soon as the woman stepped away. He quickly got his husband’s attention, “This is my gift to you, if you wish to accept it.” He offered the carved, wooden box to the man as his nerves rose up into his throat. The General looked at the box for a moment before finally taking it from Aaron’s hands.

Aaron held his breath as General Washington opened the box. Inside was gold ring with a large red stone setting. The ring was placed on a piece of black velvet, helping the color of the stone stand out. Aaron watched as the General picked the ring up to take a closer look.

“I know it’s not much, and I hope you never have to use it, but I wanted to give you something worthy of a General,” Aaron explained with a grin.

“Thank you, your highness” General Washington replied, though he didn’t seem impressed at all as he put the ring back on the velvet and closed the box. Aaron kept the smile on his face, refusing to show his disappointment at the lack of a reaction.

“You’re welcome.”

“I’ll assume you want your gift as well,” the General muttered, waving the woman back over to them with a large box. Aaron’s smile slipped off his face at the harsh comment. Bellamy took a step towards General Washington with a deep scowl. Aaron grabbed his friend’s wrist to stop him from making a terrible mistake. The woman moved between the General and him, giving Bellamy an equally dark look as she set the box on the floor.

“Since you are leaving your home and will be far away from your family, I thought a letterbox would be the best choice. It will keep your letters safe as well as preserve them forever,” General Washington explained. Aaron reached out and ran his fingers over the box. It was light blue with golden leaves and flowers painted over the top and sides.

“Thank you, General. It’s very beautiful and I’m sure that I’ll make good use out of it,” Aaron lied, making sure to smile brightly to help his words seem true. It truly was beautiful, however, Aaron didn’t have much use for a letterbox. He knew that no one would write to him. His friends were coming with him and his Uncle refused to send personal letters. Sally would also be too busy to take the time to sit down and write him a simple letter.

“You’re welcome, your highness,” General Washington replied before standing form his chair, “It’s about time that we mingle with the crowd. If you excuse me, there are a few people I need to greet by myself. I suggest you do the same.” Before Aaron could reply, the General walked away. The woman soon left as well. Aaron sat back in his chair and let out a loud sigh.

“That could have gone better,” Bellamy pointed out.

“It could have,” Aaron agreed, “But clearly this marriage will be much harder than I thought.”

“It could be worse,” Bellamy offered.

“How?”

“He could be ugly.”
“Do you want to trade places with me?” Aaron grumbled, rolling his eyes at Bellamy’s assessment. Yes, the General was tall with broad shoulders, a handsome face, and lovely dark eyes, but that didn’t make the situation any easier.

“No need to get snippy,” Bellamy muttered, taking a step back. Regret sank low in Aaron’s stomach.

“I’m sorry. I just...Do you see any way out? I need a moment alone where it’s quiet. My head is starting to ache from all the noise.”

“I think I see a way out. Tell me when you’re ready.”

“Is my sister watching?”

“Nope.”

“Let’s go.”

Aaron got up from his chair and followed Bellamy down from the platform. Without saying a word, they weaved their way in and out of the crowd. Aaron kept his head down to avoid meeting anyone’s eyes. Making eye contact was seen as an open invitation to talk to him, but Aaron refused to let anyone get in his way. They found an open doorway, which Aaron quickly slipped through while Bellamy kept watch.

Aaron found himself on a balcony overlooking a large, vast garden. Below, candles lit up the paths that zigzagged between the flowers and trees. It was breathtaking with its rainbow of colors and the lovely smell that drifted up into his nose. Unlike the bright, loud clothing that the people of Frihet wore, the garden had a calming effect. A large foundation in the middle sprayed glowing colored water into the air. Away from the crowd and the eyes of the world, Aaron started to relax as he watched the water dance.

He placed his hands on the railing, ignoring the way the light reflect off the new gold ring on his finger. Out here he could forget about the treaty, about the wedding, and the threat of failure hanging over his head. He could imagine he was back home with a bright, exciting future instead of his husband waiting back inside the castle. Out here he wasn’t out of place. He was just himself.

“So this is where you’ve decided to hide,” a voice noted. Aaron frowned as he turned around. The woman who had helped give him General Washington’s gift earlier was standing a few feet away with a glass in each hand. She had brown hair that fell to her shoulders and bright brown eyes. She was wearing a long red gown with a black, long sleeve coat overtop.

Aaron looked at Bellamy over her shoulders, giving his friend an irritated look. It was his job to make sure Aaron was left alone. Why had he let the woman passed? Aaron didn’t want to talk to anyone, especially not someone new. Nor did he have any desire to have a drink. He wanted to keep his thoughts sharp and stay attentive.

Bellamy put a finger to his throat and slowly slide it across before pointing at the woman. Aaron sighed again, turning his attention back to the woman. Without a word, the woman moved closer until she was standing next to him by the railing. She looked out at the garden as a small grin appeared on her face.

“Is someone looking for me?” Aaron asked after a moment of silence.

“No. Not yet at least. I just came to check up on you. I saw you leave the table wanted to make sure everything was okay,” the woman replied. She offered Aaron one of the glasses. Aaron took it, making sure to hide his frown.
“Thank you,” he told her. “I needed a moment. A breath of fresh air.” He started to feel foolish for having such a childish need, but it was too late to take the action back.

“Don’t we all?”

“I apologize, but I don’t believe we’ve met. You obviously know who I am, yet I’m not sure what to call you,” Aaron confessed, setting the glass on the railing to avoid having to take a drink.

“Eliza. Eliza Schuyler,” the woman answered before taking a sip from her glass.

“Schuyler? Do you have a sister named Angelica?”

“I do! You’ve met her?” Eliza exclaimed, clearly excited by the idea.

“I have. She was at the treaty meeting in Tyst. I didn’t get a chance to speak with her, but I recognize the name.”

“She’s an amazing negotiator. One of the best.”

“She is,” Aaron agreed, turning his attention back to the garden. He hoped that Eliza would take his subtle hint and leave him alone, but she only took another sip of her drink and stayed by his side.

“Are you...” Aaron trailed off, shaking his head.

“Am I what?”

“Nevermind. I do not wish to pry into your life when we have only just met.”

“You are a Prince. You may ask anything you want,” Eliza pointed out. She was right. If Aaron asked, she would be required to answer, but that wasn’t fair to her, or to anyone.

“Just because I’m a Prince doesn’t mean I have the right to be rude,” Aaron argued. He looked over his shoulder at the door, noticing that Bellamy was busy talking to another servant from Frihet.

“What if I ask you a question in return?” Eliza offered.

“What?”

“You ask me your question, and then I ask you one. An equal exchange of information.”

“You are sure? I don’t want to put you in an awkward situation,” Aaron offered, giving her a way out if she wanted it.

“I am sure, your highness,” Eliza said firmly, squaring her shoulders and standing taller.

“Alright. I was going to ask if you were close with the General. I saw you talking to him earlier and wondered if you were perhaps a friend of his.”

“I’ll be honest, friends is putting it mildly. I was one of his students. He taught me everything I know, and I have great respect for him. Now I live very close to his estate and see him nearly every day,” Eliza replied. She was one of General Washington’s students? Aaron had heard stories about them, how the General passed down his wisdom and knowledge to create more warriors like himself.

“Wasn’t Hamilton his student as well?”

“He still is. Lieutenant Hamilton hasn’t finished his training yet. Last I heard, he’s still living with the
General along with Lieutenant Colonel Laurens.”

“Wait what?”

“Anyway,” Eliza moved on, “Now it’s my turn to ask a question.” Aaron started to protest, wishing she would answer his last question. Did Hamilton really live with the General? Did that mean Aaron would be sharing a home with a man who despised him? Aaron had also met Lieutenant Colonel Laurens, but he couldn’t remember much about the man. However, Aaron forced himself to stop and give Eliza her chance. He was a man of his word. One question for another. An equal exchange.

“Very well. Ask your question then.”

“What is your biggest fear? I know it’s a bold question, your highness, but from what I’ve learned, what people fear can say a lot about their true intentions.” It was a bold question. Aaron thought about refusing to answer, about ordering Eliza to ask something else, but his honor refused to let him do such a thing.

“Failure,” he said, offering no explanation. He looked at the glass she had brought him and picked it up. He swirled the liquid inside as he thought it over. His Uncle would be appalled that Aaron had given away his fear so easily, but Aaron didn’t have the heart to lie to Eliza, not after she answered his questions so easily.

“Failure,” Eliza echoed. “That is a big fear to have.”

“I suppose it is.”

“It’s also not an easy fear to defeat.”

“No, it’s not.” He knew it wasn’t. His fear of failure wrapped around his throat nearly every day. He was never able to escape it. No matter what he tried, the threat of failing crept into his mind and left him paralyzed. His new future with General Washington would only make the fear grow.

“Your highness,” Bellamy called. Aaron looked over at his friend. “I’m sorry, but they’re looking for you. It’s time for the first dance of the evening.”

“It’s alright. Tell them I’m on my way,” Aaron assured him, offering the glass back to Eliza. “Thank you for answering my questions, Miss Schuyler-”

“Eliza,” she insisted as she took the glass with a nod of her head.

“Eliza. I hope we will get the chance to talk again soon.”

“I’m sure we will. Enjoy your night, your highness.”

“Aaron,” he replied, giving her a soft smile. If he was going to call her Eliza, if she was going to visit often, then she might as well call him by his first name. It would make things easier on both of them.

“Enjoy your night, Aaron,” Eliza repeated with a kind grin. “Go have fun.” Aaron gave her a single nod before following Bellamy back into the large banquet hall.

“This way,” Bellamy instructed, helping Aaron make his way through the crowd to General Washington. His husband was waiting on the edge of dance floor with Lieutenant Hamilton by his side.

“Sorry for the wait. I was speaking with Eliza and lost track of the time,” Aaron told him. Hamilton
scowled at the words, giving the General a furious look.

“It’s fine,” General Washington replied, stepping closer and offering his hand without an ounce of emotion on his face. Aaron carefully took the offered hand, making sure his touch was light and delicate like he was taught, and allowed the General to guide him to the center of the dance floor. Music started to swell, filling the room with a happy, romantic song.

General Washington led Aaron through a slow dance, twirling him at all the right moments before pulling him close. Yet the General barely looked at him, his attention somewhere else. Aaron stared at the man’s chest as he tried to think of what to say.

“Eliza said that she lives close to you,” he muttered.

“She does,” General Washington confirmed.

“She was one of your students?”

“She was.”

“As well as Lieutenant Hamilton and Laurens?”

“Yes.”

“They still live with you though?”

“They do.”

“May I ask why?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

*Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.*

Aaron sighed as the crowd started their antics. This tradition was crude and annoying. Why did they want to see them kissing so much? It didn’t mean anything to either of them. Nevertheless, General Washington paused their dance long enough to place a quick kiss on Aaron’s lips. They returned to their dance, but they didn’t get very far.

*Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.*

Aaron tried to keep a scowl off his face as the crowd started to demand another kiss. Their yelling got louder and louder until it drowned out the clicking sound. The General shook his head at first, however after a few seconds he took hold of Aaron’s face and pressed their lips together. General Washington kept him there for a long moment before finally letting go. The crowd went wild at the scene, but Aaron didn’t feel the same excitement. Before they could return to their dance, Sally appeared at their side.

“General Washington, may I borrow my brother for a moment?” she asked. Her tone was the perfect mixture of polite and firm. It was nearly impossible to deny her anything when she used that voice.

“Of course, your highness,” the General replied, stepping back and allowing Sally to take his place. Other couples quickly joined them on the dance floor as Sally and Aaron started to move across the floor.
“You’re doing great, little brother,” Sally praised. “You’re making your kingdom proud.”

“I wish mother and father could be here,” Aaron muttered without thinking. Sally squeezed his hand until Aaron let out a soft whine.

“Don’t say things like that. No one wants to hear such things. Be happy about your marriage and focus on the goal.”

“Sorry,” Aaron whispered, trying to pull his hand from her iron grip. It wasn’t the first time she had criticized him for bringing up their parents. Nothing good came from living in the past or chasing after ghosts, but Aaron still wished his parents had lived long enough to see him married.

“Never forget how important this is, Aaron. Never. Everyone is relying on you. If you mess this up, there is no fixing it.”

“I know.” He didn’t need her to remind him what was at stake. He knew how important this marriage was, knew how hard he had to work to ensure that it went perfect. Aaron glanced around the room. No one here understood how much pressure he was under. One mistake, one small error that caused a rift with the General could lead to chaos. To another war. To more people dying. And it would be all Aaron's fault.

No one knew how much he had given up already. He left his home, his family, his life behind in order to bring about peace, yet no one could understand how that felt. No one knew how badly Aaron wished he could return home with his sister. A part of him would rather deal with his Uncle than continue on his current path to an unknown future full of trials. However, no matter how badly Aaron wanted to go back, that part of his life was gone forever. He made his choice. It was time for him to do his duty and serve his people well.

“I promise you, sister, I will make this work,” Aaron stated. Sally looked him up and down for a moment, her lips creating a twisted smile.

“Good. See that you don’t fail us.”

Chapter End Notes

I just really want to make sure you all know, your comments, your kudos, everything you do, truly helps. I love this story. It’s probably one of the best ones I’ve started working on when it comes to ideas and world building. I’m so happy that I get to share it all with you and that so many of you like it too!

So, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

P.S. - Would you like Chapter Summaries? Would they help you or just being spoilers?
The story is about to start rolling. Are you ready for it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

George rolled over in his bed, shifting his pillows around as he rearranged his legs. He knew it was almost time for him to get up and start his day, but he wanted to stay in bed a little longer. A few more minutes wouldn’t change anything. George sighed, moving to pull his arm out from under his body. His elbow bumped into something, prompting George to freeze and hold his breath. He opened his eyes just enough to make sure he hadn’t disturbed his sleeping husband.

Prince Aaron was lying a few inches away, sleeping on his back with his hands at his sides. George had never seen someone sleep so peacefully. The Prince didn’t make a single noise during the night, nor did he change positions once. At first, George was thankful that Prince Aaron was able to share a bed so easily, but watching his husband sleep was now an eerie experience. It was almost inhuman how still the Prince was as he rested. His eyes and mouth closed as he slept soundlessly through each and every night. If it wasn’t for the slow rise and fall of his chest, George would have assumed the worst.

It was just one of the many changes that had occurred throughout George’s household. Letting his students into his home had been easy. Alexander and John shared a room for the first few years, enjoying each other’s company and quickly becoming like brothers. When Lafayette joined, George separated them all into different rooms side by side. Eliza had her own room right away, though it was close to the boys. George never had a problem with having a house full of new people. It was exciting to watch people learn to work around one another.

George’s servants, who had been loyal to his families for years, loved each of his students. It took him months to finally convince the kitchen staff to stop giving Alexander snacks after dinner. The stable boys always let John in, even when he was grounded, to George’s dismay. Eliza had gotten along well with the maids. Lafayette enjoyed everyone’s presence, always happy to start a conversation with someone walking by.

However, letting the Prince into his home was a different challenge altogether. George was not used to sharing his space in such a way, yet Prince Aaron’s clothes had a home in George's wardrobe. His dragon egg was set up in the corner on top of his trunk. A few of his personal items were scattered about the room. A book here. An older trinket there. Small stuff that most people carried throughout their lives. George didn’t mind the small messes, nor the egg in the corner that John cooed over.

No, it was the Prince’s physical presence that threw him off the most. Thankfully, the rumors about his husband proved to be untrue. He was always polite, even when Alexander and John tried to rile them up, and never raised his voice against anyone. The Prince treated the servants with respect, asking instead of demanding, and ate whatever food was placed in front of him. It quickly became clear to George, and the others, that Prince Aaron’s ‘fiery temper’ was a wild tale without any truth behind it.

However, George did see merit to Alexander’s personal report about Prince Aaron’s personality. The Prince never voiced his opinion unless directly asked and he keep his voice at a level volume at all
times. George wouldn’t call him boring, at least not yet. He was simply hard to read, hard to understand. Every conversation they had led to a dead end. Nine out of ten times they ended up talking about the weather before going silent and letting the time go by as they stared at each other or at their plates.

After two weeks of being married, two weeks of eating breakfast and dinner together, they didn’t know each other any better than before. While that wasn’t completely true, that’s how George felt. Living with a stranger was hard enough. Eliza begged him to try harder, yet George had no clue what to do. Being married was not part of his skill set. He wasn’t used to dealing with having a husband. George couldn’t help but tried to avoid his husband as much as possible, unable to handle the awkwardness of their conversations, or lack thereof. He never knew what to say.

George sighed, rolling over to face away from the Prince. He looked at the dragon egg in the corner. Prince Aaron has asked for John’s help in setting up the small nest. They used an old blanket for a base before placing a large pile of hay in a circle to hold the delicate egg. Each day, John came to check on the dragon, making sure it was warm enough and well taken care of. George had noticed the Prince staring at it on a few different occasions, but he had yet to ask how things were going. Perhaps he should. Perhaps that would be a good topic for them to discussion.

After a few brief, relaxing moments, George finally decided that it was best to leave his bed. Their bed. He carefully climbed out from underneath the blankets, being mindful not to be too loud. He made his way to his wardrobe, grabbing his cleanest uniform from it’s home before heading to the connected bathroom.

“Good morning, George,” an older woman, Yuma, said as George made his way behind the screen set up in the corner. He didn’t use to have one, but he had one brought in to offer some privacy to the Prince. Yuma had been his nanny when he was a young boy. She helped raise him, watched him become a man, and been with him through everything. George had asked her to retire years ago, but Yuma wouldn’t hear of it. She refused to stop working, claiming that she still had things to do.

“Good morning. How’s Earl?”

“Same as always. Complaining about his knee, wishing to be back in the army.”

“Sounds like him,” George replied, removing his night clothes and climbing into the large tub. Yuma had filled it with hot, lavender scented water. George sank down and took a deep breath, letting his muscles melt.

“How’s that new husband of yours?” Yuma asked from the other side of the screen. George frowned at the question.

“He’s good,” he lied, “Things are good.”

“George,” Yuma scolded, sounding just like Eliza. He could already hear the lecture that he was about to get. It wasn’t the first time. Eliza, Yuma, even little Martha had been telling George to do something with the Prince, but George didn’t have the time, nor any idea what to do.

“What do you want me to say?”

“That you’re trying.”

“I am.”

“Not hard enough.”
“I have other stuff to deal with right now. Besides, the Prince has his hands full with his friends and his dragon egg. And, no one said we had to be a true couple,” George argued. He wasn’t lying. He did have work to do. Plans to go over. Troops to check on. New students to mentor. He agreed to marry the Prince, but nowhere did he agree to be at the Prince’s beck and call. Prince Aaron was old enough to take care of himself. He didn’t need George to watch over him. It was a shame that they weren’t getting closer, but George could live with it as long as the Prince never told his Uncle.

“I know, I know,” Yuma agreed. George settled down in his bath, hoping that the conversation was over. “Just can’t help but feel bad for the poor boy. So far from home and all that.” George tilted his head back as guilt twisted in his chest.

“Gods be damned, Yuma,” he muttered, realizing what the old woman had done. Now he wasn’t going to be able to think of anything else. He should be trying harder. He wasn’t the one who left his family and his home to marry a stranger. He wasn’t the one in a new place with no friends or allies. George groaned before sinking his head under the water.

He could hear Yuma trying to talk to him, but he refused to come out. He was too old for this. Way too old to be trying to figure out someone twelve years his junior. Lafayette had made it sound easy, yet George couldn’t come up with a single strategy. When George finally raise his head above the water, he could hear Yuma talking to someone at the door.

“He’s busy at the moment, Aaron. Do you need something?”

“I’ll let him know.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie.”

“Who was that?” George asked when Yuma returned.

“Your husband. He wants you to know that he’s going out to the stables before breakfast,” Yuma replied.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Oh.”

“You should go on a ride with him,” Yuma suggested, walking around the screen with a towel in her hands, “Or perhaps take him on a trip.”

“I doubt he would agree to go,” George muttered. Yuma threw the towel over his head.

“Time to get out before you get any new wrinkles.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Don’t give me any lip.”

“Sorry, Yuma.”

“You should be. And a trip would be a wonderful idea. Aaron would love that,” Yuma insisted.

“Aaron?”

“Please don’t tell me that you’re still calling him by his title?” Yuma begged. George didn’t answer,
watching the woman move to the other side of the screen before getting out of the tub. It wasn’t his fault. He didn’t think titles were worth much. They didn’t mean anything at the end of the day. Yet Prince Aaron refused to call him anything besides sir, or general. He didn’t think the Prince would appreciate him using his name in return.

“You need to do something about this, George. You’ll never be happy if you keep avoiding the issue,” Yuma claimed.

“I’m trying,” George murmured as he dried off and got dressed.

“Talk to him. That’s all you have to do. You’ve been on so many adventures, done so many things. Tell him about them.”

“I’m sure he’s already heard them. I doubt he wants to hear me just brag more.”

“It’s not bragging. And besides, even if he’s heard them before, it will be different hearing it straight from you.”

“We’ll see,” George agreed, walking out from behind the screen as he finished buttoning up his uniform. Yuma looked him up and down before stepping closer to straighten George’s collar.

“Try,” Yuma insisted, grabbing his chin and staring into his eyes. “Or else.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Good. Now go.”

“I’m going,” George replied, making his way around Yuma to grab his boots from the other room. He sat on his bed, slipped the boots onto his feet, and started to lace them up as he thought over what he should do. He didn’t get much time to think before the door to his room threw open.

“George!” a young girl called, rushing towards him and tackling him back onto the bed.

“No fair! I wanted to get to him first!” a younger boy complained as he ran into the room.

“Well, you were too slow!”

“You cheated!”

“I did not.”

“Martha, Phillip, that’s enough,” George ordered, sitting up with the girl in his arms. He beckoned the boy over, lifting him up onto the bed next to George. Martha Jefferson, a young girl from a wealthy family by the coast, had only just starting her training. Her attitude was similar to that of her father, Thomas, even though she was only eight years old. George still had so much to teach her.

Philip was an orphan. Alexander and John found him and brought him to George, asking for him to be trained the same way they had been, to be given the chance of a better life. George couldn’t refuse, even though the boy was only six, and quickly took him in. Philip was an adventurous soul who loved to push against the rules, similar to Alexander in a way. George looked forward to seeing what they would grow to become.

“You two are up early.”

“John told us to come see the dragon egg,” Philip explained.
“He said that it’s a silver dragon,” Martha added with excitement.

“But he’s not sure.”

“I think he’s right.”

“You can’t see the egg. Not without the Prince,” George told them.

“But John said—”

“The egg belongs to the Prince and you need to ask him if you want to see it.”

“But it’s right there,” Martha protested, pointing to the corner nest.

“I don’t care,” George sternly replied. “Let’s head to breakfast and then you can ask the Prince to show it to you.”

“Lame,” Philip whined. “The Prince is never gonna let us see it.”

“I told you we should have just snuck in later,” Martha whispered as she stood up and pulled Philip towards the door. George got up, following after his students as they made their way down the hall. He made a mental note to have someone keep an eye on his bedroom. Years ago, he wouldn’t have paid much attention to his students going in his room, but now that he shared it with Prince Aaron he knew he had to keep it closed off from others.

“Good morning, George,” Eliza greeted him, already seated at the table with Alexander next to her. The table was long and old, passed down from George’s grandfather. A light blue table cloth covered the cracked wood, matching the eight chairs that sat around it. A iron chandelier was hanging over the table with twelve candles place on it’s arms. The walls of the room were covered in portraits. One of George’s parents. Another of Alexander, John and Lafayette. One with Eliza and her sisters. Soon, George would have to get one done for Martha and Philip. Perhaps the Prince should have one as well.

“Good morning. Have either of you seen John?” George asked as he took his seat at the head of the table. Philip and Martha did the same, digging into the food on the table without pausing to say hello to anyone. The spoons moved by themselves, placing food on the children’s plates without anyone having to say anything. Most of George’s dinnerware was already charmed to serves his guest. It made things much easier when so many people sat at the same table.

“He went to the stables this morning,” Alexander replied.

“With the Prince?”

“I think so. John said something about showing the Prince the new foal that was born two days ago.”

“They should be back soon,” Eliza added. “Martha, don’t play with your food.”

“I’m not!” Martha protested as if she wasn’t currently enchanting her food to dance around her plate.

“You are.”

“I’m no—”

“Manners, Martha. Please,” George reminded her.

“Sorry, George,” Martha muttered, settling down in her seat while Philip shoveled food into his
mouth. George sighed, shaking his head at the boy’s hurry. Philip still couldn’t shake his old habits, the ones that had helped him survive so many years on his own. George knew it would take time and left Philip alone. It was best to let the habits ease away then call it out and embarrass the boy.

“Good morning!” John called as he walked into the room. He messed up Philip’s hair before taking a seat next to Alexander. Philip pouted, fixing his hair and sticking his tongue out at John. John echoed the boy’s action before sending a wink Martha’s way. The girl blushed and looked away, hiding her face in Eliza’s arms.

“Where’s the Prince?” George asked as the spoons started to fill his plate.

“He’s coming,” John replied, picking up his fork. “Should be here shortly.”

“John, George said we can’t see the dragon egg,” Philip whined.

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s not your egg, John. It’s the Prince’s. They need to ask him for permission,” George explained, gather some food onto his plate finally.

“Oh come on! I take care of that egg just as much as the Prince does. Let the kids see it. It’s not like they’ll hurt it!” John protested.

“That’s not the point. That egg was a gift from Lafayette and it belongs to the Prince. You need to respect that. At least ask, I’m sure that he’ll let them see it.”

“I’m sure that he’ll say no and throw a fit about it,” Alexander muttered. John nodded his head.

“The Prince has never done such a thing.”

“Yet-”

“Alexander, I can still send you to your room.”

“Do it. I dare you.”

“What has gotten into all of y-”

“Good morning,” Prince Aaron’s voice rang out. George pressed his lips together, giving everyone at the table a pointed look as the Prince got closer. As always, the Prince was wearing a dark grey outfit with no color or personal details. All of Prince Aaron’s clothes were like that. They were different shades of grey or similar dull colors. Compared to the rest of them, who wore bright, colorful clothes, Prince Aaron seemed like a dark presence in the light.

“Good morning, your highness.”

“I’m sorry I’m late. I was speaking with one of the caretakers for the horses,” the Prince explained as he sat down in the chair to George’s right. “The new foal is doing well, but I wanted to make sure the mare was alright. They said it wasn’t an easy one this time.”

“That’s great,” George replied, nodding his head at Bellamy, the Prince’s guard, and Theo, his personal maid. Both returned his nod with one of their own. Everyone at the table sat in silence for a minute as the Prince gathered food for his morning meal. Unlike the others, who allowed the spoons to do the work, Prince Aaron served himself by hand. That was one of the most unusual traits that the Prince displayed.
Magic was a part of their lives day in and day out. They used it to help with everything, cooking, cleaning, even teaching. Charmed items made everyday chores much easier. Pots cleaned themselves. Mirrors stayed clean. Wardrobes and chests picked up clothes. It was a normal phenomenon, yet Prince Aaron had yet to use any magic, nor did he let the charmed objects around the house help him. It was rather unusually to see someone who was said to be so powerful with magic never use any.

“Prince Aaron?” Philip spoke up, breaking through the awkward moment.

“Yes, Philip?”

“Can we see your dragon egg?”

“Philip,” George snapped. Now was not the right time for such a question, not after the argument that John and George had just gotten in along with Alexander’s comments. Nevertheless, George didn’t miss the look of surprise in Prince Aaron’s eyes, nor the small smile that appeared on his face.

“Of course you can,” the Prince answered.

“Really?” John asked in shock.

“Really?!” Philip declared with glee. Prince Aaron’s shy smile grew a little bigger at the boy’s excitement.

“When you and Martha have time, I can show you the nest in our room. Lt. Laurens helped me set it all up. He knows a lot more about dragons than I do, but I’ve been reading every book I can get my hands on. Perhaps you both should quiz me later.”

“Perhaps we should,” Martha challenged.

“George said we had to ask you since it’s your egg, but no one thought you would say yes!”

“Philip!” Alexander snapped.

“Oops.”

Philip covered his mouth with his hands. George watched as Prince Aaron’s smile vanished, his eyes cloud over with hurt at the boy’s words. Theo and Bellamy shared a look before glaring daggers at John and Alexander. The tension in the room rose to new heights.

“Well...um...Let me know when you have time. Or if Lt. Laurens has a moment he can show you instead,” Prince Aaron offered, those his words were less joyful and more formal in tone. George turned back to his food. It was the same thing day after day. Every single time they ended up here, in an uncomfortable silence that left them all feeling on edge.

It wasn’t Philip’s fault. He was too young to understand what his words meant. Nor was it John’s or Alexander’s. It was George’s. He needed to do something, needed to figure out a way to bring the Prince out of his shell. Prince Aaron had built thick walls around himself, leaving George no way of getting through.

Theo leaned over and whispered something to the Prince. George watched them curiously, wondering what she was telling him. Prince Aaron’s face didn’t give anything away as he listened to his maid. Martha noticed the exchange as well and looked around the table with an annoyed look on her face.
George said we’re not supposed to whisper at the table,” she reminded everyone, “So why does the Prince get to do it? Why don’t you yell at him?”

“Martha,” George snapped, “The rules are-”

“Cause he’s a prince, and princes don’t have to follow the rules,” Philip replied. “Everyone knows that.”

“That’s not true,” Eliza tried to explain.

“That’s not fair!” Martha declared, leaning forward in her seat. Before George could get them under control, the two children started a screaming match. Eliza and Alexander tried to calm them down, but Martha and Philip refused to listen to anything they said. John rolled his eyes, shaking his head as he continued with his meal.

Crack!

George slammed his hand down on the table, prompting everyone’s plate to rattle, as he yelled “That’s enough!”

The room was deafeningly quiet for a long moment before Prince Aaron pushed back his chair and stood to his feet. George looked at his husband, guilt squeezing his heart. The Prince’s eyes were full of terror and panic. Something was terribly wrong. George opened his mouth to ask what was happening, but the Prince spoke first.

“Excuse me,” Prince Aaron choked out before rushing from the room. Theo and Bellamy trailed after him. George sighed, reaching up to rub his forehead. He could feel a headache starting to form behind his eyes.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Alexander broke the silence. George lowered his hand and glared at his student.

“You’re grounded.”

“What?! Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“All of you are grounded.”

“That’s not fair!”

“I’m twenty-three, you can’t ground me!”

“George please!”

“Quiet!” he snapped, glaring each and every one of them into submission. “Until you can all learn to behave, you are grounded. Is that understood? Or would you rather argue with me and get your time extended?” No one said a word. Martha and Eliza turned away, hiding their expressions. Alexander glared back at George, but he didn’t start another argument. John shrugged, focusing on his meal.

“Are you mad at us?” Philip piped up, his bottom lip already starting to tremble.

“Of course not, Philip. I’m just disappointed,” George assured him. Philip slipped out of his seat and made his way over to George, climbing into his lap.
“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are,” George replied, rubbing the boy’s back. “It’s okay, Philip. We all have bad days, but we also need to learn to control ourselves.”

“What doesn’t the Prince get yelled at?” Martha hissed.

“Martha, please. Prince Aaron isn’t trying to break the rules or anything. He’s in a new place, far away from his family and friends. He’s overwhelmed. It will take time before he figures us all out,” George explained.

“He must be sad,” Philip noted. “I’d be sad if I was so far away from all of you. Wouldn’t you be sad, Martha?”

“I guess,” the girl replied, crossing her arms over her chest as she sank down in her seat.

“Let’s hurry up now. We have lessons after breakfast,” Eliza reminded them.

“Do you think Prince Aaron will still let us see his egg?” Philip wondered as George set him down.

“I’m sure he will.”

“I hope so. I wanna see it really bad.”

George watched Philip climb back in his chair and thought back to the Prince’s expression. The young man seemed so frightened by something, as if he was facing his greatest fear. George didn’t want to pry, but he couldn’t help but wonder what had caused such panic in the Prince’s mind. He pushed his worries away for now, focusing his attention on his students and family. He would have to try and talk to the Prince later.

After Martha’s and Philip’s morning lessons, John’s report, a sparing match with Alexander, and their early dinner George retreated to his office for the rest of the night. His desk was covered with letters and maps. He had a charmed quill that wrote his letters for him, sparing his hand the work as he replied to letter after letter from his troops out in the field.

He still had countless men and women stationed along the border between Tyst and Frihet. They had to make sure that the borders were safe and that there were no more miscommunications. Captains sent him updates every day, along with a list of achievements made by their troops. George wrote his praises to each of the squads, trying his hardest to give them hope and make them understand how important their work was to the country and to him personally.

Lafayette had sent two ships to trade with the Northern Islands. Ravens arrived everyday, tracking their progress. George sent back some light orders followed by reassurance. They were getting closer and closer every day. They had to stay focused on their goal and not let their fears take over their mind. George had faith in them, they just had to have faith in themselves.

As he was working, his thoughts shifted back to the Prince. He hadn’t seen Prince Aaron all day. The kitchen staff informed him that they sent food to him, but no one knew where he was or what he was doing. He was even missing from dinner, which Alexander and Martha commented on. George sighed as he finished answering another letter. He rubbed his eyes as the thought about what to do. Yuma was right. He had to try harder, had to do something.

He grabbed another piece of parchment, and with the help of his quill, composed a quick request. He whispered an enchantment and watched the parchment take flight. It slide under his office door on its
way to the receiver. Hopefully, he could gather some insight and create a better plan before he walked into the situation blind. George went back to his work as he wanted for his message to be delivered. It didn’t take long before someone lightly knocked on his door.

“Come in,” he called, setting another letter aside. The door opened and Theodosia stepped into the room. She curtsied, but stayed close to the door. Her long dress was a dull pink color with light grey sleeves. The color didn’t do the woman justice. A bright red would look much better. Or something with purple details.

“You summoned me, General. How can I be of assistance?” she offered.

“You can call me George, if you like,” he replied. “There is really no need for us to keep being so formal. Not when you live in my house.”

“As you wish, George.”

“I asked you to come here because I need your help,” George explained, leaning back in his chair. “It’s come to my attention, through many different people, that I should be trying harder with my husband. I was hoping you might be able to guide me in the right direction.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You’ve been with the Prince for quite some time, correct?”

“I have.”

“And you know him very well?”

“I believe so.”

“Then I believe you are the right person to help me. I’m not asking you to tell me, Prince Aaron’s secrets,” George clarified. “Just for you to give me some ideas on what the Prince likes. I need to figure out how to get to know him, but every time I open my mouth I only seem to push us farther apart.” Theodosia stared at him in silent, barely blinking. George shifted in his seat, wondering what the woman was thinking.

“Can you help, or not?” he asked, unable to take the silence or her staring any longer.

“I can, but I’m curious as to why you would go to such great lengths in an attempt to get to know your new husband. You don’t have to, yet you seem very concerned about trying to make things work,” Theodosia observed. For a moment, George was shocked by her words, but there was no judgement in her eyes, only curiosity.

“I don’t want to just make things work between us,” George confessed. “I want the Prince to be happy here, to feel at home. We share a room, a bed, but yet we’re still strangers. I want to change that, to offer the Prince friendship and a chance to have a real marriage.” A smile appeared on Theo’s face.

“Aaron loves to read. He spends most of his time in your library. He also likes nature. A walk would be lovely and a good way to get to know him. You have so much land, but Aaron hasn’t seen most of it.”


“Oh yes. Aaron loves creatures of all kinds. You have a wide variety in your stables, however the
caretakers won’t let him see most of them without your permission.”

“That can be changed. Thank you, Theo. I owe you so much for this,” George admitted as his nerves started to fade away. He could work with this. A few ideas were already forming in his mind.

“You owe me nothing, George. I only want the Prince to be happy.”

“Is he doing alright?”

“I cannot say,” she answered right away. George nodded his head in understanding. “But I will say this, if you feel nervous or unsure about this marriage, the Prince must feel the same. Everyone is watching you. You’re both under a lot of pressure, but you may be able to find strength in one another.”

“I hope we will be able to.”

“I hope so too. I should get back to him. I promised I wouldn’t be gone long.”

“I understand. I would ask that you keep this conversation between us. I don’t want him to think that I’m going behind his back,” George suggested.

“He would never think that, but I’ll keep it to myself,” Theo promised. “Have a good evening, George.”

“You as well, Theo.”

She offered him a small bow before making her way out the door. George let out a relieved sigh as he turned back to his work. That answered that. He knew what he was going to do and hopefully things would start to come together. It would still take time, George knew that, but it was a step in the right direction. George picked up the next letter and started to compose his response.

George’s work got away from him. By the time he put down the last letter, the sun had vanished over the horizon and the charmed candles in his office started to light themselves one by one. George put his quill away, placed all the letters that needed to be mailed out in a neat pile, and stood up from his seat. He yawned as he made his way out of the room. Prince Aaron was probably already in bed and asleep, but George hoped that there was a chance that the Prince was still away.

Just to be sure, he tapped one of the buttons on his uniform and muttered a basic location spell. Within seconds, the results appeared in front of him. Surprisingly, the Prince was not in their bedroom as the arrowed pointed in the opposite direction. George turned around, following the spells directions to his library. Strange. It was already quite late. What was the Prince still doing in the library? George opened the door slowly and slipped into the room.

The library was one of George’s favorite rooms in the house. Shelves lined three of the walls from the floor to the ceiling. Countless pages of information that George and his family had collected over the years. A few of the shelves were dedicated to his students. Soon, Martha and Philip would be able to claim a shelf as well. Perhaps George should offer Prince Aaron the chance to add his own collection.

A large fireplace was built into one of the walls. A couch sat facing it, flagged by chairs on both sides and low table in front. It was the perfect place to read or study. George could remember seeing Alexander and John working away while sitting on the couch with Lafayette in one chair and Eliza in the other. So much has changed since those days. Bellamy and Theo jumped up from the chairs instead, offering matching bows.
“Good evening, sir,” Bellamy spoke first.

“Good evening,” Theo repeated.

“It’s rather late isn’t?” George pointed out as he walked farther into the room. “Shouldn’t the Prince-” He trailed off as he caught sight of the Prince laying on the couch. He was on his side with his knees drawn up towards his stomach. His cheek was resting on an open book and his mouth was slightly open. A small noise escaped every once in awhile.

“How long has he been like that?”

“Not very long. We were just about to wake him,” Bellamy answered, stepping towards the Prince.

“Let’s not,” George ordered. Bellamy froze midstep. “It looks like he hasn’t been sleeping very well.”

“He did mention that it’s difficult for him to stay asleep,” Theo told him softly.

“Is this the first time this has happened?”

“No, sir,” Bellamy answered. “This is the fifth.”

“Why did no one tell me about this?”

“Aaron told us not to,” Theo muttered. George paused before nodding his head. He understood their loyalty to their Prince, their friend. He silently made his way around the couch to take a closer look at the Prince’s sleeping form. He looked younger as he slept, more peaceful than the stiff board George was used to. George didn’t have the heart to wake him up, not when he was sleeping so well. Having made up his mind, George stepped forward and slowly slide one arm underneath the Prince’s legs. His other arm carefully went underneath the young man’s back. Without much effort, George lifted him up in his arms and started for the door.

“Sir?” Bellamy asked, staring at him in confusion.

“Get the door for me,” George ordered. Theo rushed to obey. George noticed the small grin on her face, though she tried to hide it by ducking her head.

“Where are you taking him?” she wondered.

“To bed. You’re both dismissed for the night. I’ll make sure the Prince gets what he needs.”

“Are you sure, sir?”

“I am. Thank you for all your help.”

“Of course, George. Good night,” Theo said.

“Good night, Theo. Bellamy,” he replied before starting down the hall towards his bedroom. Candles lit up his path as he went. He whispered a spell, prompting his bedroom door to open as he got closer. Another spell pulled down the blankets, allowing George to carefully set the Prince down on the bed. He waved Prince Aaron’s boots off his feet before grabbing the blanket. The Prince’s eyes flickered for a moment then started to slowly open.

“Where am I?” he asked, looking around in confusion as he started to try and sit up. George gently pushed him back down as he pulled the blankets up.
“Shhh, go back to sleep.”

“But—”

“It’s time to rest now, Aaron. Close your eyes now,” George told him softly. The Prince stared up at George for a second, blinking slowly before a shy smile appeared on his face.

“You called me Aaron,” he pointed out.

“I did,” George admitted, though he hadn’t meant to. It just slipped out.

“That’s nice of you,” Prince Aaron muttered, shutting his eyes and turning on his side. He pulled the blankets up underneath his chin. “I like my name.” George bit his lip to prevent himself from chuckling.

“Good night, Aaron,” he whispered, brushing a hand over the Prince’s head. A soft snore was the only response he got, but it was good enough for him. He toed off his boots before climbing underneath the blankets in his uniform and shutting his eyes. He could do this. It would take time and small steps, but he could do this. The Prince wasn’t bad and George knew they could make this work. Tomorrow, he was determined to get close to Prince Aaron by whatever means necessary.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Thank you for your comments, your kudos, your support! It makes my day and pushes me to keep writing. I love each and every one of you!

If you get bored, don’t forget that you can come talk to me @holdthesewords
As soon as Aaron woke up, he knew that something was different. He felt well rested and his legs were tangled up in the blankets. He mentally cursed himself as he rubbed his eyes. He must have forgotten to take the sleeping potion Theodosia made for him. It allowed him to sleep perfectly still to insure he didn’t bother the General throughout the night. It didn’t make sleep any easier, Aaron still stayed away for hours after taking it, but it at least made sure that the General slept well throughout the night by preventing Aaron from tossing or turning.

Aaron stretched out his arm and froze when his hand brushed against something. He looked over in surprise to see the General still in bed next to him. Usually by the time Aaron woke up, General Washington had already started his day. Aaron pulled his hand back to his chest as questions bounced around his head. Was the General sick? Did he not sleep well? Did Aaron keep him up all night? Should Aaron wake him up? Was he missing a meeting?

General Washington shifted one of his legs and slightly moved the blankets. Aaron froze, in terror. He woke the General up! Maybe if he was quiet, the General would be able to fall back asleep and Aaron could avoid any confrontation. He held his breath and held as still as possible as his nerves claws up his throat. He stared up at the ceiling of their bedroom, trying to think of ways he could make amends.

“Good morning,” General Washington mumbled, turning over to face Aaron.

“Good morning,” Aaron replied on instinct. He kept his eyes on the ceiling for a few seconds before glancing at his husband. The General smiled at him, nodding his head in greeting.

“Did you sleep well?”

“I— I did.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Aaron didn’t know what to say to that. The General didn’t seem to mind his silence as he yawned and sat up in bed. He stretched his arms over his head as the blanket fell down to his waist. Aaron looked away, face heating up at the sight of General’s Washington bare chest. Aaron was unaware that the General didn’t wear a shirt to bed.

“Do you have any plans for today?” General Washington asked as he climbed out of bed and moved towards his wardrobe.

“Ummm, no? Not that I’m aware of,” Aaron answered, getting out of bed. He walked over to his dragon egg. The egg was still a long way off from hatching, but Aaron checked on it every morning and afternoon just to be sure that everything was still okay. He wanted to make sure the egg had enough hay to stay warm and safe.

“Would you like to join me for a walk through the property?” General Washington offered. Aaron’s eyes widened at the question. He turned to the General, but kept his shock hidden inside. Never let your emotions show. Keep your heart inside, never on your sleeve. Wear a mask to throw off those around you. That’s what his Uncle taught him. What Aaron had learned to do since a young age.
“A walk?” he clarified.

“More of a picnic. We could leave an hour or so after breakfast.”

“You don’t have work?”

“None that requires my attention today. Please don’t feel as if you have to go. If you are busy, if you wish to stay inside, that is alright as well. I simply wanted to extend the invitation.”

“I would....,” Aaron paused, “I would like to go.” A walk did sound nice. He had yet to see the rest of the property, not wanting to venture out too far by himself in case he ran into danger or stumble upon something private that the General didn’t want him to see. This was General Washington’s home, his house. Aaron had to respect that even though they were married.

“Wonderful,” George replied. “Do you like sesame balls or wife cake more?”

“I don’t—I don’t know what either of those things are,” Aaron honestly confessed. He could count on his fingers the amount of times he had cake, though he wasn’t sure what a wife cake was. If a sesame ball was similar, then he probably never had it either. His Uncle had not been a fan of sweets, refusing to let Aaron or Sally have any more than once a year. If they were good enough to partake in them.

“Nevermind then. I’ll bring both so you can try them.”

“Should I plan to bring anything?”

“Not unless you want to? A book might be a good idea. We can stop and read for a while under the trees.”

“I can bring a book.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” General Washington replied, nodding his head before stepping towards the bathroom. He paused suddenly and looked at Aaron with an unreadable expression. “Do you want to go first? To get dressed I mean”

“Oh no! You go! I can wait.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Cause I can wai-”

“Really, it’s okay,” Aaron insisted.

“Alright, alright,” the General agreed, finally disappearing into the bathroom. Aaron waited for the door to fully close before moving to grab his own clothes out of the wardrobe. He often took his baths at night, trying to avoid ruining General Washington’s schedule. His eyes scanned the clothes hanging side by side. The General’s uniform and casual shirts were extremely colorful compared to Aaron’s. Aaron had thought about ordering new clothes in colors similar to General Washington’s, but he decided against it after some time. He looked better in grey or black and wearing colors was only a distraction, one that his Uncle never allowed.

Aaron quickly changed out of his night clothes, picking a dark grey shirt to go with some black trousers, before checking on the egg one last time. He placed his hand on the egg’s shell, rubbing his
fingers over the bumps. He shut his eyes and prayed to the Gods. He begged the egg to be safe, for the dragon to be healthy, and for personal strength when it came to taking care of his new creature after it was born. It was the same pray he did every day, but it brought him some comfort.

A knock on the door came after he finished changing. He opened his eyes as the door to the room opened, offering Bellamy a smile.

“Good morning, little prince,” Bellamy teased as he walked into the room.

“Morning, trouble,” Aaron replied.

“You are both children,” Theodosia claimed, walking around Bellamy and grabbing Aaron’s face. She turned his head one way, then the other before letting out a pleased noise. “You look better this morning.”

“I feel better, but I forgot to take the potion.”

“I know. You fell asleep in the library, then the General took you to bed.”

“T ook me to bed?!”

“He carried you,” Bellamy quickly explained. “Picked you up off the couch and carried you all the way here. Even tucked you in.” Aaron looked over the bathroom door in shock.

“He asked if I wanted to go for a walk,” he muttered.

“And?” Theo prompted.

“I said yes. It sounds like fun, but, but why is he doing all of this?”

“Who knows,” Bellamy shrugged. Theodosia rolled her eyes, linking her arm with Aaron’s and leading him towards the door.

“I think it’s because he wants to get to know you better,” she whispered.

“Or he wants to be annoyin’”

“Bells, shut your mouth.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!”

“Please shut your mouth then.”

“No!”

“Some things just never change,” Aaron said with a smile as they walked down the hall. He never grew tired of his friends’ playful batter. It was comforting to have them both so close to him. He couldn’t imagine where he would be without them, especially now that he was so far from home and on his own.

“The General wants to know more about you, Aaron,” Theo insisted, “He even asked me for some ideas. He’s a good man, and I think you could have a happy marriage with him if you tried.”

“I’m less worried about the General and more worried about his students,” Aaron admitted.

“Alexander has a bad attitude, what else is new?”
“He’ll get use to you.”

“I doubt that,” Aaron argued, “I’ve tried everything, but he only hates me more. Laurens is the same way.”

“Maybe you could-”

“Bellamy,” Theodosia warned.

“But-”

“No!”

“It would be a good way for them to connect!” Bellamy argued.

“Or Alexander could use it against him!”

Aaron sighed. He could see the reason behind both of their arguments, yet he couldn’t agree with one side or the other. Bellamy was right. Lieutenant Hamilton had a very peculiar interest in mental magic, a subject that Aaron didn’t know a lot about even though he could do it. He was only seven when he first use mental magic.

It had been an accident, and he tried to avoid using it as much as possible, but he found that he had a natural ability. Only Theo and Bellamy knew about it. He confessed to them in tears, fearful that his friends would turn him in. Instead, they kept his secret close to their hearts and refused to tell another living soul.

Speaking with Lieutenant Hamilton on such a matter could bring them closer by giving them a topic to connect on. Aaron would be able to provide the Lieutenant with a live subject while Hamilton could explain more of the history to Aaron, especially the part about people turning against those who use mental magic.

However, with all that in mind, Theo also had a very good point to her argument. If Aaron did confess to his ability, or even worst, demonstrated his power in front of Lieutenant Hamilton, the man would be able to blackmail Aaron if he so wished. The public was fully against those who practice mental magic, and even though Aaron didn’t use his power very often, just knowing that he could make him enough of a threat to everyone else.

Aaron decided that he would keep his secret a little longer. There were other ways he could try to connect with Lieutenant Hamilton. He was starting to gain ground with Lieutenant Laurens, their passion for creatures bringing them close together. The egg was what truly connected them.

Aaron had such limited knowledge, but Laurens had training with dragons of all ages. He was more than happy to help Aaron take care of the egg and offered advice on how to handle the hatchling. Eliza, who was a kind woman with a mind that could rival anyone, already felt like a friend, but Aaron still enjoyed her company at any time.

“Quiet down,” Aaron ordered as they got closer and closer to the dining hall. Theo and Bellamy glared at one another, ending their debate as they walked into the hall. Eliza, Martha, and Philip were already at the table. Aaron put a polite smile on his face as he slowly approached his seat.

“Good morning,” he offered.

“Aaron! Good morning,” Eliza replied with excitement. Aaron’s smile relaxed at the warm greeting.
“Morning,” Martha muttered while Philip only stared. Aaron ignored the children, trying to not let it bother him.

“What are your plans for today?” Eliza wondered.

“The General and I are going to go for a walk,” Aaron answered, “He said it would be a good way for me to see more of the property.”

“It will be! There’s so much to see. Martha, do you want to tell Aaron your favorite part of the property?”

“No,” Martha answered, turning her nose up as she put her spoon in her mouth. Aaron mentally rolled his eyes at the girl’s attitude. He had heard stories about her father, Thomas Jefferson, and was fully aware that the young girl took after him the most. It was unfortunate that she wasn’t more like her other father, James. He was a much calmer, quieter soul.

“I like the apples,” Philip said with a grin, “There’s so many trees and George always lets us bring apples home and shows us how to make pies. Or cider. Or apple treats. I like that part a lot.”

“I’ll make sure that he shows me that,” Aaron promised, “Apples are my favorite.”

“Mine too. But I also like cherries. Or bananas. Oranges are good too.”

Eliza and Aaron chuckled as Philip continued to list off all the different types of food he liked. The boy was always able to make Aaron smile or laugh. Two of the dishes on the table floated towards Aaron and started to scoop food onto his plate. Aaron quickly grabbed the spoons, completing the action himself.

It seemed like everything in Frihet was charmed. The plates, the doors, even the clothes it seemed. Back in Tyst, they did everything by hand. Aaron couldn’t stand letting objects do his work for him, so he took charge as often as he could even though the others often stared as he did it.

“Good morning,” Alexander called as he took the chair next to Eliza.

“Morning,” the table echoed back.

“Explain to me why we get up so early when we could sleep in?” John complained as he dragged himself across the room and collapsed into his chair. Aaron raised a curious eyebrow.

“Because we’re all too used to waking up early?” Eliza offered.

“And because George would wake you up if you tried to sleep in as late as you want,” Alexander added. John groaned, leaning over to place his head on the table.

“Why are you so tired, Lieutenant?” Aaron wondered politely.

“I didn’t go home till two in the morning. A local village needed my help with a wild Ondska Vatten, and it took me all night to catch the thing.”

“Do you help villages often?”

“As often as they ask. Creatures take a special touch.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s what I do. What George trained me to do.”
“We believe in helping everyone,” Alexander commented, giving Aaron a pointed look, “After all, taking care of our people is the most important thing to us.” Aaron pressed his lips together, holding back his opinion as he sharply smiled at Lieutenant Hamilton.

“Good morning, everyone,” General Washington announced, taking his seat at the head of the table. The plates rushed to serve him. They clearly knew who was the head of the house. “John, how did it go last night? Any issues?”

“It went as well as we expected. Lost an extra cow, but no one was injured,” John reported, “But that’s the third one this month. There has to be something going on.”

“Don’t Ondska Vatten usually live by the coast?” Eliza pointed out.

“Usually, yes,” the General answered, “Which is why it’s odd that so many of them are moving south into the rivers. We need to keep an eye on their movements, see how far they’re going. It could be something natural, or something pushing them out of their homes.”

“What’s an Ondska Vatten?” Martha wondered, leaning forward curiously.

“Nothing you get to learn about yet,” General Washington said.

“But-”

“Trust me, kid,” John spoke up, “You do not want to learn about them until you’re ready.”

“I’m not a kid!”

“Yes, you are!”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“Aaron,” General Washington asked, ignoring his students and turning to him with a smile, “are you still alright with taking a walk?” Aaron sat in stunned silence for a moment. The General had called him by his name as if it was nothing. Aaron wasn’t sure how to reply. He nodded his head once to confirm that he did want to go on a talk since his mouth refused to work.

“Great.”

“Can I come?” Philip begged.

“Not this time, Philip. But perhaps next time you can join us.”

“Okay!”

“Philip told me that the apples are his favorite part,” Aaron said after he found his voice again.

“They are. I can show you the orchard if you like?”

“I would like that.”

“There’s also a rather large pond. Would you like to see that as well?”

“If we have time, yes.”
“Martha, don’t play with your food!”

“I’m not!”

Aaron looked over, watching as Martha’s tower of eggs fell back onto her plate. That was another thing Aaron couldn’t believe. Everyone openly displayed their magic. The children charmed their food, building it into shapes or animating it to play out scenes. Alexander levitated books, always having one floating around his head as he walked so he could read on the go. Even the General used spells as if they were nothing.

Theo and Bellamy had been thrilled by the open displays, but they had yet to partake in them. His friends refused to start using magic more openly until Aaron did as well, which would never happen since he didn’t know how to do such simple spells. He was never allowed to learn anything besides magic used for fighting or defense. He had only ever seen Theo or Bellamy do small tricks.

“Could we leave right after breakfast?” Aaron asked softly.

“Right away? You don’t have anything you want to do first?” General Washington clarified. Aaron shook his head. He didn’t have any other plans, and he wanted to spend as much time as he could seeing the property. He also wanted to leave before anyone had a chance to pull the General away. This was a good chance for them to get to know one another, for Aaron to ask questions and get some answers. He would be more than a little annoyed if someone got in their way.

“Then we can leave as soon as we finish eating,” the General agreed picking up his spoon and starting his meal. Aaron copied his actions while ignoring the looks that Lieutenant Hamilton and Laurens were giving him. The rest of their meal was uneventful, only filled with light conversations between everyone. The children asked countless questions and often received detailed answers instead of being told to stay out of adult affairs.

Once General Washington and Aaron finished their food, they rose from their seats and made their way into the kitchens. Theodosia greeted the staff warmly while the General explained what the needed. One of the cooks muttered a few words and within seconds a basket was packed with everything General Washington asked for. It floated in the air, following after the General as he guided Aaron out of the kitchen to the back door of the house.

“We’ll head North first, then wrap around to the apple orchard before the sun gets too high,” the General said as he opened the door and ushered Aaron through. “Then we can visit the pond if you like. There should be a boat as long as Alexander and Philip haven’t taken it again.”

“Whatever you think is best, sir,” Aaron replied automatically, following Washington a stone path. The stones were pressed into the ground, level with the grass around them. The path led into the thick forest that surrounded the house.

“Please call me George. Just George. I don’t see any reason for us to be formal all the time.”

“Are you sure?” Aaron asked. It was a habit of his. He called his Uncle, and most of his teachers by their titles. It had been drilled into him to always show people the respect they deserved. General Washington deserved unmeasurable amounts of respect. It felt off to Aaron for him to use the man’s first name.

“We are married after all,” George pointed out as the trees started to block out the morning sun, leaving them in a soft darkness. “And I don’t want there to be a barrier between us. I want to be your husband. That’s it.”
“But you will always be so much more,” Aaron protested. He couldn’t get passed that. His Uncle, his family, always said that people didn’t lost their titles when they were home or among the people closest to them. Aaron was a Prince with Theo, a Prince with his sister, and now a Prince with General Washington. In the same way, General Washington was always an important military man no matter who was in his presence. Aaron knew that the others were casual with his name, but Aaron had doubts that he could do the same.

“Outside the house, off our property, you’re right. But here at home, I am only the man who is married to you. I don’t wish to live with my title every moment of every day. Sometimes, I like to just be myself.”

“Be yourself?” Aaron echoed curiously.

“You’ve never heard that saying before?”

“I haven’t. What does it mean?”

“Being yourself means...it means...well....” General Washington struggled as he tried to explain. “Have you ever felt like you have to act like someone else? You have to say and do things because you know that’s what other people want to hear, but that it’s not what you truly want? You feel as if you are playing a character in a play, lying to yourself and to those around you but no one can tell?”

Aaron didn’t reply. He knew the feeling the General was talking about. He knew it very well. As a child, Aaron had dreamed of adventures and excitement, of seeing the world and exploring everything it could show him, but those dreams quickly dissolved as his Uncle taught him his true purpose in life. The life of a Prince meant rules upon rules. It mean the world was watching, waiting for you to make a mistake. It meant giving up your freedom to marry a stranger.

“Being yourself means that you ignore what people expect you to be. You allow yourself to say and do what you want. Free from the pressures of the world. Free from judgement. Being yourself means you don’t have to lie anymore. Don’t have to play a part. You simply get to do what you want and do what you’ve always wanted to do,” the General went on to say.

The list of rules that Aaron had been taught started to bounce around his head. Be agreeable. Smile more. Laugh at every joke. Talk less. Never voice your opinion outright. Keep your true emotions hidden. Smile brighter. Always look happy. Never let people know that you’re scared. Never be scared. Be brave, but not cocky. Be smart, but never pushy. Be this, not that. Do this, never that. Aaron spent most of his life walking on a tightrope.

When he fell, there was no safety net to save him from crashing into the ground. Failure sent him straight into the belly of the beast. No excuse was good enough. No amount of crying saved him from his fate. He learned that failure meant pain. Failure was to be feared. Now, he walked that tightrope as easily as he breathed. That was his life, and he couldn’t change it.

“It’s a good feeling,” General Washington, George, said, “To be able to just relax and let the weight lift off your shoulders.”

“I’m sure it is,” Aaron muttered as they kept walking.

“Aren’t you okay wi—

Crack!

A twig snapped off to their right. The bushes started to rustle, the noise getting louder and louder.
“Something’s coming,” George warned, grabbing Aaron’s wrist and pulling him back from the undergrowth, “Stay back.” They stared at the bushes, both of them waiting for whatever was coming to appear. Aaron took a slow, steady breath and pushed his magic down into his fingertips. They started to tingling, ready and waiting for the moment when Aaron would cast his magic out. The feeling was familiar and brought Aaron some comfort. Always be prepared for battle. Always. George pulled a knife out of his boot, holding it across his chest.

The rustling got louder and louder until something orange jumped out of the leaves. A small fox, barely old enough to be on it’s own, froze just a foot away. It’s golden eyes stared at George and Aaron, waiting for them to make the first move.

“That was not what I was expecting,” George confessed.

“Me either, but it’s kind of adorable,” Aaron added, unable to keep the smile form his face as he pulled his magic back into his heart. “We should let it go.”

“Of course. I have no plans of hunting a fox today. Or any day really,” George replied, lowering his knife and putting it back in it’s hiding place. The movement prompted the fox to scurry away as fast as its legs could carry it. It vanished back into the undergrowth silently. Aaron watched it go, still smiling even after the fox was gone.

“It sounded a lot bigger when it was coming our way,” he said.

“It did, There is a wide variety of creatures in these woods, and I never assume that I know what’s coming,” George replied, starting back down the path. Aaron quickly fell in step next to him.

“Best to be overly cautious than to be caught unaware.”

“A very good saying to live by. One I wish my students would learn.”

“You’ve had many students haven’t you?” Aaron asked. He heard tales of George’s personal adventures when he was in the military fighting against the Northern Islands, but he only knew a little bit about George’s work as a teacher.

“Fewer than you think,” George admitted as the trees started to thin out, “I’ve taught lessons for countless troops, but I’ve only had six students officially. Four of them are still currently living with me.”

“Do you enjoy teaching?”

“I love it. I can’t think of anything better than watching one of my students master a spell after weeks of practice. Seeing them grow is the greatest gift.”

“I’ve seen you with Martha and Philip. They adore you,” Aaron said with a grin, “You’re an amazing teacher.”

“I try to be. They are both very different from one another,” George replied with a soft smile. “Martha is very strong willed, like her father, but she’s learning more and more every day. Philip is trying his best, but I wish he would understand that he has so much time still. He doesn’t need to rush through his lessons in order to catch up with Martha.”

“He will learn in time,” Aaron assured him.

“I can only hope,” George muttered, “Watch your head now. The apple trees are enchanted to pick their apples as soon as they are ripe and place them in baskets, but they’ll hit you in the head if
you’re not watching.”

“How many trees do you have?”

“About five hundred. We’ve just started to add some peach trees around the edges, but it will be a few years yet before they start to produce any fruit.”

“Can I pick an apple?” Aaron asked.

“Of course. Go right ahead.”

Aaron moved towards one of the trees, noticing right away that there were no ladders, no ropes, nothing to help someone climb the trees. Why would there be? If the trees could pick their own fruit, then there wasn’t much need for any people to be able to get up into the branches. Aaron decided against his adventure, turning around and moving back towards George.

“I thought—”

“I changed my mind,” Aaron muttered, moving along the path.

“Wait,” George said. Aaron’s feet stopped right away. “I have a question, though I won’t push you to answer.”

“You may ask.”

“You don’t use magic very often. Since we’ve met, I don’t think I’ve seen you use it once. Why is that? I know you can do things, I’ve heard the stories, so why don’t you just call an apple to you?”

“In Tyst—” Aaron paused, thinking it over. The General was not asking to be mean, clearly not by his word choice, nor his praise of Aaron’s apparent skill. It was out of curiosity and a quest for understanding. He deserved to know, to understand what Aaron had learned and the ideas he lived by. Aaron turned to face him, his husband and started to explain.

“In Tyst, we only use magic when we need to. We use it for self defense or during a war, but never in our daily lives. We are taught at a young age that people should never use their gifts to make a simple task easier, no matter what that task may be. Magic is sacred. To use it on a meaningless task is a waste. It’s insulting to even try to use a spell that makes an apple tree pick it’s own apples or plates serve their own food.”

“I didn’t know,” George confessed, “I hope I have not insulted you by—”

“You haven’t,” Aaron cut him off, “I know that things are different here. I wouldn’t dream of forcing you to change your ways. It’s just—just slightly unusual for me. It’ll take me time to get used to it.”

“So you don’t know how to summon an apple yourself?”

“No.”

“Would you like to? Or is that rude to offer?” George suggested. Aaron stared at him for a moment as his thoughts went wild. He should say no. Magic wasn’t meant to be used in such a way. However, George and the others used it every day and nothing horrible happened to them. The stories Aaron had been told as a child, people losing their magic or being turned into wild beasts, were clearly untrue, yet he wasn’t sure he could go against what he had been taught. In Tyst—But he wasn’t in Tyst. He was far from home in a kingdom that didn’t see magic the same way.
“I would like to,” Aaron admitted, “but I’m not sure I should.”

“In Frihet, we are less strict about magic. In my house, I don’t care what you do as long as you don’t hurt anyone else. This is where I’ve taught Alexander and Lafayette to call things to themselves. I would be happy to teach you as well, but I will not force you. Nor do I want you to be feel uncomfortable.”

“I want to learn,” Aaron repeated. George smiled, offering Aaron his hand.

“Let me show you,” he offered. Aaron forced himself to take the General’s hand and let the General guide him into a position.

“Focus on one apple on the tree,” George spoke directly into Aaron’s ear as he stood right behind him. Aaron could feel the man’s chest pressed into his back.

“Lift your arm towards that apple.”

Aaron followed his instructions and pointed his hand at the apple had chosen.

“Now, keep your focusing on your apple as you slowly let some of your magic flow into your hand. You want it in the center of your palm.”

This part was the easiest. Aaron was used to focusing his magic into his hands. That’s how he performed most of his spells, but it was different to not be in the middle of battle or in any danger. He twisted and turned his magic into a small circle on the center of his palm.

“Pull the apple to you using that magic. Think of it like this. You’re throwing out a string, so thin that no one can see it, and pulling the object straight into your palm.”

Aaron took a slow breath as he repeated George’s words in his head. Throw out a string and pull the apple back. Throw out a string. Pull the apple back. Throw out. Pull back.

“You can do it,” George whispered.

Snap!

The apple’s stem broke. Flying through the air faster than Aaron’s eyes could follow, it shot over his shoulder before he could stop it. He turned around just in time to watch the apple smack George directly in the face.

“Ouch! Fuck!” the General exclaimed. His hands flew up to cover his nose and mouth as the apple fell to the ground. Aaron’s eyes went wide. Terror wrapped around his throat. General Washington was going to be furious! His Uncle was right! Only bad things happened when magic was used for unnecessary means.

“I’m sorry,” Aaron confessed, his stomach twisted with panic. “I’ll go get you some ice. Or Eliza. She can fix it. I’m so sorry, sir. I’ll fix—”

“And here I thought Alexander hitting me with a pumpkin was the worst thing that could ever hit me in the face,” George commented, rubbing his nose before lowering his hands, “No need for any ice, or Eliza. I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry,” Aaron repeated.

“Don’t be. It’s part of learning. Everyone makes mistakes their first time. Lafayette hit a bird. Philip
hit himself. It happens.”

“But—”

“No buts. Let’s try again.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’ll only mess up again,” Aaron muttered, lowering his head to the ground. He failed. He made a mistake. Failure was not acceptable. It meant being punished, being hurt. He hoped that the General wasn’t too hard on him. A gentle hand touched Aaron’s cheek and helped guide his head up.

“Then you’ll mess up again, but we’ll keep trying until you get it right. People make mistakes, Aaron. I make them all the time, but you shouldn’t let the fear of messing up stop you from trying. You’re powerful, I can see that. I’m sure you can do it if you try again,” George encouraged. Aaron couldn’t help but lean into George’s hand. Such a soft touch even after he failed. He wasn’t used to it and it was able to chase the panic away.

“Just one more time,” he agreed. He wanted to try, wanted to know if he could do it. George’s words gave him some hope.

“One more time,” George echoed, turning Aaron back towards the trees. “This time, focus on the apple hitting your hand like a butterfly. Soft. Gentle. An easy touch that you barely feel.”

“Throw out a string,” Aaron muttered, remembering George’s earlier instructions, “Pull it back. Land like a butterfly.”

“Just like that. You can do this.”

Throw out a string. Pull it back to you. Let it land—An apple flew through the air and connected with Aaron’s hand. He stared at it in shock.

“I—I did it?”

“You did it!”

“I can’t believe it,” Aaron whispered. He looked at the apple, turning one way then the other. It was such a simple thing, but it felt like everything. He went against everything he had been taught. He used magic for a small task. Instead of feeling bad, he felt powerful.

“I can. I knew you could!” George praised, grabbing Aaron’s shoulders and shaking him excitedly. Aaron smiled at the words. “See? You just had to try one more time.”

“Can you teach me other things?” Aaron asked without thinking.

“Of course. Whatever you want to learn, I’ll teach you,” George answered, “And you can teach me things as well.”

“I don’t know anything that you don’t know,” Aaron confessed.

“Sure you do. You know more about Tyst than I do.”

“Yes, but I don’t think you need to know that stuff.”

“But I want to.”

“You do?”
“Yes. And you’re the best person to tell me everything I need to know.”

“I guess?”

“Then it’s a deal. I’ll teach you more magic, and you teach me about Tyst.”

“After we finish our walk.”

“Of course,” George agreed, taking Aaron’s hand and pulling him through the orchard. Aaron threw the apple up in the air and caught it before squeezing George’s hand. The General squeezed back, offering Aaron a bright smile over his shoulder. Maybe this marriage would be so bad. Maybe, just maybe, this marriage could work.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes, getting smacked with an apple is the best way to grow closer.

I hope you like it!

Let me know in the comments!
George glanced around the table with a smile on his face. They had just sat down for dinner, but the room was already full of laughter and conversation. Eliza and Martha, his darling girls, were having a fierce debate about the possible uses of goldenseal. So far, it seemed as if Martha was winning by having a unique imagination when it came to healing.

Philip and Alexander, always the trouble makers, were trying to use their spoons to catapult food towards Bellamy and Aaron. It wasn’t working that well, but George knew it was only a matter of time before Philip just threw the food with his hands. Honestly, George didn’t have the heart to disciple them at the moment. He was just glad that Philip was coming out of his shell with Alexander’s help.

John and Theodosia were having a quiet conversation while their hands flew through the air to emphasize their points. Aaron’s servants, no friends, George reminded himself of the difference, had been invited to sit at the table. It only took a few days before they became another piece of the ever growing puzzle. Theodosia was quick witted and smart, going toe to toe with Alexander and John.

George noticed how Eliza went quiet when the other woman was around. She often looked away whenever their eyes met and George saw a blush on her cheeks more than once. George made note of it, but he had yet to bring it up with her. If Eliza wanted his opinion, she would ask for it. He did not want to encroach on her life or feelings.

Aaron and Bellamy were talking about Aaron's ongoing lessons. Since their walk five days ago, George had started to give daily magic lessons to the young Prince. Nothing too complicated or dangerous yet, just simple spells to summon objects or enchant them for later use. Bellamy and Theodosia joined them every once in awhile when they could, having decided to give the Prince some space instead of following him everywhere.

George helped Aaron put an alarm spell on his dragon egg. When the egg started to hatch Aaron would get a mental warning and be able to be there for the hatchlings first moments. George was only teaching him small, basic lessons that all his students learned, yet the Prince treated each session with a high level of seriousness. He listened to every word George said, never questioning him and following each instruction to the tee.

After the second lesson, George realized how little Aaron actually knew about everyday magic and how badly the Prince wanted to learn. George didn’t understand Tyst way of thinking. Why hold back when they had such amazing abilities? Why not teach children, and even adults, how easy life could be if they used magic all the time? It was such a strange idea to keep magic hidden or locked up until a battle or war.

Bellamy glared daggers at Alexander, finally noticing what the Lt. and Philip were trying to do. Alexander winked at the guard, a normal gesture that George had yet to question, before finally getting his spoon to work the way he wanted. A spoonful of mashed potatoes flew over the table towards Aaron. Bellamy waved his hand to block it, sending the food back towards Alexander’s plate with a frown.

“We do not play with our food,” Aaron scolded, echoing George’s usual complaint.
“You might want to prepare yourself,” George warned as Philip threw down his spoon and grabbed a handful of potatoes. George took his husband’s hand and pulled him out of his seat.

“Philip, wait!” Eliza tried to stop him, but it was too late. The boy threw the food over the table. The potatoes hit Bellamy in the shoulder, but they also sprayed over John’s shirt.

“Hey!”

“Philip!”

“John, don’t!”

“Too late! This means war!”

The room dissolved into chaos. George pulled Aaron back from the table until they were out of range. Eliza and Theo tried to stop it, but soon they gave up and joined in the fun. Martha let out a warrior scream just before Alexander yelped in shock. John and Bellamy faked their defeats at the hand of Philip, who cheered in triumph. Food was flying everywhere, covering the dining room chairs, tablecloth, and floor.

“Shouldn’t we stop them?” Aaron suggested as he watched the food fly.

“Nah. Let them have their fun,” George decided, waving his hand towards the table. “It’s not every day a food fight occurs and we’ll be able to clean it up.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m su-”

Splat!

A handful of stuffing landed on George’s head. Aaron pressed his lips together and slowly backed up. George hadn’t even noticed his hand moving. The Prince was getting much better at summoning items, though George was not happy to have the power turned against him.

“Oh no, what a shame,” the Prince said, trying to bite back a knowing smile.

“Aaron got George!” Martha cried with glee.

“Yay!” Philip cheered, “Go Aaron! Go!”

“I mean, you did say we would be able to clean it up,” Aaron said as he continued to step back.

“You’re gonna get it,” George threatened, taking a step forward with a smile. Aaron grinned and took off running, diving under the table to pop out by Alexander’s side. The table started to shake as George focused his magic on the plates of leftover food. Time to end this fight.

“Oh shit!”

“Language, Alex!”

“Oh crap!”

“Duck!”

Ducking and hiding didn’t save them. The plates rose up from the table, each one going after a
different person. The stuffing spread over Eliza’s back as she shrieked. Martha and Philip were covered in gravy. Alexander was unable to fight off the carrots while John was tripped up by a plate of chicken. However, Theodosia and Bellamy pulled Aaron to the ground and covered his body, allowing the apple pies to smash on their heads. Loyal to the end.

George dispelled the plates, letting them safely crash to the floor. The room suddenly filled with laughter. Eliza looked at John, pointing out the pieces of chicken caught in his hair as he laughed at the stuffing caught in Eliza’s bosom. Alexander cursed at the carrots shoved into his waistline as Martha and Philip smeared the gravy across one another’s faces. Bellamy helped Theodosia to her feet while Aaron thanked them over and over again.

“I hope you all know that you’re cleaning this up,” George declared as he walked over to the table. He noticed a bowl of whipped cream still sitting untouched by his chair.

“That’s not fair!” Alexander argued, “You made the biggest mess.”

“You started it,” Bellamy muttered.

“That is not true!”

“It is true!”

“Wanna come say that to my face?”

“I am saying it to your face!”

“Enough,” Aaron begged, making his way over to George, “We’ll all help clean up.”

“You’re looking rather clean, dear husband,” George pointed out. Aaron shrugged, a sparkle in his eyes at George’s words, and offered up an innocent look.

“I wasn’t part of this.”

“Liar!” John accused. Bellamy threw a spare piece of pie at his face. John caught it in his mouth as Martha squealed with disgust. George quickly picked up the bowl of whipped cream and smashing it into Aaron’s face. George waited a single second before pulling the bowl off to reveal Aaron’s cream covered face. Theo’s mouth dropped open. Bellamy looked nearly frightened.

“Aaron?” Theodosia asked. George glanced at the Prince’s friends for a moment in confusion. Why did they look so nervous? So fearful? Was it for the Prince? Or for the reaction he might have? Anxiety started to bleed into George’s thoughts. Perhaps he had made a mistake. He went to apologize just as Aaron wiped off his eyes and licked his lips. The room was deadly quiet as everyone waited.

“You’re sleeping on the couch,” he declared, flicking some of the cream towards George. George relaxed as the others laughed at Aaron’s response.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he promised as he reached up to wipe some of the cream off Aaron’s cheek. His finger paused by Aaron’s lips. George thought about kissing him, about pressing their lips together and tasting the sweet cream off Aaron’s lips, but he wasn’t sure how the Prince would react. They’ve gotten close over the last five days, much closer; however, George wasn’t sure where the Prince stood when it came to being intimate. George let his hand fall away. Aaron smiled at his words, licking off more of the cream.

“I don’t wanna clean,” Philip whined, rubbing at his eyes and pouting.
“It won’t take long,” Eliza promised, “Just a few spells and we’ll be done.” John waved his hand first, making the plates to pick themselves up and float to the kitchen. Theodosia joined in and started to clean the food off the floor while Alexander cleaned the table and chairs. George sent the tablecloth off to the laundry room.

“Why aren’t you helping?” Martha asked, crossing her arms over chest and staring at Aaron.

“Because he’s still learning,” Philip answered for him, “and everyone learns at their own pace.”

“But he’s so old! He should know how to do things already!”

“Martha!”

“I’m not that old!”

“You’re ancient.”

“No, I’m not. George’s ancient. I’m nowhere close to that old.”

“I am not!” George protested. John and Alexander snickered, pressing their hands over their mouths when George gave them a harsh glare.

“On the bright side, no one can tell if you have gray hair or not,” Eliza giggled. Martha and Philip didn’t even try to hide their laughter. George sighed, shaking his head as he moved to leave the room. The laughter and teasing was only playful batter. They didn’t mean anything by it, even though George couldn’t stop the way his stomach twisted. He tried to push his thoughts away, placing a smile on his face as Aaron appeared by his side.

“Are you getting wrinkles by your eyes, Eliza?” he asked innocently. Eliza gasped and raised a hand to her face, “Alexander, don’t think I don’t know that you’ve been using magic to keep your hair that color. Worried about the white coming through?” Alexander glared at him, but one of his hands drifted up to play with his ponytail, “And John? Well...I’ll keep what I know a secret for now. Just in case.” John ducked his head and kicked his foot into the carpet. George glanced at his students, then at his husband in confusion. Aaron shrugged one of his shoulders before pulling George down the hall.

“Wait, what?” Philip cried as they left, “What does he know? I wanna know too!”

“You didn’t have to do that,” George clarified as they made their way to his office.

“I didn’t. But I did anyway,” Aaron replied.

“Aaron-”

“Hush. I did it because I could. I’ll pay for it later, but was worth it.”

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” George commented, pushing open his office door and making his way over to his desk. As he took a seat in his favorite chair, Aaron grabbed his current book off the desk, placed his hand on George’s shoulder for a single moment, and took his place on the small chair in the far corner of the room. It was their new evening routine. A way to spend time together while George finished his work and Aaron explored the library’s collection.

“It’s not really a game if no one else is playing,” Aaron replied, opening his book and continuing with his story. George watched him for a moment, smiling at the way Aaron’s eyes darted across the pages. He read books just as fast as Alexander, devouring one in a few hours and then reaching for
another. His quest for knowledge was never satisfied.

“You’re not working,” Aaron noted, turning a page without looking over. George’s smile softened as he turned back to the letters on his desk. Aaron always knew how to keep him on track. The young Prince was smart and cunning, with a quick wit and subtle humor. He made George laugh, but also pushed him at the right moments.

During their lessons, Aaron was an attentive, obedient student. He followed every order George gave, never questioning anything as he followed along with each step. He kept a level head even when his magic refused to work and asked countless questions in an effort to understand. George had expected him to get frustrated, to try and give up like he had the first time, but Aaron kept trying over and over again. He looked at George after each attempt, watching his face for any signals. It didn’t take George long to figure out that Aaron wasn’t used to praise or encouragement.

George tried to go out of his way to make sure Aaron heard good things throughout the day. He made sure to keep them subtle, wanting to make sure each one sounded real and true. George meant every word, but the point was for Aaron to start believing it too. Aaron soaked up each phrase like a plant seeking water after a long, hard drought. The soft smile on his face was payment enough for George to keep doing it over and over again.

Aaron’s early words, his joke, came back into George’s thoughts. Ancient. It shouldn’t bother him. It shouldn’t. He should be able to move passed it, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the age differences. He couldn’t get passed the fact that he was older, much older, then the Prince. Does it bother Aaron? It had to, didn’t it? He had to think about it sometimes, wondering why he had to marry such an old man.

“Does it bother you that I’m so much older than you?” George asked, cursing his mouth’s betrayal. He could feel Aaron’s eyes on him, but he refused to look. He told himself that he wasn’t worried about Aaron’s reaction, that he didn’t care what the Prince might say. George tightened his grip on his quill, forcing himself to keep writing. It was a lie. All of it was a lie. He did care. He cared so much. And the Prince had yet to answer.

The long silence weighed on George’s heart, making it ache from the heaviness as he tried to stay patient. The Prince was probably thinking of a way to phrase his feelings without offending him, or he was trying to avoid answering the question all together. Suddenly, a hand gently pulled the quill out of his fingers. George looked up to meet Aaron’s eyes. Those brilliant eyes. The Prince smiled, shaking his head.

“It doesn’t bother me. It never has.”

“It should.”

“The King and Queen of Morker have a bigger age gap.”

“And they suffer for it.”

“George-”

“I can’t help it,” he confessed, rising from his chair to escape the Prince’s touch, “It haunts me. Twelve years. Twelve long years between us. It shouldn’t mean anything, but it does. You were right. I am ancient and it will always be that way.”

“You might be thirty eight on the outside, but your heart is still young,” Aaron argued.

“My heart is just as old as I am.”
“That’s not true, at least not from what I’ve witnessed. I’ve seen how you act, George. I’ve seen your personality and while you have more wisdom than anyone else here, you also have the same spirit as Philip and Martha. In many ways, you are still child. You want to explore and learn new things. Want to find the answers. Get dirty and laugh. You don’t take everything seriously and refuse to relax. You know how to live your life, how to be young. Sure, you may have lived twelve years more, but your mind and heartbeat the same way mine does.”

George stared at his husband as the words sank into his mind. He had never thought about it that way, never thought about his actions compared to his age. He joined in with the food fight. He wrestled with Philip. Played dolls with Martha. Teased and pranked Alexander or John when he had the time. All things that he had done as a child, yet here he was; now an adult, but still doing some of the same things.

“I see your point,” he admitted, moving back to his desk. Aaron stepped in his path and took his hands.

“But do you believe me?” the Prince asked as he stared into George’s eyes. George gave his mind a few seconds to think it over completely. He didn’t want to lie to Aaron, didn’t want to say yes when he still wasn’t sure, but after a moment, he knew that Aaron was right.

“Yes, yes I do.”

“Good. That’s good,” Aaron muttered, dropping George’s hands as he suddenly got shy. It was a normal reaction that the Prince had at times. He would move to touch George one moment, then back away quickly the next as if he feared George’s reaction. It was just another thing George was trying to reteach him. It was alright to touch him, alright to seek someone’s company.

“Back to work,” George declared, placing a hand on Aaron’s shoulder as he moved to step around his husband.

“No,” Aaron protested, grabbing George’s sleeve, “We’re done for tonight.”

“No?” George echoed in confusion. Had he forgotten something? Did they make plans? He wasn’t one to forget things, but perhaps he had overlooked an earlier conversation or idea.

“I thought perhaps we could retire early tonight.”

“Is there a reason why?”

“No, it’s just—well, there is a small reason, but if you need to keep working then it can wait of course,” Aaron offered, shifting away as he glanced anywhere but at George’s face. Clearly, Aaron wanted something that he was too nervous to ask for.

“Alright. Let’s retire,” George agreed. He refused to make Aaron suffer any discomfort by demanding answers that he knew the Prince wasn’t ready to give. George knew he made the right choice as Aaron’s shoulders and eyes relaxed. He offered Aaron his hand, guiding him from the room with a small grin.

“How is your book?” George asked as he did every night on their way to bed.

“It’s wonderful. It’s hard to put it down. I’m at the part where—you’ve read it?” George nodded. “I’m at the part right before they go into the castle in the sea kingdom’s capital city. I wish Key would listen to Magnus more, but she always wants to do things by herself. Zan is also not doing well with Timmy, and he’s my favorite character!”
“Timmy was always my favorite too,” George noted. The book was old, one from George's childhood, and told the story of three adventurers thrown together in order to save the world. Timmy, a young silver dragon, was funny and sweet. He often kept the group together through innocent questions and curious antics that got them into trouble.

“Don’t spoil anything for me,” Aaron begged, “I want to see what happens and Alexander already ruined one of the twists.”

“I won’t,” George promised. He pushed open the door to their bedroom, walking towards the wardrobe first. “Alexander doesn’t mean to spoil books. He just gets too excited.”

“Like a puppy.”

“What?”

“He gets overly excited like puppy. That's what Eliza said.”

“I guess that does make some sense.”

“Does it?” Aaron asked, “I’ve never met a puppy before so I wasn’t sure if she was making any sense.”

“You’ve never met a–” George stopped himself, turning back to the wardrobe to gather his night clothes. He knew better then to ask such a question. There were countless things Aaron had never seen or experienced. George added ‘meeting a puppy’ to the list right under ‘eating cake.’

“I’ll change in the bathroom,” Aaron offered. He didn’t wait for George's reply before vanishing into the other room. George sighed, praying that he didn’t offend Aaron on accident. He was trying to be careful, trying to figure out how the Prince thought and felt about certain things. He wanted this marriage to work. It was getting better everyday, but he needed to keep trying.

George quickly changed out of his uniform, placing it back in the wardrobe, and pulled on a pair of soft, blue pants. They were his favorite pair. He didn’t bother with a shirt. It would only make him too warm during the night and then he would have to take it off at some point. He pulled back the covers on the bed to create a place for himself just as a knock on the door demanded his attention.

“Come in,” he called. Theodosia opened the door and slide into the room.

“Good evening, George,” she said as she walked over to Aaron’s side of the bed.

“Good evening,” he replied. He watched as she set a potion bottle on the table next to Aaron’s side of the bed. The bottle was made of clear glass, allowing George to see the dark, sparkling, blue liquid inside. A sleeping potion. Aaron was still taking it? George had hoped they moved passed such things.

“Is everyone okay with him? Just nod or shake your head, please,” George wondered, trying not to put Theodosia in an awkward position. Theodosia smiled, giving him a single nod as she walked back towards the door.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Good night, George. Tell Aaron to sleep well please.”

“I will. Good night, Theodosia. Tell Bellamy to stay out of trouble.”
“As you wish,” Theodosia replied, shutting the door behind her. George glanced at the bathroom door, thinking everything over. Theodosia said everything was okay, but that didn’t explain why Aaron was still using a sleeping potion. George climbed into bed, keeping his eyes on the door as he waited. After some time, the bathroom door opened and Aaron walked out. He made his way over to the bed before pausing when he saw the potion on his night table. George kept his eyes on the open door to give Aaron his privacy.

“George,” Aaron muttered, leaning over to look at George’s face, “I–T–there was a reason I wanted to come to bed early.” George turned on his back to look at Aaron with a raised eyebrow.

“There was?”

“Yes. But, but I think it might be a dumb idea. And I’m not sure how to explain. Or how to even ask.”

George stared at him for a moment. He looked so nervous, so worried. George hated to see such a look on his face. George sat up in bed and patting the space next to him. Aaron slowly climbed underneath the covers and rested his head on his pillow. He kept his eyes on the ceiling, refusing to look at George again.

“I know that whatever it is, it’s not a dumb idea. You have never had a dumb idea, Aaron. Never,” George assured him, placing a hand over Aaron's mouth when he tried to protest, “Let’s try this, don’t look at me when you ask. Look at your egg instead. Explain your reason to it while I listen. Pretend that I’m not here at all.” He pulled his hand away, giving Aaron an encouraging smile as the Prince sat up in bed. Aaron stared at his egg for a long time. His mouth opened every now and again, but nothing came out.

“I don’t want to take the sleeping potion tonight,” Aaron finally whispered, wrapping an arm around his body, “I don’t want to take it ever again, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to sleep without it. I know I’m a restless sleeper and I don’t want to annoy you George with all my movement. Eliza and Theo said that I should ask yo–ask George to help, but I don’t wanna be a bother.”

“That’s not a dumb idea, Aaron,” George said, reaching out to place a hand on his arm.

“Maybe not, but I shouldn’t make you try to help-”

“Lie down and face the wall,” George gently ordered, cutting Aaron off. The Prince’s eyes snapped to his face, staring into George’s soul before he obeyed. George turned on his side, waiting until Aaron got comfortable. He wrapped an arm around the Prince’s waist and pulled him across the bed until his back was flushed against George’s bare chest.

“Now, shut your eyes.”

“George,” Aaron protested, “I don’t-t-”

“Shhh. Shut your eyes.”

The room was quiet for a while.

“Are your eyes closed?”

“Yes,” Aaron grumbled. George knew that type of voice. Philip used it when he didn’t want to do what he was being asked to do.

“Aaron.”
“Fine, fine. Now they’re closed.”

“Good. Take slow deep breathes.”

“This isn’t going to work. I’m going to be ann-”

“Slow deep breathes.”

Again, the room went quiet as Aaron gave into George. His breathing started off huffy, but it sooned evened out and became slow and deep like George wanted. He held Aaron tighter, using his other hand to rub soft circles into Aaron’s lower back.

“I don’t care if you move in your sleep, Aaron,” George whispered, addressing Aaron’s earlier confession, “You won’t wake me up.”

“What if I do?” Aaron muttered, his voice so quiet that George almost missed the question.

“Then I’ll go back to sleep.”

“Will you be mad?”

“Never.”

“Promise?” Aaron asked around a yawn.

“Promise.”

“This is nice,” Aaron murmured, shifting to get more comfortable.

“It is. No more talking. Just keep breathing.”

“Kay.”

George kept watch over Aaron until his breathing evened out and he started to make soft noises, letting George know that he had truly fallen asleep. George turned over and blew out their candle, leaving the room in darkness, before he closed his eyes and pressed his body against Aaron’s once more. He would do this every single night if it meant Aaron would fall asleep and sleep well. He would do whatever it took to make sure Aaron was happy.

“No.”

“Aaron.”

“I said no.”

“Why not?”

“It’s looks terrifying!”

“She won’t hurt you!”

“She’s staring at me like she wants to eat me!”

“She won’t eat you. She doesn’t each humans, only weasels. And the occasional rabbit. Just come closer.”
“No.”

“Aaron, come on.”

“No. Never. It’s not happening.”

“Please?” George asked, softening his voice as he looked at Aaron. The Prince shifted from one foot to the other with a frustrated look on his face, but George could tell he was close to giving in. It was only a matter of time. George ran a hand over Nessie’s feathers to help keep her calm. She was staring at Aaron with interest, clicking her beak and pawing at the ground. It was all out of curiosity, but her actions were only making Aaron more nervous. However, his nerves made the griffin more curious. There were at an impasse.

“She won’t hurt you,” George promised, rubbing under Nessie’s chin, “She’s a good girl. Just take it slow and let her get used to you.”

“What if she doesn’t like me?” Aaron admitted as he took a step towards the large creature standing by George’s side. Nessie was a five year old pure white griffin. A gift from Lafayette for his birthday. George raised her from birth and watched her grow into a beautiful, powerful creature. She was still young, still a baby by griffin standards, but she was fierce, adventurous, and too curious for her own good. There was no denying that she was George’s favorite creature.

It was clear that she had an interest in the Prince as soon as George brought him into her stable. She never paid so much attention to Alexander or even John. George was her favorite human and she refused to let anyone else get too close unless it was to feed her. Nessie tilted her head as she watched Aaron shift around. She reached out towards him with her beak. Aaron jumped back with a terrified look.

“Slow, Nessie. Slow,” George gently ordered, reminding her not to get too excited. She didn’t know her own strength at times. Nessie pulled her head back and went as still as a statue. George reached a hand out towards Aaron, waiting as long as it took. The Prince still didn’t look very sure, but after a while he took a few steps forward and grabbed George’s hand.

“Keep looking. Don’t take your eyes off her. I’m right here, Aaron. I’m right here. She won’t hurt you. I promise. She’s never hurt anyone.”

“She is pretty,” Aaron muttered as he got within a few inches of Nessie’s head. Once again the griffin stretched towards him, turning her head and clicking her beak. Aaron painfully squeezed George’s hand in fear and tried to move back.

“Hold still. Just hold still and let her smell you,” George assure him, “She needs to get to know your smell first.”

“I can do this. I can do this,” Aaron told himself, staring at Nessie with fear in his eyes.

“You’re being so brave,” George praised as Nessie sniffed his shirt. She pressed her beak into his neck, then his shoulder before ducking down to nudge his stomach. Aaron flinched at the touch, but didn’t jump or scramble backwards. Nessie looked back at George for a moment, her eyes narrowing, then she turned back to Aaron and chirped loudly. Aaron jumped at the noise.

“There. All done,” George declared, lowing his hand from Nessie’s side as a signal that she was free to move. The griffin didn’t waste any time and started to circle Aaron.

“Hi,” Aaron offered, his eyes following her as she walked around. Nessie used her beak to straighten his jacket before placing her head underneath Aaron’s chin. She was being overly affectionate with
him, which George took as a good sign.

“Ready to go for a ride?” George offered, reaching for Nessie’s saddle.

“What? No! You didn’t say anything about going for a ride!”

“We’ll stay on the ground,” George promised as he called Nessie over. The griffin didn’t move from her spot. “Nessie needs to go out and I’m sure she would be thrilled if I took you along.”

“George-”

“Please, Aaron? I want to show you what she can do.”

“Just once?” Aaron asked, still looking unsure as Nessie moved to rest her head on his. He gave the griffin an annoyed expression, but he didn’t try to push her away. George called her again, making his voice more firm. She finally got the message and left Aaron alone to come over to George. She flapped her wings as she kept her eyes on the Prince.

“Only once. And it’ll be a short run,” George agreed. He quickly put Nessie’s saddle over her back. She froze, holding still as he secured the straps around her stomach and legs. She pawed at the ground and looked between the two of them. George could see the spark in her eyes. She was ready for this. Ready to run. Ready to show Aaron what she could do.


“Are you sure?” George wondered as he started to lead Nessie out of her stall. As much as he wanted Aaron to agree, he didn’t want the Prince to feel forced. It was one thing to face your fears, but another thing to be dragged kicking and screaming. He couldn’t always believe the expression that was on Aaron’s face. There could be a storm hidden underneath.

“Honestly? I’m nervous. And somewhat scared. But I want see how different it is to ride a griffin instead of a horse.”

“It’s very different, but the saddle is the same and Nessie listens well when we ride.”

“I want to do this,” Aaron insisted.

“I’ll right. Let me help you up,” George offered, bending down to grab the Prince’s foot and lifting him up. “That’s it. Just like on a horse, one leg on each side. Find the straps. Good. Good. Stay towards the front. I’ll sit behind you.”

“What do I hold on to?” Aaron asked as he looked around in confusion.

“Grab onto some of Nessie’s neck feather. They’re stronger than you think. You might pull out one or two, but most of them will stay in place and they’ll help you keep your balance.”

“Will it hurt her?”

“No, no. She won’t be able to tell unless you yank them the right way,” George assured him as he lifted himself up into the saddle. He pressed his chest against Aaron’s back before wrapping his arms around the Prince’s waist. He grabbed hold of some of the feathers on Nessie’s neck. The griffin shook her head, getting used to the feeling of hands in her feathers.

“Are you truly okay with this?” George asked one last time, “I can still let you down.”
“I’m okay,” Aaron assured, leaning back into George’s body, “I can do this. I trust you.” Aaron probably didn’t know how much that those words meant to him, but they made George heart swell.

“Hold on,” he warned before clicking his tongue. Nessie’s head snapped to attention. Her body tensed up like a dam holding back water. She opened her wings and kicked at the ground, shaking off her mental restraints. George closed his eyes for a moment, focusing on his breathing until it matched up with the creature. They were one and the same. Connected. “Gohen-Go.”

Chapter End Notes

They're making progress! Look at our sweet boys trying so hard!

Thank you for your comments! I already have a lot of this written, so there is more to come for sure!
Riding a griffin was nothing like riding a horse. Every horse ride Aaron had ever partaken in was slow and bumpy. He was only allowed to ride older horses who were unable to handle rough terrain, keeping him confined to the flat area around the castle. At a young age, Aaron decided that horses were too boring. He didn’t want to waste his time learning how to ride such a slow, restrained creature. His Uncle didn't approve of such thinking, and after a short fight, Aaron agreed until his teachers deemed him skilled enough at the task.

Nessie was the complete opposite. She was fast and agile, whipping around the trees with so much speed that the wind whipped around Aaron’s head. She jumped over streams and rocks effortlessly. Each movement was fluid and graceful. George guided Nessie by pulling on her feathers in specific places, helping her avoid upcoming obstacles and steering her away from low tree branches. Together, they easily made their way through the forest towards the large pond at the edge of the property. Aaron held on as tight as he could to, worried that he would fall off at any moment.

Aaron shut his eyes for a moment, enjoying the rush of the air moving round him and the solid weight of George's body against his. After his early evening confession three days ago where George helped him fall asleep simply by holding, Aaron started the unique habit of trying to touch his husband as often as possible. It started small. A hand on George’s shoulder in the morning. A casual touch during lunch as they passed a book between them. Their fingers brushing together as they walked. When George didn’t shy away and instead returned each touch, Aaron grew bolder.

It went against what he had been taught as a child. Such affectionate displays were beneath a Prince. It was a show of weakness and a childish habit. He shouldn’t need hugs or a simple pat on the back; however that didn’t stop him he from craving George’s touch and presence. He felt safe in George’s arms, happy when they held hands, and excited when George put his arm around Aaron’s shoulder. It was nice to have someone to lean on, both emotionally and physically.

“Are you alright?” George asked. Aaron opened his eyes and smiled as the tree line started to thin.

“This is amazing,” he confessed, looking over his shoulder at George, “I’ve never traveled so fast!”

“I’m glad you–Nessie no!”

Nessie spread her wings out as her hooves stomped against the ground. They started going even faster than before. Aaron turned back around, watching as they sped towards the lake. Nessie wasn’t even trying to slow down and they were getting closer and closer by the second. George was pulling hard on the griffin’s feathers, but she wasn’t obeying him anymore.

“George? What’s happen–INNGGGG!”

Suddenly, Nessie beat her wings and they started to lift off the ground. Aaron screamed in terror, watching as the lake got smaller and smaller the higher they climbed. He squeezed his eyes shut as he tightened his grip on Nessie’s feathers until his fingers started to ache. They were going to fall! He wasn’t going to be able to hold on! He could hear George yelling at Nessie over his shoulder.

“Bad girl! Bad! Unten–down!”

Nessie still refused to listen, climbing higher and higher. Then for a brief moment, Aaron felt
weightless, as if he was floating through the air before he settled back down in the saddle. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling, simply different and new. The wind no longer whipped around his head and everything was still and calm. Aaron opened one of his eyes slowly to look around before his mouth dropped open.

The ground was far below them, barely visible among the clouds that floated around them. Aaron had never seen anything so wonderful. He could almost reach out and touch a cloud, feel it on his fingertips. Nessie looked left and right before slowly dipping down to go underneath an upcoming cloud. Aaron let go of her feathers, reaching up towards it, but his fingers were just a inch too short.

“I’m so sorry, Aaron. She’s never been like this before. I’ll get us down–”

“No,” Aaron said quickly, lowering his hand, “No, I’m okay.”

“What?”

“I’m okay,” Aaron repeated, looking back at his husband, “I want to stay up here. It’s beautiful.” George stared at him for a moment before a grin appeared on his face. One of George’s hands made its way to his hip.

“It is. I was hoping to show you this once you got used to Nessie, but she must have decided that today was a good day to fly,” George explained. Aaron didn’t mind. It had been a scary experience at first, but the world around him more than made up for it.

“It’s alright. I’ve never seen the clouds like this. It makes the world seem so small,” Aaron confessed, “Have you ever touched one?”

“A cloud?”

“Yeah.”

“I have. Many times actually. Would you like to?”

“Gods, yes. They look so soft and pure,”

“They are. Here let us help you,” George whispered, “We’ll get closer to them. Nessie, Wolke—to the clouds.” This time, Nessie chirped loudly and obeyed. She gently glided to the right by angling her wings. Aaron watched the clouds as they passed above and below them with a bright smile on his face.

“Look out,” George warned before Aaron’s vision was blurred by white. He gasped at the cool feeling on his face, reaching out his hands as the cloud parted around them. He tried to catch pieces of it, laughing as the cloud slipped through his fingers.

“This is amazing,” he muttered in awe, “I wish we could stay up here forever.”

“Don’t tell Philip that. He’s been trying to convince me to build a castle in the sky for months now.”

“Why can we? There’s so many spells in the world. There has to be one that would let us do it.”

“There is and we could build something up here, but the creatures wouldn’t like being up here all the time. And we wouldn’t be able to have visitors.”

“You are a destroyer of dreams, George,” Aaron pouted.

“It’s a hard job to have, but someone has to do it,” George replied easily, wrapping his arm around
Aaron’s chest, “Hold on.” Aaron grabbed onto George’s arm tightly as Nessie dived down. The wind picked up again. They passed through cloud after cloud until Aaron could see the ground again. It was getting closer and closer.

“George!”

“It’s okay. Nessie knows what to do,” George promised. Aaron wasn’t so sure. They looked like they were about to crash. Aaron shut his eyes, unable to keep watching. Nessie suddenly straightened, throwing Aaron back into George. A arm quickly wrapped around his chest to steady him.

“This is her favorite part,” George said, “I hope you don’t mind getting a tad wet.” Aaron opened his eyes, seeing the large pond spread out right below them. The water looked like clear, perfect glass. Nessie tilted to the right until her wing dipped below the surface, cutting through and forcing the water to spray up. It created a rainbow over Aaron and George, creating a wonderful sight to behold.

“Wow,” Aaron muttered, at a lost for words.

“She loves the water. I can’t keep her away from it, though I have tried. Giving her a bath is a nightmare.”

“George?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?” George asked in confusion as they flew towards the edge of the pond.

“For this. For asking me to go for a ride. This is...This is...I can’t even think of a word that is good enough to explain to you how much this means to me,” Aaron confessed, “I simply know that I will never forget this.”

“I’m glad you’re happy. That’s all I want.”

“I am. I’m very happy.”

“I don’t think you know how–Slow Nessie! Slow!” George called. The griffin’s hooves suddenly hit the ground and Aaron lunged forward. If it hadn’t been for George’s arm still around his chest he might have gone flying off the creature. Nessie chirped, prancing around the grass innocently.

“Don’t act cute with me,” George warned, letting go of Aaron to slide out of the saddle. He grabbed some of Nessie’s feathers and pulled until she looked at him. “That was not very nice.” Aaron watched as Nessie stared at George before letting out a soft chirp.

“I know, I know. You get too excited, but you still have to be careful with people,” George explained, “I’m not mad. Just disappointed in you.” Aaron giggled, quickly looking away when George glanced towards him. Nessie chirped again, pressing her beak against George’s cheek.

“I know, I know. You get too excited, but you still have to be careful with people,” George explained, “I’m not mad. Just disappointed in you.” Aaron giggled, quickly looking away when George glanced towards him. Nessie chirped again, pressing her beak against George’s cheek.

“Do you need help getting down?” George offered. Aaron thought it over for a moment before nodding his head. Best to ask for help then fall on his face in front of the General. He didn’t want to suffer such embarrassment. George moved back and reached up to grab Aaron’s waist.

“Leg over,” he instructed. Aaron obeyed, swinging his other leg and letting George help him to the ground. Aaron took a step back to give him some space just as Nessie shifted. She bumped into
Aaron’s back and knocking him into George. Aaron caught himself on George’s jacket as George’s hands found their way back to his waist.

“Nessie!” George scowled, narrowing his eyes at the griffin. Aaron looked up at him as his cheeked heated up. *Kiss him.* a small voice whispered. No one was around to see it and George was already so close, but something held Aaron back. What if George didn’t want that? They’ve gotten closer, so much closer, but Aaron still wasn’t sure if George truly wanted a marriage or just friendship. He would be happy with either. He only wished to know where the lines were so he didn’t cross one by accident.

“George–” Aaron started to ask.

“George!” Alexander cried, riding towards them on a black horse, “George, we need to go! Stark Hem is in danger!”

“What?” George asked in shock and confusion. Aaron stepped out of Alexander’s way, moving closer to Nessie in the process.

“It’s a wildfire! It’s coming straight towards us! If we don’t stop it–”

“If it takes out Stark Hem, it’ll head towards the capital next,” George muttered, “Get John and Eliza. Take the children to Yuma for safety.”

“What about you?”

“I need to gather some supplies, then we’ll ride out. Now go!”

“Yes, sir!” Alexander replied, turning his horse and taking off towards the house.

“What’s going on?” Aaron asked as George turned back to Nessie and helped him back into the saddle before climbing up.

“Wildfire. Its green flames destroy everything in its path,” George explained, surging Nessie towards the house as fast as she could run, “I have to get to the village before it can set the first building on fire. If we don’t stop it, countless people will die and even more will be without homes.” Aaron eyes widened. He heard stories about wildfire and how terrifying it can be, but it was not a normal event in Tyst.

As they arrived back at the stables, a young boy ran towards them with George’s sword and armor. George jumped down, taking the items from the boy and starting to put his armor on. John and Eliza joined them a few seconds later, both dressed in their own armor. John helped Eliza saddle up a horse and load it up with bag after bag.

“Do you have everything you need?” George asked as he finished putting on his breast plate. Aaron studied the General’s armor, surprised by how plain and beaten up it was. There was no decorations. No engravings. Nothing but a few dents here and there. It was very different from the armor soldiers in Tyst would wear. Even John’s and Eliza's armor had more detailing featured throughout the metal.

“We have everything we need,” Eliza replied, “We’re ready when you are. Alexander is on his way and I’ve sent a warning crow to the village.”

It was impressive to watch them. They were prepared for this. More than ready to go save people. Aaron wanted to go with them. It was different then when he wanted to go to war, go to battle. He didn’t care for glory or pride. He only wanted to help. To protect people.
He wanted to use what he had learned to actually do something instead of standing by and letting others handle it instead. But this wasn’t his kingdom. Wasn’t his place. His Uncle told him only to offer his help when there was no other hope. His Uncle told him a lot of things....

“We,” Aaron stated, making up his mind before he could talk himself out of it, “We have to get to the village.” George and the young boy froze, staring at Aaron with wide eyes. Eliza and John must have overhead because Aaron noticed them both watching as they finished packing the supplies.

“No, no no no,” George clarified, stepping towards him and waving his hands as if to dismiss the words he had just heard. “you are not going. You’re staying here with–”

“I’m not a child, George,” Aaron protested, taking a step towards him and crossing his arms, “I’m coming with you.

“You can’t–”

“I can. And I will. You can either take me with you, or I’ll follow you myself.”

George stared at him, pressing his lips together in a thin line. Aaron watched his eyes go back and forth between protest and acceptance. George didn’t know what to do, didn’t know what the right answer was. Alexander, Bellamy, and Theo walked into the stables and froze.

“What’s going on–”

“Shhh,” John snapped at Alexander. Aaron ignored their attention, keeping his focus on George.

“I want to help. I want to save the village by your side.”

“It’s too dangerous! You can’t go.”

“George, trust me. I can do this.”

“Aaron...”

“Please? Give me a chance.”

“I don’t–”

“We don’t have time to stand around and debate,” Alexander called, “Just let him come.”

“We’ll stay with him,” Bellamy promised. George looked over at them before letting out a loud sigh.

“Alright, but you are not to leave his side no matter what. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Theo replied.

“We’ll protect him,” Bellamy insisted.

“Then saddle up. We’re moving out,” George ordered to them all. He waved his hand over Nessie, summoning armor over her head and wings. Aaron watched in awe before something popped into his head.

“Where’s the ring I gave you?”

“In our room.”
“Summon it,” Aaron ordered. George spared him a quickly look, but didn’t argue. He muttered a short spell and within seconds the ring flew over to him. He slide it on his finger above his wedding ring. Aaron nodded, satisfied that George listened and glad that the ring would be able to do its real job today.

“You can ride with me, Bellamy,” John suggested, whistling for his own horse who was already ready to go. Bellamy nodded his head and quickly climbed up.

“I’ll take Theo,” Eliza offered as she raised herself into her saddle and held out her hand to the woman. Theo glanced at Aaron, waiting for him to nod, before taking Eliza’s hand and lifting herself up. Aaron wondered for a moment if Theo and Bellamy thought he was crazy or if they were concerned about his decision. He hoped not. He knew in his heart that this was the right thing to do. He prayed he didn’t face any negative consequences afterwards.

“None of you have armor,” Alexander pointed out while guiding an orthros out of its stall. The creatures two heads glanced around the room before zeroing in on Aaron. Aaron had never seen an orthros in real life, but such a creature fit well with Alexander’s personality. He noticed that each head had a green collar wrapped around it. A small, but caring gift.

“We don’t need any,” Aaron said, letting George help him back into Nessie’s saddle.

“George,” Alexander warned as he climbed on top of the orthros.

“I’ll handle it,” George replied. Once they were ready, they left the stables and took off as fast as their creatures could travel. Nessie stayed on the ground, helping to surge the others forward as they went. Aaron focused ahead of them, keeping his eyes open for any danger. He pushed his magic down into his fingers as he got ready. He could do this. He knew he could. This was what he was trained to do, even if this was very different situation.

“Almost there,” George announced, “Eliza, focus on getting everyone out of the village. John, Alexander, keep the fire at bay. Once we get to the village, I’ll go up and see if I can find the source. Then we’ll take it out. Theo, Bellamy, stay by Aaron.”

“What do I do?” Aaron wondered when George finished speaking.

“Help Eliza and stay out of the way as much as possible.”

Aaron scowled at the orders, but he didn’t protest. He knew that George was trying to keep him safe, keep them all safe, but Aaron could do more than just stay out of the way. The air around them started to get warmer until it was uncomfortable. People appeared in the forest, running passed them with countless bags and chests in their hands. Eliza slowed her horse to talk to a few of them.

“Oh shit,” John exclaimed as they arrived at the edge of the village. Chaos had already taken over and left everything in shambles. People were frantically running around grabbing their belongings. Children were screaming, lost and confused by everything happening around them. Others were calling out for love ones. Over the horizon, Aaron could see a green glow and black smoke that covered most of the sky. The wildfire was already so close, and with each passing moment it moved towards them all.

“Get to work!” George declared, helping Aaron down. Aaron quickly grabbed Nessie’s feathers at the last second, preventing George from leaving by holding on as tight as he could. Nessie shook her head, trying to get him to let go, but Aaron refused to be pushed off.

“Aaron, what are yo—”
“Give me your hand,” Aaron cut George offer, reaching towards him. George stared at him for only a second before offering his hand over. “No, the other one.”

“Well, you should have been more specific.”

Aaron ignored the comment, placing his hand on the red stone held by the ring on George's finger. He muttered a short spell and called forward the magic already in the ring. Aaron stepped back, letting go of Nessie, as the ring started to glow. The light got brighter and brighter until a large shield appeared in front of George. The shield was made of purple light, allowing George to see through it while still being protected from anything that could harm him. George's eyes widened in shock as he looked between the shield and Aaron.

“A gift worthy of a General,” Aaron explained, echoing the same words he had said on their wedding night. He had debated giving George a sword, but he knew now that a shield was a much better choice. Aaron wanted George to be safe, to return to him after everything was over without any injuries. A shield would helped ensure that.

“Thank you.”

“Just be careful,” Aaron begged, “Make sure you come back.”

“I will,” George said, offering him a soft grin. “I promise. Be safe for me. I'll see you soon.” Aaron nodded his head, believing in the words, and watched as George surged Nessie forward. They took to the sky, moving towards the green flames. He stared for a moment longer, praying to every God he could think of, before getting to work.

“Bellamy, Tailor positions,” Aaron called.

“On it!”

“Wait, what?” John asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Alexander snapped, grabbing his arm, “We need to try and protect the buildings in case we can’t stop the fire.”

“I’m coming. I’m coming.”

Aaron watched them take off then turned his attention back to Bellamy. They both muttered quick speed spells before rushing off the helping the villagers. Bellamy focused on older people, collecting their belongs in record time and escorting them to the edge of the village, far from the coming fire. Aaron’s attention went to reuniting children with their lost parents and helping the families make it to safety in one unit. The spells helped them move fast, but also helped them with balance and agility.

As they worked, the fire got closer. Soon, the smoke started to block out the sun. Aaron pushed himself to work faster and faster. He had to save as many people as possible. He had to get everyone to safety before it was too late. Bellamy followed Aaron’s lead, enlisting the help of others to help make the process work better.

“Aaron! Bellamy! Where are you!?” Theo yelled. He quickly finished helping a family before running to his friend’s side. Bellamy joined them a second later. “George can’t find the source. There’s no way to stop the fire. We need to check every house for anyone left behind, then get out of here.”

“On it,” Bellamy agreed, taking off right away. Aaron went to follow him, but Theo grabbed him arm first. Aaron looked at her in confusion.
“A shield could save this village,” she whispered. Aaron’s eyes widened.

“But George—”

“George isn’t here right now, and we both know I’m right.”

“Theo, I can’t—”

“You can. Don’t be scared, Aaron. This is what you were trained to do and I’ve seen you do this before.”

“It would buy us some time,” Aaron muttered, glancing towards the coming fire. His magic started to sing at the idea. It urged him on, begging to be used, begging to be given a chance.

“Time is what we need,” Theo insisted, “And I know you can do it.”

“I’ll try.”

“Go. I’ll keep the others busy.”

Aaron grabbed her hand and squeezed, giving her a proud look before running off towards the fire. He passed Eliza on the way, but she didn’t try to stop him. Alexander and John were at the edge of the village. They were trying to put up a thick barrier to protect the buildings, but Aaron could tell that their spells wouldn’t stand up to a wildfire.

“Aaron!” Alexander shouted, “Get back! Get away from here!”

“I can help!”

“No, you can’t,” John snapped, “Go back!”

Aaron ignored them and planted his feet on the ground. He let his magic flow, let it free from it’s cage. It spread down to his feet, locking him in pace as it filled up every inch of his body.

“Aaron—”

“Leave him alone!” Bellamy ordered.

“What part of stay out of the way do you not understand?!” John growled.

Focus…Breathe in. Breathe out. Let the magic expand… Aaron told himself.

CRACK!

He clapped his hands together, forcing his magic into his palms as the image of what he wanted solidified in his head. A purple beam of light formed as he slowly pulled his hands apart. He slowly spread his arms wide, pushing the beam down along the ground and up until it created a wall of light. He spread the wall higher and higher until it blocked off the village completely.

“Holy shit,” John muttered in awe.

“Damn,” Alexander seemed to agree as he stared at Aaron with wide eyes. Aaron smiled to himself at their reactions.

“What is going on?!” George roared, landing Nessie a few feet away, “The wildfire will be here any second!”
“You can do this,” Bellamy muttered. Even though he was far away, Aaron could hear his words loud and clear. Aaron kept his arms spread out and stared straight ahead at the green flames coming towards him.

*Prepare yourself. Don’t let it scare you. Be ready for the first impact.* Aaron reminded himself as the flames devoured trees, grasses and bushes. He pushed the beam to spread out along the ground.

“Aaron–” George said in shock.

“I can do this,” Aaron cut him off, “I can do this.”

“You–”

Screams of terror pierced the air as the wildfire slammed against the wall of light. Aaron gasped at the heat that flooded his body, but his magic held out through the assault. It was a strange feeling. Aaron could feel each flame as it brushed against his wall. He felt the heat, though it didn’t hurt, and could feel the pressure from the wildfire as it tried to push him back. However this was not the first fire that Aaron held back, and he refused to let it be his last.

The wildfire refused to give up, climbing up the wall in hopes of getting over it. Aaron pushed the light higher and higher before extending his shield out, making a ceiling that prevented the fire from going higher. The fire gave up on climbing higher and focused on pushing against the shield. The flames slammed into the light over and over again. Aaron tried to keep hold, tried to stay steady, but soon the fire started to push him back. His feet slid over the ground.

“Holy fuck,” John exclaimed.

“Can’t hold it forever!” Aaron called, taking a bit of magic from his hands and sending it to his feet instead. It didn’t help. It was no match for the fire’s strength. The fire kept pushing him farther back. If he didn’t stop it soon, it would be able to catch on one of the buildings unless Aaron was able to push it back. Suddenly, Aaron’s back hit something solid and stopped him from moving back anymore. Gentle, but strong hands fell to his hips. Aaron shut his eyes at the familiar feeling.

“I’ve got you,” George said, “I’m here. You just stay focused.”

“We have to find the source,” Aaron insisted, using George’s body to support himself as he pushed back against the flames.

“How?”

“I can get someone through the fire to find it. It’s somewhere inside the fire right?”

“Right.”

“I’ll go,” Alexander volunteered, stepping forward.

“What?!” John yelped.

“Alexand–” Bellamy tried to say.

“No,” George protested strongly, “No, I’ll go–”

“You can’t go. You’re the General. You need to stay and give orders and help Aaro–”

“And I’m ordering you not to go.”
“We don’t have time to stand around and debate,” Aaron warned, using Alexander’s words from before as he looked over his shoulder at George, “I can’t do this forever. Neither can you. You have to let him do it. I’ll keep him safe.” George looked between the two of them with a pained expression.

“Trust us,” Alexander begged, “This is what you trained me for, remember?”

“And I’m starting to regret it. Just...Just be careful,” George pleaded.

“I will.”

Aaron nodded Alexander forward towards the light. Once he was closer to the wall, Aaron extended the light to wrap around Alexander’s body. The strange feeling got even more weird for Aaron. He could feel Alexander’s presence as if it was inside his mind and hear the man’s steady heartbeat. This was the best way to find the source safely while the fire was trying so hard to fight his wall, but Aaron wasn’t sure he would ever get used to such an experience.

“I’ll keep you safe as you move, and I can hear your heartbeat. If I think you’re getting hurt, I’ll pull you back,” Aaron explained, leaving no room for Alexander to argue.

“Understood,” Alexander agreed before walking passed the wall. George watched with fear and concern written across his face. Everyone watched, their eyes going from Aaron to Alexander until the flames blocked the other man from their sight. Aaron focused more on his breathing, keeping his magic in check as the fire pushed against his wall.

Between breathes, he listened for Alexander’s heartbeat, making sure it was still steady and strong as the man moved through the fire. Aaron could feel George’s chest as the man took his own deep breathes. The movement had a calming affect on Aaron, letting him focus on Alexander and the wall and less on his fears.

Aaron noticed a sudden skip in the Alexander’s heart followed by a sharp increase in the rhythm. Something was happening, something bad. He needed to pull Alexander back and he needed to do it fast The flames shot up into the air with a loud roar, nearly throwing Aaron and George back. Aaron held onto his magic as hard as he can as the wildfire throw its full power against his shield. George’s arms wrapped around his waist to keep him steady through the attack.

“I can do–” Aaron struggled to say, “I can do this!”

“You can!” George assured him.

Finally, there was a shift and the fire started to retreat. Slowly, the flames died down and Aaron no longer had to fight to keep his wall stable. His mind cleared, the heat and pressure vanishing, and he could hear Alexander’s steady heartbeat once again. He let out a sigh of relief. It was over. Finally.

“He did it,” John said in awe, “He did it!”

“Oh thank the Gods,” Eliza exclaimed, moving to take Theo’s hand. George shut his eyes as the fire got smaller and smaller before completely going out. It left nothing but ash and destruction behind, but at least the village was safe from it’s power. Aaron lowered the wall inch by inch until it vanished. He kept his shield around Alexander, wanting to make sure the man returned unharmed as he promised, as he leaned back into George’s chest.

Soon enough, Alexander made his way back to them with a smile on his face. John threw his arms around him, holding him tight. Eliza ran over to join in the hug. Even Bellamy stuck himself to Alexander’s side, something that Aaron found odd, but sweet. George slowly left Aaron and made
his way over, prompting the others to back away. He placed a hand on Alexander’s shoulder.

“Good job,” he praised, a tired look on his face. Alexander smiled brightly. “And you're grounded.”

The smile vanished.

“What?! By why?”

“Because I said so.”

“But—”

“George—” Aaron started to protest.

“You’re grounded too,” George snapped, a look of anger crossing his face as he turned back towards Aaron, “I told you to do one thing, and you went against that.” Aaron took a small step back in fear as the George walked towards him. He understood George’s anger, but he was still hurt and shocked by such a negative reaction. The General's hand came towards him quickly, prompting Aaron to flinch back, but instead of pain, the hand gently grabbed his cheek and pulled him towards George. Their lips met and Aaron’s world froze.

They shared kisses before, but they were nothing like this. Aaron’s eyes slowly slide shut as George’s lips moved against his. It was better than all the kisses they had shared on their wedding night. Instead of feeling awkward or uncomfortable, Aaron felt his stomach flip and his heart flutter. Aaron didn’t want this kiss to end. Didn’t want George to move away. This kiss was even better than any of the other touches they had started to share. He couldn't believe that he had been missing out on this for so long.

Suddenly, loud cheering overtook them. Aaron jumped back from George, his face heating up as villagers started to walk towards them. Did they see them kiss?! What would they think?! The villagers rushed towards the others and started to thank them a thousand times over. A small girl, around Philip’s age, ran towards Aaron and George. She threw her arms around their legs, linking them together as she stared up at them.

“Thank you for saving us,” she told them.

“It was nothing,” Aaron replied, placing a hand on her head.

“He’s a hero,” George declared proudly. The girl giggled, pressing her face into Aaron’s pant leg.

“Hero,” Aaron echoed to himself. He never considered himself a hero, never imagined he would be called one. It was simply his duty to protect people, his job and nothing more.

“You saved them,” George pointed out, “You more than anyone else. You are their hero. Our hero.” Soon, other people approached them to give their thanks.

“May the Gods bless you.”

“You are so brave, so true. Thank you for everything.”

“We can never repay you.”

Aaron wasn’t sure what to say to the villagers, but he tried his hardest to show them how much their kind words meant. Throughout all of it, the young girl stayed with them. He didn’t have the heart to tell her to let go and allowed her to remain. She was quiet, looking up at Aaron with wide eyes. George’s hand slowly found it’s way to Aaron’s, linking their hands together. Aaron smiled at the
gesture and gave George a soft smile.

“We should head back,” Aaron suggested as the crowd died down. People returned to their homes and their normal lives as Eliza and Theo finished passing out the supplies they had brought with them. Aaron was sad to leave, but he was starting to feel drained after using so much magic. He needed to rest for a while.

“It’s time to go home,” George gently told the girl stuck to Aaron’s leg. She pouted, sticking out her bottom lip.

“Do you have to go?” she asked. Aaron slowly pulled her off their legs and knelt down to her level.

“I’m sorry, but I do. I have to go home and rest. Plus, I’m in trouble so I should probably get home before I get in even more trouble.” The girl giggled at the idea before looking very serious.

“Will you come back?”

“Of course.”

“Promise.”

“I promise.”

Okay!” Satisfied with his answer, the little girl ran off. Aaron watched her take the hand of an elderly woman and walk off towards home. He smiled at them, a small twist of pain in his heart, but more hope in his soul then he had ever had before.

“I see now why you don’t need armor,” George commented, “It all makes sense now. When you said that your people only use magic for defense or battle, I didn’t think it meant something as amazing and huge as that.” Aaron chuckled and squeezed George’s hand. He was glad that George finally understood more about Aaron’s kingdom’s stance on magic, but Aaron should still try to explain why he made such a rash decision.

“I’m sorry for–”

“Don’t be,” Goerge cut him off, “You did the right thing, the best thing. You protected the village and saved everyone.”

“But you’re mad at me?”

“In a way, yes,” George confessed, glancing away for a moment, “I’m not mad as much as upset. I was scared and worried about you, worried that something horrible would happen. All I could think about was the fire breaking through and killing you. Or Alexander getting hurt without anyway for us to reach him. I do think you did the right thing, Aaron, but that doesn’t stop me from hating you being in danger.”

“I went against your orders.”

“You did, but you came up with a better plan and handled it well. You did an amazing thing.”

“But I’m still in trouble?”

“Oh god yes. You are grounded for a week.”

“A week?”
“Yes.”

“I have another question.”

“What?”

“What does grounded mean?”

Chapter End Notes

My internet almost prevented this chapter being posted, but I fought it and won!

Keep your eye on this chapter. I like it, but I don't LOVE it, so there could be some edits later.

What do you all think of Aaron's magic?
The General IV

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late posting! I had a wedding today and I was gone nearly all day, but here is the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~ Two and a Half Months Later ~

“Wait, this is all for us?” Aaron asked in shock as Lafayette finished showing them around the small coastal mansion they would be staying at for the week while Lafayette and Hercules took up residence in the castle located in the center of the city. They were currently walking through the sitting room after having seen the bedroom, bathroom, and a small library. It was a decent sized house, the perfect sized for Aaron and George with an amazing view and enough room to give them both space.

It was just for them. Theo and Bellamy stayed behind with the others, a choice that George had feared would cause Aaron grief and discomfort, but the Prince hadn’t protested and appeared to be at ease without his permanent shadows. Lafayette had stationed a few guards around their temporary home for safety, though George wasn’t too worried about anyone making a move against them.

“Of course,” Lafayette answered with a smile, “Unless that isn’t what you want. I had assumed that you would want some space, and to be as close to the water as possible, but if that’s not correct, I can move you to–”

“It’s perfect,” George cut him off gently, placing a hand on the King’s shoulder. It was easy to see that Aaron wasn’t listening to him anymore. He had stepped over to the wall of windows that overlooked the ocean, staring at the waves in awe. George watched him closely and wondered how many times he would go through the same cycle of emotions. When Lafayette had first invited them on this trip, a short vacation he had called it, George had assumed that Aaron was familiar with the idea. He was wrong. Very wrong.

Not only did Aaron have no idea what a vacation entailed, but it was becoming clearer every day how sheltered and closed off from the world Aaron had been all his life. It stirred an unmeasurable amount of rage in George’s stomach. Theo and Bellamy were more accustomed to the world, or they were quieter when it came to their reactions, yet Aaron was shocked by nearly everything they saw on their three day carriage ride through the Kingdom.

Aaron marvelled at the landscape, asking countless questions about the plants and animals. He begged George to tell him the history of every village they passed, seeking to learn as much as possible. He was excited about seeing the farms, shocked by the bright colors and joyful music, and even jumped into the river with George as if he had never touched a body of water before.

At first, George had been confused. After all, Aaron was a Prince. He must have had everything provided for him and been offered the best education and resources in the world, yet the smallest things made the biggest impact on him. A single flower from an elder villager made Aaron smile brighter than George had ever seen. Children singing made Aaron stop and stare with wide, curious eyes. He laughed at common jokes, jumped at fireworks, and was confused by simple board games.
It didn’t make any sense.

How could Aaron not know about such things? How had he not experienced them before or at least read about them at some point? George understood that Tyst was different than Frihet in many ways, but some very universal things threw Aaron off. It only confused George more and more. He didn’t want to ask Aaron, didn’t want to force the Prince to tell him or make him feel bad for not knowing how the world worked, but George couldn’t help but be concerned about it.

His confusion gave way to anger. George wasn’t blind, nor stupid. He noticed the way Aaron flinched when he thought he was in trouble. The way he jumped to obey every command. The way he watched George when they went some place new, following his example or waiting for orders on what he was meant to do. However, Aaron had a sweet heart.

He was caring and smart, fixing problems as they traveled and offering a helping hand whenever he could. The smile never left his face, even when some people backed away from him with dark looks. He was a pure soul, the type of soul that was hard to find, yet someone had tried to cage him for so long. Someone kept him from the world and left him at a horrible disadvantage.

George couldn’t help but be angry about all of it. The rage that twisted in his stomach wasn’t aimed at Aaron, but at his jailers, at the people who kept him from the world only to sacrifice him to it through a political marriage. He swore that he would never let anyone hurt Aaron. Never. The young man didn’t deserve to feel any pain or suffer at the hands of someone else’s misdeeds. No, George would protect Aaron with his life and show him everything he had missed out on.

George’s anger turned into a deep set motivation. He was going to make sure that this vacation, this adventure, was the greatest seven days of Aaron’s life. He didn’t care what it took, he was going to make sure everything was perfect. Thankfully, Lafayette and Hercules were here to help him. If anyone knew how to make someone feel welcomed and cared for, it was the two of them.

“What are those people doing?” Aaron asked, the question catching Lafayette’s and George's attention. The King moved towards the windows first. Aaron shifted a few inches away from Lafayette, always keeping a minimal amount of distance between them. Another thing George assumed came from his caged life. He wasn’t good with people getting too close or paying him too much attention.

“Wave rider?” Aaron echoed, confusion written across his face.

“Yes,” Lafayette replied, “They use the boards, which are charmed to float on water, to ride the incoming waves. It’s a lot of fun, though it does take some balance to stay on the board. George is rather good at it if I remember right. Perhaps you can try it yourself?”

“Can we?” Aaron asked, turning to look at George hopefully. He always asked, always waited to see if George would say yes. Aaron never made any demands or tried to do things without seeking permission first.

“Of course. We can go out tomorrow if you want. Early in the morning when there’s not that many
“I would like to,” Aaron muttered as he went back to staring out the window.

“I can have a few boards sent here if you wish?” Lafayette offered, giving George a sharp look as he stepped away from Aaron and moved closer to George’s side. George understood the look and shrugged a shoulder, demanding Lafayette leave it alone for right now. He didn’t want to talk about Aaron’s odd personality, at least not at the moment. It could wait until a later time or date.

“That would be perfect,” George agreed, “We’re still having dinner with Hercules and you tonight, correct?”

“Yes. I leave you both to settle it, then see you at the venue. I had some clothes brought for you—”

“Lafay—”

“I expect you to wear them. Both of you.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I know, but I like too. Besides, I wanted to show your husband everything Frihet has to offer,” the King said, glancing back at Aaron.

“Thank you,” George muttered. Lafayette brushed his words aside

“Don’t thank me,” he ordered, “Just have fun and make sure that he does to.”

“I plan on it.

“Until dinner.”

“Until dinner.”

Lafayette made his way out of the room, leaving the mansion with his team of guards. George smiled to himself. He still felt so much pride and love at how Lafayette acted and ruled. No matter what happened in his life, Laf always tried to stay positive and look towards the future, a trait that clearly helped him through the toughest times of his life. Being around the King would be good for Aaron, would help him understand more of Frihet and give him a chance to make more friends. Hopefully.

“Would you like to go for a walk on the beach?” George suggested, walking over to take Aaron’s hand. He tangled their fingers together and brushed his thumb over the back of it.

“No yet,” Aaron replied, “but perhaps later. I would rather rest before dinner. We’ve been traveling so much and I don’t want to—”

“You don’t have to give me a reason, Aaron,” George assured him, squeezing his hand softly, “If you wish to rest, then let us rest.”

“Thank you—”

“Don’t—”

“No, George, please listen to me. I have to thank you. I do. I need to thank you for all you’ve done. For all your answers, kindness and patience. I know I’m not always easy to deal with, but you have made my life full of wonder and happiness. I wasn’t sure about this at the beginning, but now I know that this will be the best thing in my life. I owe you so much and I will never be able to thank you for
everything you’ve done for me.

“Aaron,” George muttered. He didn’t know how to reply, didn’t know what to say. The Prince’s words warmed his heart and set his blood on fire. Aaron didn’t seem to mind his silence as he placed a kiss on the corner of George’s mouth and stepped away. George stopped him quickly, placing a hand on Aaron’s cheek and pulling him in for a real kiss.

George never got tired of kissing him. Never. Each kiss was a new experience. Aaron would make a new noise, react a different way, or melt into George in a way that made George’s mind and body sing. Since that day at the village months ago they had started to share kisses more often.

For the first week, Aaron had been shy and unable to “start” a kiss, but over time he had gained more confidence. This time their kiss lasted much longer, Aaron’s lips moving against George’s until both of them had to pull away for air. Aaron pressed his forehead against George’s chest and let out a soft sigh.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Aaron. You’re very welcome.”

George wished he was better with words, wished he could explain how important Aaron was to him. How he shared Aaron’s feelings. He had been unsure about this marriage, not extremely hopeful that it would turn out well, but he could easily see them spending the rest of their lives together. Yet he wasn’t sure how to put such feelings into words. Wasn’t sure how to convey such emotions without going on a long rant.

“Can we head back to the library?” Aaron asked, “To rest and relax?”

“Sure. Lead the way,” George agreed, letting Aaron pull him through the house. The library was smaller than the one at home, but it still had a good size couch and a table. Aaron grabbed a book off the shelf, the same one he had been eyeing earlier, and took a seat on the couch. George didn’t bother picking his own book, bypassing the shelves to sit next to Aaron.

“I’m not sure you’ll want me to read this one,” Aaron warned. It had become a small pastime for them. Aaron would pick a book and read it out loud to George. Sometimes while he was working. Other times when they were laying in bed. It didn’t matter what the book was about, George just enjoyed hearing Aaron talk and spending time with his husband. He noticed that the book was about the ocean, but even that didn’t make him want to leave.

“Go ahead,” George encouraged, “I’ll keep my eye on the clock and let you know when it’s time for us to get ready.”

“Alright,” Aaron agreed after a moment, “Chapter 1: A History of Water. Written over three thousand years ago, the first record of the ocean described it as...”

George let Aaron’s voice wash over his mind. He glanced at the clock every so often, but his eyes spent more of their time staring at Aaron’s face. He watched the Prince’s eyes move over the page. Stared at Aaron’s lips as they formed each and every word. Observed every twitch of his nose.

George felt the corner of his mouth turn up in a small grin, unable to help himself. He could no longer deny it, not to anyone or himself, that his young husband was attractive. Aaron had a handsome face with amazing eyes and perfect lips. His appearance haunted George's late night thoughts. Additionally, Aaron was smart, brave, and kind. George never thought he was be so happy in a marriage that had been arranged by other people, yet here he was truly enjoying himself just
because his husband was around.

It was somewhat of an odd feeling. Similar to when George was around Eliza and Lafayette, or Alexander and John, but also different. It was stronger. Deeper in a way. Realization hit George like an arrow to the chest. His smile vanished as his eyes widened at the shock. He knew how to explain how he felt to Aaron. Knew how to tell Aaron how much he mattered. All it would take was three words. Three small words that didn’t seem like much, yet saying them would mean everything to George.

He stood up quickly, bumping against Aaron a bit on the way. He tried to keep his face clear, tried to keep the storm inside his heart hidden, as he made his way towards the door. George needed to get out of the room, needed to think this through before he made a terrible mistake. Needed to be far, far away from Aaron as soon as possible.

“Is it time to get ready?” Aaron asked. George paused, shutting his eyes for a moment at Aaron’s innocent question. He couldn’t let Aaron think he had done something wrong. It would ruin everything George had already done to help him. Instead, George glanced at the clock then at his husband with a professional smile. It wouldn’t hurt them to get ready now and it would be the perfect excuse to leave.

“It is. But I’ll get ready first so you can keep reading,” George replied, feeling a little guilty for lying, but it was for the best. He had to pick his battles wisely.

“Alright. Come get me when you’re done,” Aaron agreed, returning to his book and giving George the chance to run away. He moved down the hallway as fast as his feet would take him, opening the door to their bedroom and throwing himself face down on the bed. He sighed into the pillows and wished the mattress would swallow him whole. George should get ready. Should focus on the dinner planned for the evening, yet his mind refused to leave him alone. It kept going back to the same question over and over again.

Did he really love the Prince?

The answer should be easy to come up with, yet George felt conflicted on which path he should take. Part of him screamed no. Never. Love wasn’t for him. The voice ordered him to retreat, to get far away from Aaron and build thick walls to protect himself from such feelings. George understood where such a voice was coming from; however, another part of his mind, another voice, was singing with joy.

George had never felt this way before, never thought he would want to live the rest of his life with one person, but Aaron seemed to be the right choice. The Prince made him happy. Made him smile and laugh. Challenged his mind and his spirit. George could see them being happy for many years to come.

Neither side won the argument, leaving George at a stalemate. Instead of dwelling on his thoughts more, he forced himself out of the bed and opened the wardrobe to get ready for dinner. Inside were two, brand new outfits. One was a deep red color while the other was a darling, navy blue. They each had an elegant label, marking the red outfit as Aaron’s and the navy as George’s.

George removed the outfit and carefully looked it over. It was obviously Hercules’ work judging by the complex stitching along the seams and the small details around the collar. Hercules was a master tailor, creating stunning pieces that never failed to amaze George and other people. Hopefully, Aaron would like his outfit as well even though it was a unique color. George had yet to convince the Prince to wear anything besides black, white, or grey, but maybe Hercules could show Aaron how great colors could be.
After changing his clothes, George stopped in the bathroom to check his appearance in the mirror. He straightened his collar and smoothed down the front of his tunic, making sure everything was in order before staring at his face. What if Aaron didn’t feel the same way? Sure, the Prince offered him countless sweet words that made George’s heart flutter, but did his heart skip beats the same way George’s did?

George wasn’t sure. Couldn’t be sure. The fear of rejection, of ruining their relationship, of making them both suffer for the rest of their lives, scared George more than anything. He would never be able to admit his own feelings unless he felt more sure about Aaron’s reaction. Perhaps he could seek Lafayette’s advice?

After all, Lafayette had been happily married for some time now. He knew what it was like to be in love, but he also would understand George’s doubt and worry. Plus, George knew he could trust Lafayette to keep his secret. He quickly made up his mind. Tonight, at some point during their dinner, he would try to talk privately with the King. It was best not to wait, not to let his mind dwell. They would be here for a week or so. George wasn’t sure he could last so long by himself with Aaron without making a terrible mistake. He only hoped that Lafayette could help.

“I did not!”

“You did!”

“You’re telling lies!”

“We were both there, Laf! Everyone saw!”

“You’re making it bigger than it was!”

“Boys,” George warned, “That’s enough.” Lafayette and Hercules settled down, but Hercules still had a smug smile on his face and Lafayette was trying to avoid looking at anyone out of embarrassment. Hercules had brought up, much to Lafayette’s dismay, the King’s terrible dancing skills. No matter how many lessons he took, Lafayette was still helpless on the dance floor. Hercules found it charming, but Lafayette couldn’t stand the talk of his failing feet.

“You must know something equally embarrassing about the Prince, don’t you, your majesty?” Aaron spoke up, taking a sip from his glass as the others glanced at him with curiosity. Aaron looked marvelous in Hercules’ clothing. The deep red color brought out every good feature Aaron had. The Prince’s skin color, his perfect facial features, and his wonderful eyes were all enhanced. Aaron looked magical, truly magical. It made George’s heart yearn to hold him close and kiss him, but he kept his desires hidden.

They had already finished with their dinner and were simply sitting around the table to enjoy some drinks as the night weared on. The conversation never paused, never grew dull as they traded stories and jokes. Aaron was still shy around the others, still too quiet and formal, but he was slowly getting better. George’s mission for the night was to get Aaron to call Lafayette and Hercules by their names instead of their titles. Everyone had forgone their crowns and symbols, leaving them as normal men sharing a meal instead of powerful leaders.

“I do,” Lafayette admitted, “Would you like to hear about the time he fell into the pig feed?”
“You wouldn’t!” Hercules protested.

“I would love to hear such a tale,” Aaron encouraged.

“You are an evil man, Prince Aaron!”

“I believe you started it,” Aaron pointed out with an easy smile. George bit back his own grin, proud of Aaron as he teased Hercules in circles. The man was no match for his husband’s quick wit. Poor Hercules didn’t stand a chance. Finally, Lafayette leaned over and pressed a kiss against Hercules’ forehead, silencing the man as Hercules got distracted by the King’s touch.

Shy fingers found their way to George’s hand. Without hesitation, George tangled his fingers with Aaron’s and gave the Prince a reassuring squeeze as he looked at his husband. Aaron offered him a small smile, hesitant and unsure. George nodded his head, sharing a pleased look with the younger man. Aaron’s shoulders relaxed and he settled back in his seat more. He had been doing such things all night, glancing at George or seeking his touch as they enjoyed the evening in hopes of getting reassurance about his presence or actions. George never shied away from such things, making sure that Aaron found as much comfort as he needed.

“George,” Lafayette’s voice cut into their tender moment, “Can you help me grab the dessert?” George was confused at the request, but the look in Lafayette’s send a clear message that dessert was not Lafayette’s true goal.

“Of course,” George agreed, rising from his chair. Aaron sat forward with a look on panic. He tried to hide it away quickly, but George had witnessed it enough times to see through Aaron’s mask.

“We’ll be right back,” George assured him in a soft tone. Aaron didn’t seem so sure, but Hercules came to the rescue.

“Perfect,” Hercules declared, giving Aaron a bright, kind smile, “Now I can tell Aaron about all your own embarrassing moments, George.”

“Just remember that I know about yours as well,” George warned. The short exchanged appeared to settle Aaron’s nerves as the Prince sank back in his chair.

“Be quick,” he muttered, using the spell Alexander had taught him to ensure that his words were only heard by George. George nodded and placed a gentle hand on Aaron’s shoulder before leaving the room with Lafayette.

“Let me tell you about the time that George–” Hercules started one of his stories right away as soon as George and Lafayette made it through the door into the kitchen located in the next room.

“Will he be alright?” Lafayette asked when they were out of range of their partners. The kitchen was smaller than the capital’s, but it still had enough room to prepare food for at least a hundred people if Lafayette wanted it to. George noticed that the servants and workers were nowhere in sight. Perhaps Lafayette had sent them away already. Who knows how long the dinner would last, best to let the others return to their families. “I didn’t mean to make him–”

“Aaron gets nervous around new people,” George cut him off, “but he’ll be more than alright with Hercules. He needs a gentle hand in order to come out of his shell, which we both know Hercules can provide.”

“He is certainly a shy little thing.”

“Give him some time and he’ll be talking your ear off.”
“I hope so. I can tell he has a lot to say, but I hate feeling as if I’m forcing him to talk. I had the cook make us some cake for dinner, as you suggested, but I wanted to talk to you about something between serving it,” Lafayette confessed, moving towards the corner where a large cake sat on a serving platter. It was three stories and covered in soft white frosting. George raised an eyebrow at the King’s words, waiting for Lafayette to continue.

“I would like to give the Prince another gift. From what you’ve told me in your letters, he loves the egg and he’ll take good care of his dragon, but I would like to give himself something else now that some time has passed. I want to run my idea by you and make sure that my heart is in the right place.”

“I’ll do what I can to help you,” George agreed, “What do you want to give him?”

“The home you’re both saying in. I plan to give him full ownership.”

“Why?” George asked in shock, his eyes widening at the idea.

“If the home is yours, then you both can come here whenever you wish. It can be your home away from home. I’ve seen the way the Prince looks at the water, as if it calls to him. I believe that he would be more than happy to spend some parts of the year up by the coast instead of always staying back by the capital.”

“Laf, why are you giving him such a gift? You’ve already given him one for the marriage. He’s not expecting anymore.”

“Because I want to. He makes you so happy, which is all I’ve ever wanted, and I wish to repay him for that.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t, but the Prince is so kind and true, such a small gift to me would mean a lot to him and could be helpful to both of you. I want you both to be just as happy as Hercules and me and I think this could help,” Lafayette explained, “Do you think he would accept my gift?”

“He wouldn’t be able to refuse, but you know that he’ll probably try to give you a gift equally as great,” George warned.

“I welcome him to do so.”

“Your mother would be so proud of you,” George sudden said, unable to stop the words coming leaving his mouth. Lafayette smiled sadly and moved so he could press his forehead against George’s chest.

“I miss her,” the King whispered.

“As do I, but I know she is smiling down on you.”

“I could not have asked for a better teacher.”

“Nor could I have asked for a better student and King.”

“You’re going to make me cry!”

“Don’t cry! Hercules will have my head!”

Lafayette laughed, shaking his head and wiping under his eyes as he pulled away. George smiled,
overjoyed to see his student so happy. He was proud of Lafayette, proud of the man he had become. He knew that the Queen would also be proud of how honest and kind Lafayette was. He was a true ruler, one that would go down in history.

“Let’s get to the cake out before they start to wonder what’s taking us so long,” Lafeyette suggested, sliding the cake towards him in order to pick it up.

“One more moment,” George begged, “I have a question for you as well.”

“Ask me anything.”

“How do you know when you’re in love?”

Lafayette’s head snapped towards George, his eyes going wide before an excited look appeared on his face. George whined as Lafayette bounced over to him, literally bounced.

“Oh George! I never thought I’d see the day—”

“If you’re not going to be helpful, then we can ju—”

“No no, I’ll be helpful! I’m so happy for you—”

“I’m not even sure that it—”

“If you have to ask that question, then you’re sure enough of your feelings,” Lafayette stated, cutting George off completely and making his mind stall for a moment.

“I don’t know if what I’m feeling is really love,” George muttered, “I don’t want to tell Aaron unless I’m sure, don’t want to have any doubt in my mind.”

“When you think of the future, do you imagine him being there by your side?”

“Yes,” George admitted.

“Does his very presence put you at ease?”

“Yes.”

“Do you seek him out because of the way he makes you feel?”

“Very often.”

“Do you want him to be happy and safe above all else?”

“By the Gods, yes.”

Lafayette didn’t ask another question, staring at George with a knowing look. George thought back over the questions and his answers, shaking his head as a helpless smile appeared on his face.

“I’ve never felt like this. Never.”

“That’s how I feel about Hercules,” Lafayette assured him, “It’s a terrifying, but glorious feeling. It makes your heart flutter while your stomach also twists until you feel sick. You want to tell him, yet you’re scared that he doesn’t feel the same. Am I getting it right?”

“Yes. I want to tell him. I want Aaron to know how much he means to me, but I doubt that he feels
the same way,” George whispered, running a hand over his face.

“He cares about you. I can see it in the way he looks at you. Caring is the first step towards love, and it would be impossible for Aaron not to love you back. I’m sure he’s just as scared as you about the idea. He’s shy about his feelings, so he might be better at hiding it, but you shouldn’t be scared, George. Let your heart guide you. It’ll know when the time is right,” Lafayette suggested.

“I’m not sure I trust my heart to make the best choices,” he grumbled.

“I trusted mine and now look where I am? Our hearts have a way of getting us where we need to be. Listen to yours and it will make sure everything turns out right.”

“Thank you, Laf. I knew you out of anyone would understand.”

“Of course I understand, and I’m happy to listen to your fears. If you need to talk to me again, just send a messenger or come see me. I’ll offer whatever advice I can think of.”

“How the tables have turned. Now I’m asking you for advice instead of you asking me,” George chuckled. Lafayette smiled brightly, bumping his shoulder against George’s.

“We both knew it would happen one da–Oh!” Lafayette jumped, running into George and nearly knocking him over. The King glanced over his back before ducking his head shyly.

“What is it?” George asked with concern.

“I think it’s best if we grab the cake and return to our husbands,” Lafayette replied quickly, his eyes darting anywhere but towards George.

“What happe–Ah!”

Something pinched George's butt, making him jump in shock. He looked over his shoulder to snap at the culprit but no one was there. At least no one that George could see. Was someone using an invisibility spell? Or a speed spell to get away quickly?

“Ho–”

“It’s one of Hercules’ favorite long distance spells,” Lafayette explained, still avoiding George's eyes, “He must have taught it to Aaron.”

“We need to go before he can teach the Prince any more dirty tricks,” George insisted, grabbing the cake while Lafayette took the plates.

Chapter End Notes

Vacation time! And so much more to come! Are you all excited to see what happens next?
“What are you wearing?” George asked as Aaron came out of the bedroom in his water suit.

“My water suit. Why, what’s wrong with it?” Aaron wondered, looking down at his outfit in confusion. Sure, the water suit was slightly old and out of style, but it was still in good shape. The suit stretched over Aaron’s shoulders, covering his chest and stomach before ending halfway down his thighs. It was what everyone wore in Tyst when they went into the water.

“Nothing, nothing,” George replied quickly, shaking his head as he walked into the bedroom to change, “It’s just different.”

“Bad different?”

“There’s no such thing as bad different. It’s just more different than what I’m used to.”

“Should I wear something else?”

“Of course not! Wear whatever is comfortable for you,” George insisted before quickly shutting the door. Aaron glanced down at his outfit again, running his hands over the waterproof fabric. He should have asked Hercules about getting a Frihet style water suit instead. He didn’t want to seem out of place when they went to the beach. He wanted to experience Frihet the way it was meant to be done.

Aaron loved Frihet more and more with each passing day. Their trip across the Kingdom featured farmlands and orchards, bustling towns with new inventions, and countless people who laughed, danced and used magic without pausing to think about it. Aaron loved every moment of it, wishing he had a way to commit every detail to memory in case he forgot something later. George had been wonderful during the trip, answering every question Aaron had and allowing him to explore the new things he saw.

Aaron tried to limit the amount of questions he asked on the third day, keeping track to avoid taking too much of George's time; however his husband replied by asking him countless questions instead. He wanted to know Aaron’s favorite part of their meal. If he liked one color over the other. Would he like to look at this shop or that one? Did he want to try the street food? Aaron answered each question with a smile, enjoying every single moment. He stayed close to George’s side as they witnessed it all together.

He never got tired of how George made his heart flutter. He lived for every touch they shared. Every silent look passed between them. Every laugh George let slip out. Every kiss, even the quick ones. Aaron had never felt so happy, at ease and carefree. He was excited to go to the beach, excited to try something new with George. At dinner the night before, Aaron had suggested that King and his husband join them if they have the time.
Aaron had been unsure about having dinner with the King and the Prince; however, both of them were amazing men. Prince Hercules made Aaron’s outfit, an elegant piece in a color that Aaron had never thought he could wear. It fit well and was extremely comfortable. Aaron also noticed that it caught George’s attention. Aaron had felt the man’s eyes on him a number of times last night.

Prince Hercules, who Aaron had only seen in passing at the wedding, was a loud, easily excitable, sweet man. He had a booming voice and laughed louder than anyone else Aaron knew, but he was easily distracted by the King. Watching the two of them stare at each other with so much love in their eyes was an amazing sight. Prince Hercules loved stories, both telling them and hearing others. He was more than happy to tell Aaron anything he wanted to know.

The King, George’s old student and a good friend, was equally as sweet as his husband, but also extremely talented and brave. He begged Aaron to talk about himself, asking question after question. He spoke often about Aaron’s parents, the stories he had read about Aaron’s mother and the tales about his father’s creations. He even mentioned the passing of his own mother, begging Aaron to tell him if he ever need to talk. Aaron had never seen someone admit their own pain in such a brave way. When the King revealed that he himself made their dessert, Aaron had been shocked to the heavens at such talent and creativity.

Aaron enjoyed the two men greatly, and he was more than happy to allow them to join George and him on their beach trip. He had a good feeling that either of them would be a good teacher. He hoped to learn quickly so he could take George on another trip by themselves.

“There you are!” a voice called. Aaron turned to greet Prince Hercules with a smile. The Prince was wearing a plain red shirt and matching red water shorts. Both were looser than Aaron’s outfit and made of a strange material that Aaron had never seen before.

“Good morning, your highness.”

“Seriously, call me Hercules. Or Herc. Or anything besides your highness.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Hercules scoffed playfully before looking Aaron up and down. He started to walk around him slowly, making a soft humming sound.

“I really like your water suit,” Hercules admitted, “Do you know what it’s made out of?”

“Sadly, I don’t.”

“But it’s water proof?”

“Competely.”

“Interesting. I could use it to make-”

“Hercules, don’t stare like that. You’re making him uncomfortable,” King Lafayette cut in. Hercules’ eyes snapped to Aaron’s. He offered up an apologetic smile and move back.

“Sorry, Aaron. I get excited about new fabrics and I just can’t help myself at times. It’s a terrible habit.”

“You could use it to make what?” Aaron offered softly. He wanted to hear what Hercules was going to say, wanted to hear his idea. Hercules’ face lit up at the question.
“If I could modify the design slightly, I could create something for our navy. Something easy to move it, yet waterproof.”

“It’s strong. It’s never torn and it’s hard to cut through.”

“Brillant.”

“I can let you look at it closer after we’re done at the beach?”

“Really!?”

“Sur.”

“Now you’ve done it,” King Lafayette declared, shaking his head in dismay, “He’ll be so caught up with his new design that I won’t see him for days.” Aaron noticed that he was wearing a similar outfit to Hercules, however his way purple with golden details along the hems.

“Oh, I didn’t me-”

“He’s joking, Aaron,” Hercules assured him quickly, “Lafayette is just being dramatic, as usual.”

“Hey! Don’t insult the King!”

“I’m not. I’m insulting my husband.”

“How very rude.”

“Are you sure that Hercules’ starring didn’t make you uncomfortable, your majesty? Are you worried you’ll lose his affection?”

King Lafayette let out an offended gasped at Aaron’s words while Hercules threw his head back to laugh. Aaron smiled innocently; however, the ends of his smile kept trying to turn into a clever smirk.

“You’re amazing, Aaron. Truly amazing,” Hercules wheezed between his laughing fits, “I wish I could have a portrait of Lafayette’s face he created! It’d be priceless!”

“It’s only in good fun,” Aaron assured the King as he glared at his laughing husband.

“George, your husband is being mean to me!” King Lafayette declared as soon as the bedroom door opened. George stepped out into the hallway, glancing between King Lafayette, Aaron and Prince Hercules before shaking his head.

“I was only gone for four minutes, Aaron,” he sighed, “Couldn’t you find it in your heart to behave for such a short amount of time?”

“Nope,” Aaron replied. George grabbed him by his hips and pulled him into a soft kiss. Aaron melted at the touch, wrapping his arms around George’s neck.

“Gross!” King Lafayette cried out with disgust.

“Cover your eyes!” Prince Hercules added. Aaron laughed against George’s lips, pulling away to shake his head.

“Let’s head to the beach,” George whispered, kissing Aaron’s nose, “I have so much I want to teach you.”
“I’ll follow your lead,” Aaron promised. He took George’s hand, squeezing hard as he looked at George’s outfit. His shorts were similar to the King’s, but his shirt was more plain like Hercules’. Aaron didn’t understand Frihet’s fashion yet. Perhaps he could ask Hercules to explain once they arrive at the beach.

“Ready to get beat, old man?!” King Lafayette challenged.

“Not everything has to be a competition,” George replied as they started down the hall.

“But life is more fun that way.”

“But won’t you get tired of losing?” Aaron spoke up.

“George, your husband is a menace.”

“I’m well aware of that. I’m extremely proud of his skills.”

Aaron smiled as they walked, unable to help himself. The playful bickering between them filled his chest with a fond feeling, the type of feeling he had only ever experienced with Theo and Bellamy. With each step, each word, Aaron felt more at home. He could get used to this feeling, to being this happy and carefree.

“How are they so good at it?” Aaron asked, watching the King and Prince ride the waves with ease with his legs hanging over the side of his own board. George was holding on to it to make sure Aaron didn’t float away as they continued with his lesson. Lafayette and Hercules had removed their shirts before swimming out to ride the waves, an odd thing to Aaron.

Why bother wearing a shirt to the beach if you’re only going to take it off before going into the water? Hercules ducked in and out while Lafayette used his board to fly high into the air, using the waves like a ramp. They were much farther out than Aaron and George, who kept to the shallower waters while Aaron learned how to stand up.

“It takes time before you can be that good,” George assured him, “Plus, Lafayette has a habit of using magic to keep his feet on the board.”

“Can we do that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Cause that’s cheating. And you need to learn the right way to do it.”

“You’re so boring sometimes,” Aaron whined.

“I know. I’m horrible,” George replied before tapping Aaron’s thigh, “Come on. Let’s try again.”

“I’m just going to fall on my face,” Aaron grumbled as he pulled his feet out of the water and knelt on the board. He thought he had good balance, but this board was proving that he was mistaken. He couldn’t keep his footing long enough to move more than a few inches, the waves tipping the board one way then the other at random intervals. He felt as if he had already tried a hundred times, yet George refused to give up on him. Aaron was less hopeful. Aaron slowly climbed to his feet, holding his arms out to keep himself steady.

“That’s good. Just take it slow,” George encouraged. Aaron straightened his legs a little bit more but
kept his knees slightly bent. A small wave tilted the board, making Aaron stagger for a moment. He
shut his eyes, fearful that he was about the fall, but this time he was able to correct his footing in
time.

“See! You can do it!”

“Let’s not celebrate yet,” Aaron warned as more waves came their way.

“Just stay focused.”

“Easy for you to say.”

The board gently rocked up and down. Aaron was able to correct his footing and get a feel for the
movement. The board was smooth and shaped in a way to help cut through the waves better, at least
that’s what Hercules had told him. Suddenly, the board tilted too much to the left and Aaron started
to fall. However, something caught him and helped him correct his footing just in time.

“I thought we couldn’t use magic,” Aaron said, looking down at George. He was both grateful and
annoyed at the man’s help.

“I never said we couldn’t use magic. I just said you couldn’t use it to stick your feet to the board,”
George replied with a smile.

“Inching around the rules. How typical of you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Do you want me to take you out? I can ride with you so you can see what it
really feels like first?”

“Okay. What do I do?”

“Kneel down first while I get ready.”

“Get ready?” Aaron asked in confusion. What would George have to do to get ready? George kept
one hand on the board as he slipped his other arm out of his shirt. He reversed his hold to get the
other arm out before throwing his wet shirt into the air and sending it flying towards the sand.

Aaron’s eyes watched it go, deciding that the beach was much more interesting than his husband’s
bare chest. He was used to seeing it by now, after all George never slept with a shirt on, but that
didn’t stop Aaron from wanting to stare or the heat that twisted in his stomach. The board tipped
backwards as George climbed on behind him.

“We have to get out to the reef first,” George explained, dipping his hands into the water to push
them forward, “Once we’re there, I’ll get us started and help you stand up.”

“Was it’s necessary to take your shirt off?” Aaron asked without thinking. George was quiet for a
moment before chuckling near Aaron’s right ear.

“No reason,” Aaron said quickly, keeping his eyes ahead of them as George moved the board farther
out to sea. They moved in silence for a while.

“Get ready,” George warned as he turned the board to face the beach.

“I’m ready,” Aaron assured him. A large wave that stretched high into the sky came towards them.
Aaron swallowed down his fear, focusing on what George as the wave lifted their board into the air.
George jumped to his feet, easily keeping his balance as the wave took them towards the sand.

“Up you go,” George ordered, grabbing Aaron’s shoulders and helping him to his feet as well. Aaron tried to stay steady, but the board was wet and slippery. He was going to fall! Strong arms wrapped around his waist, giving his feet a chance to figure themselves out. Finally, Aaron found the right placement and was able to support himself.

“Hold on,” George warned as he guided the board along the wave. Aaron looked to his left, eyes widening at the clear water next to them. He could see some fish and other sea creatures swimming through the wave. He reached out to touch it, spraying some water over George and himself. It was wonderful. Amazing. Aaron couldn’t put it into words.

Wind whipped around them as George zigzagged the board along the wave. They were going so fast, yet it also felt like there weren’t even moving. George let the wave carrying them into the shallows again. He jumped off the board, preventing it from going into the sand, and smiling up at Aaron.

“So?”

“Again! Let’s do it again!” Aaron demanded. George laughed before tilting the board sideways with any warning. Aaron’s arms pinwheeled as he tried to keep his balance, but he still fell back into the water. He resurfaced after a moment, glaring daggers at George, who was still laughing up a storm.

“What was that for?!?” he demanded, splashing some water into George’s face.

“Just some innocent fun.”

“Innocent?”

“I put more emphasis on the fun part.”

Aaron narrowed his eyes, taking a deep breathing and ducking under the water. He slipped underneath the board, swimming around George’s legs before hooking his foot around George’s ankle. He pulled hard, aiming to knock the man off his feet first. When George stumbled, Aaron grabbed his shoulders and pushed him below the surface for a few seconds. He quickly let go and allowed George to pop back out.

Aaron grabbed the board, pulling himself out of the water to sit on it as he watched George clear the water from his eyes. Water droplets raced down the man’s chest, traveling along his stomach muscles to disappear right above his hips. Aaron watched them race, his eyes trailing over his husband’s body. He forced his eyes to look away. He shouldn’t be staring. Shouldn’t be having such thoughts.

“You’re right. That was fun,” he muttered.

“Menace,” George declared, splashing some water over Aaron’s legs.

“You’re well aware of that,” Aaron echoed their conversation from earlier.

“Yes, I am,” George assured him, walking towards him. He placed himself between Aaron’s legs, holding onto the board to prevent Aaron from getting away, “And I rather enjoy it.”

“Do you?”

“Course I do. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”
Aaron grabbed George's cheeks and pulled him in for a kiss. Their teeth knocked together, making Aaron whine. He hadn’t meant to be so rough. George made a different type of noise, more of a growl that came from deep in his chest. A shiver went down Aaron’s spine. He pulled out of the kiss sooner than he wanted, kissing George’s forehead as he looked for an escape route. He suddenly needed to be far, far away from his husband.

“Would you like to go riding with Lafayette?” he suggested, “Hercules and I can sit and watch for a while. I want to help him with his new design, but I would hate to force Lafayette to sit through such a boring conversation.”

“I’m sure Lafayette wouldn’t mind.”

“Wouldn’t you rather be riding instead of listening to us talk about fabrics?”

“Well, yes, but I don’t want you to feel as if you have to go alone.”

“I don’t. I want you to spend time with your student, your friend. This is a good chance for you to do so.”

“Your heart is too pure for this world.”

“Don’t tell lies,” Aaron murmured, turning his face away. George kiss his cheek softly.

“I would never lie to you,” he promised. Aaron shut his eyes at the words, feeling his heart skip a beat. George pulled away and called out to Lafayette and Hercules. The two men paused their riding, making their way across the water towards them.

“Aaron would like to go in for a while, if you would care to join him, Hercules.”

“Of course! Perfect timing. I was hoping to get a closer look at your suit in action,” Hercules agreed.

“Be sure to keep your hands to yourself,” Lafayette reminded them. He playfully glared at Aaron and splashed a small amount of water his way. Aaron kicked some water back towards the King as a warning. The King shouldn’t start fights he wasn’t ready to finish.

“You have nothing to worry about, your majesty. I’m quite happy with my own husband,” Aaron assured him, sliding off the board to follow Hercules back to the beach.

“Be careful,” George warned.

“We will be.”

“There’s nothing to worry about out here,” Hercules pointed out. Aaron had a good feeling that his words did little to calm George’s concerns. He could sense George’s eyes watching them as they went, but he kept his eyes on the sand. Hundreds of thoughts floated around Aaron’s mind, each one trying to demand attention. His stomach ached for a few seconds before it started to do flips. He could no longer deny his feelings, nor his wants.

Aaron had never imagined that his marriage would turn out this way. George was perfect in so many ways. Nice and patience. Smart and funny. Caring. Gentle. Brave. Strong. Aaron’s heart yearned for him, begged Aaron to admit his feelings, yet Aaron’s mind refused to let him.

However, now Aaron’s body was also adding it’s own opinion to the mix. His body refused to ignore the fact that George was attractive. His blood set on fire. His throat started to close up. He wanted to kiss George until he couldn’t breathe, until it was all he could think of. He wanted more,
even though he wasn’t sure what more meant.

Yet at the same time, a darkness stretch out across his mind, heart and body. It wrapped around him so tight that he felt as if he was drowning. What if George didn’t feel the same way? What if George rejected him and Aaron ruined their marriage? It didn’t help that Aaron had never been with anyone and had no idea what actually went on in the bedroom. It just gave more power to the fear.

“Are you going to tell me what’s on your mind, or do I have to guess?” Hercules asked once they made it to the sand. He waved his hand, summoning a blanket, and laying it out on the ground before he took a seat. He dug his feet into the sand and leaned back on his hand as he stared at Aaron.

“There’s nothing on my mind,” Aaron lied as he took a seat next to him. He made sure to keep some distance between, not wanting to offend the King by getting too close to his husband, before he turned his attention to George and Lafayette as they rode the waves. He dipped his fingers into the sand, creating a pattern before wiping it away to start again.

“Are you sure? I’m only asking because if there was something on your mind, I would be more than happy to listen and offer some help.”

Aaron thought about Hercules’ offer, weighing the pros and cons as his finger drew a new pattern. It would be nice to talk to someone about his conflicted mind, nice to get a fresh point of view on the situation. Aaron was used to asking Theo and Bellamy for help, but this time his friends were too far away to assist him. Hercules might be able to give some helpful advice, yet that would involve Aaron admit his feelings and his fears. He wasn’t sure he trusted Hercules, or anyone, with such knowledge.

“I can’t tell you,” Aaron confessed, pulling his hand out of the sand and setting it on the blanket. He would if he could. But he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. He glanced over to see Hercules staring at him intensely. Aaron quickly looked away, his face heating up with shame. He was so helpless when it came to stuff like this. He felt out of his element, a fish without water. He didn’t belong here, didn’t understand what to do.

“When I first met Lafayette,” Hercules said, “I never thought we would end up married. I didn’t come from a noble family or anything fancy like that. I was a tailor’s son with no title whose only claim to fame was working for the military, but Lafayette treated me like I was so much more. He looked at me like I was special, and I saw him for who he really was as well. He’s more than a King, more than a leader, more than what anyone else thinks.”

“He’s a kind, sweet man who has the weight of a kingdom on his shoulders. He grew up thinking that he had more time to be a child, but fate had a different plan for him. Along with him came George and the other students. They’re like a family, as I’m sure you’ve discovered, and I felt so out of place. They were all so talented and I was just me, but over time, Lafayette and I got closer and closer. It was easy to see how well we fit together.”

“It wasn’t always easy. People talked. I myself had a lot of doubts. I kept thinking he could do better, I still do sometimes, but when I think about my future, when I think about what makes me happy, Lafayette is always there. It’s not perfect. Sometimes we fight. Sometimes our doubts and fears blind us from feeling joy with one another, but we always get through it. Always.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Aaron wondered softly. Hercules’ words echoed Aaron’s own thoughts, his own fears. George could do better, deserved better, but when Aaron thought about tomorrow or the next day, he imagined George being there. George made him happy, gave him hope and made him laugh. Aaron would be broken hearted if George was removed from his life for any reason.
“Because I know that look on your face,” Hercules replied, “It’s the same look I had after Lafayette and I started courting when I realized I truly loved him. Your feelings are all jumbled up and you can’t figure out which was to go. You think one way is better one moment, then something happens and you’re back at the start.”Aaron had to look away from him again, hating how easy it was for Hercules to figure out what he was thinking. A soft touch landed on Aaron’s hand.

“I figured my feelings out by talking with Martha. She was an older guard at the castle and was a good person to talk to. I told her everything. All my fears. All my worries. All those dark thoughts. She knocked me over the head. Told me I was being stupid for thinking that Lafayette didn’t love me back. Over the next few days, I admitted how I felt to Lafayette and it was the best decision I’ve ever made. Now we’re married and I wouldn’t change this for all the gold in the world.”

“I don’t know how to explain it to him or to you,” Aaron muttered hopelessly.

“Trying is the best way to start”

“What if I don’t make sense?”

“Then I’ll help you through it.”

“What if he doesn’t feel the same way?”

“He does.”

For some reason, Hercules’ short, simple replies built up rage inside Aaron’s heart. Did he not understand how hard it was for Aaron to confess such things? Did he not know that Aaron’s mind refused to focus on it long enough for Aaron to even come up with the words? Hercules made it all seem so easy, but it wasn’t. It truly wasn’t. Aaron let his anger spill out before he could stop it.

“How do you know?! You don’t know how I feel! You think you do but you don’t! You have no idea-”

“Peace Aaron! Peace Aaron! Please calm down.” Hercules pleaded, throwing his hands up, “You’re right! I don’t know how you feel, but I think I might still be able to understand and help you. I’m not trying to tell you what you feel is wrong or bad or unusual. I’m just saying that keeping it all trapped inside is not going to help you.” Aaron’s anger retreated, leaving behind a dark, sadness.

“I can’t mess this up,” he whispered, remembering his sister’s words, remembering how many people were relying on him. If he made a single misstep, the world would come crashing down around him. “Everyone is counting on me.”

“You’re not going to mess it up,” Hercules assured him, placing a hand on Aaron’s shoulder. Aaron hid his face in his knees for a moment, trying to get his thoughts under control.

“The way you described it, that’s how it is for me. He makes me so happy, my heart does flips when he’s around and I look forward to every new day by his side, but-but I can’t get over the fact that I don’t know anything about the world. He must see me as a child! I can’t even wave ride or farm or do anything except stand there and look pretty. He has to hate being married to someone so dull and useless.”

“Dull? Dull?!” Hercules protested, “Are you crazy? Aaron, you are not dull. You are exciting in all the best ways. You know so many things that I can’t believe you fit in all inside one mind, plus you come up with clever jokes on the spot. Lafayette couldn’t stop talking about you after the dinner. I’m sure that George finds you equally as entertaining.”
“Really?”

“Gods yes. He smiles so brightly when you speak, and he even encourages your playfulness, which means he likes it.”

“I guess you are right about that, but—”

“George doesn’t care that you can’t wave ride. I think he likes being able to teach you things in order to spend time with you and see you grow. I don’t think he cares that you don’t know everything in the world because he doesn’t even know everything.”

“He does seem to enjoy letting me explore new things.”

“Also, George himself can’t farm. Sure he can grow trees, but have you ever seen him try to plant lettuce? It doesn’t go well,” Hercules warned him. Aaron lowered his knees as he laughed. “You can’t mess this up, Aaron. You just can’t. George cares about you. I can see it in the way he looks at you when you’re not looking. To him, you are the man who put the stars in the sky. The man who carved out the ocean. The man who is the source of his happiness. You just need to let him know that you feel that way too. Then you will both be happier.”

“You make it sound so simple and easy.”

“I know it’s not, but I promise you it’s worth doing. It’s worth taking the chance. I know you’re scared, but push past those fears and I swear you will have a better tomorrow.”

Aaron thought about Hercules’ words as he watched George cut through a wave with great skill. A soft smile turned up Aaron’s lips. He did love George. He could not longer deny it to himself. He loved the man more than he ever thought he would. He wanted George to know it, wanted George to understand how amazing he was, how much Aaron cared for him. Another question pushed to the front of Aaron’s mind.

“Can I ask you something else? Something...embarrassing? I’ll need you to keep it a secret.”

“As far as I’m concerned, everything we talk about right now will never be repeated to anyone else,” Hercules assured him. Aaron shut his eyes, trying to figure out how to phrase the question. There had to be a way to do it, a way that didn’t make him sound like a fool.

“How do you...what do you do....” Aaron sighed, “With Lafayette, do you ever start to feel like your body is on fire? As if your blood is boiling? Your stomach twists into knots but it also feels amazing and you want more?”

“All the time.”

“How do you.....how do you keep that feeling going?”

“You mean how do you take someone to bed?”

“Yes?” Aaron glanced at Hercules nervously, hating the fact that he was so inexperienced when it came to physical relationships.

“You’ve never had sex before?”

“I’ve never even kissed anyone before George.”

“Damn,” Hercules murmured. Aaron couldn’t help but notice the surprised look on his face. Had
everyone assumed that Aaron knew what he was doing? Had George expected more? Was Aaron letting him down?

“Is that bad?” Aaron wondered, his eyes widening with horror, “Should I know how? Is it bad that I don’t?”

“No no! It’s not bad! I just assume that since you’re a Prince that you had a chance to do stuff like that. I mean people had to have been falling at your feet for attention.”

“My Uncle would never allow me to do such things before marriage, nor let anyone bother me about such things,” Aaron muttered. His Uncle was just trying to do what was best. Keeping him away from others helped Aaron stay focused on his own future. He didn’t get caught up in his feelings, didn’t put himself before his kingdom. Hercules was quiet for a long time. Aaron felt his nerves clawing up his throat.

“Do you think George has taken people to bed before?” Aaron whispered the question. He already knew the answer, but he still had to ask. Still had to know for sure.

“I know he has,” Hercules confirmed, “But that is in the past. He’s married to you now and I know he didn’t give much thought to the others. I’m sorry for making assumptions about you based on your position. It was rude and offensive.” Aaron wasn’t upset by Hercules’ words. He was sure that other people assumed the same thing, even if they didn’t voice it, but it did mean a lot to him that Hercules would at try to apologize for upsetting him.

“You’re forgiven,” Aaron replied, “if you answer my question.”

“Do you want to take George to the bedroom?” Hercules asked. There was no judgement in his voice, but such a question still made Aaron’s mind go blank for a moment. He had been walking around such an idea, avoiding saying it right out as if it would make the subject easier.

“I-” Aaron paused, looking away at the sand. He slide his hand underneath the grains for a moment as he took a deep breathe. “Yes, I do. I know I do. I think about it more than I want to admit.”

“There is nothing wrong with that.”

“Every time I get close to asking him, or even when I think it’s the perfect moment to just keep going, I get scared. I’m terrified that I’ll be horrible at it.”

“You can’t be horrible at it if you’ve never done it before.”

“George will be expecting-”

“Don’t do that,” Hercules cut him off, his voice strong and firm. Aaron flinched at the tone, but Hercules set a gentle hand on his shoulder, “Don’t think that you know what George wants or how he feels. That’s not fair to him, or to you. You only know what you want and feel. Focus on that.”

“I feel like I’ll disappoint him.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know how to do anything.”

“Neither did I,” Hercules confessed. Aaron’s eyes snapped to the other man’s face. Hercules didn’t seem embarrassed or ashamed in anyway, offering Aaron a soft smile. “I wasn’t exactly much to look at when I was growing up. People weren't interested in me, plus I didn’t have much time
between work and training. Lafayette ended up being my first everything. But going to bed was easy for us."

“How?” Aaron begged. He needed to know the answer. Needed to know what to do.

“I told him I was scared. I told him that I had no idea what I was doing and that I was so worried I would disappoint him. We talked about it. It was hard to admit such some stuff, but he listened and together we figured it out. Lafayette didn’t care that I was inexperienced. He was happy that we got to explore things together. He helped me through everything. That’s how.”

“That sounds too easy.”

“I know it does, but it will work. Just tell George what you want and what you’re worried about.”

“What if-”

“Aaron,” Hercules declared, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him lightly, “If you don’t stop letting your mind run in circles, you will never go anywhere new. You tried to wave ride. You tried new food last night at dinner. You tried new clothing and traveled to a new place. You can do new things, so stop letting your mind tell you no.”

“I-”

Hercules gave him a stern, but caring look. Aaron took a deep breath, pushing his doubts aside. He glanced towards the water, watching as Lafayette and George raced the boards. He knew what he wanted, knew what he felt. Hercules was right. He had to get over his fears, get through the walls they put in front of him, and be honest with himself and George.

“I can do this,” he stated.

“Yes, you can,” Hercules agreed. He wrapped his arm around Aaron’s shoulder, holding him closer.

“Now watch this.” He waved his hand innocently. First there was a rumble, then a loud splash. A shrill yell pierced the air.

“HERCULES!”

Chapter End Notes

Please take note of the new tags that were added. Make sure you are okay with them before you continue to read this story!!
“Aaron,” George called, poking his head out of the kitchen to look down the hallway at the bedroom door, “are you ready?” He didn’t get a response. George frowned for a moment before going back to the basket he was preparing. Hercules and Lafayette were off on their own adventure for the day, leaving George and Aaron to make their own plans.

George had left it up to Aaron. After all, this was Aaron’s time to explore what Frihet had to offer. His chance to see a world he had never seen before. George didn’t want to stand in his way. Honestly, George had expected Aaron to ask to go to through the city, but instead the Prince had simply asked to go swimming with George at a more private beach and have an early picnic. It seemed like a cliche, something straight out of a romance novel, yet George had been unable to say no. It was next to impossible to say no to Aaron, especially when he looked at George so sweetly.

George was almost finished with the basket, filling it with a bottle of wine, some fruit native to the area, a loaf of bread, and a few sweet treats he knew Aaron would enjoy. He had stolen a blanket off their bed to use on the sand, as well as some extra towels. They might need them if they decide to swim before they eat. Now he was just waiting for his husband to appear. It was taking Aaron an unusually long time to change.

“Aaron?” George called again. A door opened and he heard soft footsteps coming his way.

“Sorry for the wait,” Aaron said as he walked into the kitchen, “I was trying to figure out how to get this on right.” George’s mouth fell open, his jaw hanging down as he stared at his husband’s outfit. Aaron wore a purple shirt that hugged his shoulders with matching Frihet style water shorts. The shorts weren’t very long, ending mid thigh on Aaron’s long, dark legs. Something hot and dark stirred in George’s stomach, but he pushed his feelings aside. He picked his jaw up off the floor and cleared his throat.

“What did you get that?”

“Hercules,” Aaron answered with a smile, “I asked him for some Frihet style clothes and he sent me quite a few different things. Do you like this one?” George cursed and prayed to every god he could think of as Aaron turned around to show off his outfit. The shorts hugged his butt in a way that could only be described as sinful. The control that George pride himself on was slipping. No one was expecting them to see them today and they had the house to themselves. It would be easy to guide Aaron back into the bedroom, easy to kiss him senseless and slide off his clothes to allow George to see what was hidden underneath.

But they weren’t at that point yet. Aaron hadn’t shown any desire to go to the bedroom with George, keeping his distance when it came to such intimate touches. George would be damned if he pushed Aaron into a corner. He would beg for the gods to strike him down if he put his husband in a helpless position. It was normal for George to have such thoughts, for him to want his husband in such a way, but he wouldn’t act on them.

He had thoughts about Aaron at least once a week, if not twice or more. The man was handsome and in good shape. As they grew closer, George’s thoughts stirred up more and more. He had seen enough of Aaron for his mind to race at night or during other times when he was alone. George only allowed himself to fantasied, only allowed himself to dream. Besides that, he controlled his mind and...
kept a distance from the topic. He would wait until Aaron was ready, until Aaron said he wanted something more.

Part of George believed such a day would never come, that Aaron would never want more from him, but that was okay. He would never hold it against the Prince, never force him to change or to live up to someone else’s expectations. George was happy with their relationship, happy with where they stood, and more than willing to remain that way forever. Both of them being happy was much more important than George’s desires. He didn’t need more, only wanted it at times. But he wanted a lot of things he couldn’t have.

“I like it,” he told Aaron with a smile, hoping it didn’t look strained, “Do you need to do anything else before we go?”

“I don’t think so. You have the basket?”

“I do.”

“Should I grab another blanket?”

“Nah, one is enough. Perhaps grab something to cover up with in case of wind,” George suggested. The sea winds could cause a chill, especially after swimming, and the last thing George wanted was Aaron getting sick on their trip.

“Alright,” Aaron agreed. He stepped forward and placed a light kiss on George’s cheek before moving away towards the bedroom again. George’s face heated up at the gentle touch, cursing his mind for running away before he could get control of it. Aaron was so sweet, so innocent, and George wanted to ruin him in the best ways.

“Should I grab you one too?” Aaron yelled.

“Sure!” George replied, picking up the basket and moving towards the door to wait for the Prince. A few seconds later, Aaron joined him carrying two light cloaks. George noticed that both of them were his, but he didn’t comment on that fact.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” Aaron answered, sliding his hand into George’s and following him out the door. They had decided to walk the short way to a private beach. It wasn’t far from the house, but it was through a field of tall grass. The grass cut the beach off from the rest of the sandy area and offered them more privacy. It would be nice to be able to spend some time together without any eyes on them.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Aaron commented, squeezing George's hand as they walked.

“It is.”

“Is the weather always like this here?”

“For the most part yes, but during the stormy seasons it can get extremely hot to the point of discomfort and the water can be unpredictable,” George explained, “However, there are better things to talk about then the weather.”

“What if I want to talk about the weather?”

“I mean, then we can, but I’m sure I can think of a more interesting topic.”
“Go ahead and try,” Aaron challenged.

“Why did you ask Hercules for new clothes?” George wondered. He was curious about Aaron’s sudden change when it came to his appearance. George had offered to order him new Frihet clothes countless times, sending Eliza and Theo to ask Aaron about colors or styles, but the Prince had refused every time. Yet, now Aaron had asked Hercules for new clothes without telling him. George wasn't upset about it, perhaps a tad bit jealous, but he mostly wanted to understand why Aaron changed his mind.

“Because I wanted to,” Aaron said. George frowned at his short reply, unsure if he should press for more or leave the subject alone. “What did you think of me on our wedding day?”

“What?” George asked, thrown off by the question.

“Our wedding day, when I walked down the aisle wearing black, what did you think of me?”

“Aaron, that was so long ago.”

“Hercules explained everything to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“The colors you wear, the colors that you show to others, they mean something. You wear blue, which is the color of the army, but also the color that stands for bravery and honor. Alexander always wears something with orange, even if it’s only along his cuffs. That stands for perseverance. Eliza choose light blue, which is healing and caring. Everyone wear colors that have meanings to them and they send a message to the people around you.”

“When did Hercules tell you all this?”

“At the beach while you and Lafayette were wave riding.”

“Not everyone puts so much thought into their clothes, but you are right about the color I’ve chosen and Alexander. Eliza simply likes light blue over everything else. Similarly, John will change the color he wears at the drop of a hat.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Aaron pointed out as they broke through the field of tall grass onto the sand.

“Remind me of your question,” George said as he set the basket down and started to spread out their blanket.

“What did you think of me when I first walked down the aisle? When you saw me dressed in black on our wedding day.”

“I judged you harshly,” George confessed, keeping his eyes down as he thought about that day. What he wouldn’t give to go back and tell himself to be more kind, to give Aaron a chance to speak instead of pushing his new husband to the side so quickly. “I had assumed that you knew about the color traditions and that you wore black to spite me. I believed you were making your feelings known to me and the kingdom, showing that you were unhappy with the idea of our marriage.”

“George–”

“I was wrong, Aaron. I know I was, and I’m sorry I had such a harsh first impression of you. I was blinded by my own biased towards Tyst and I placed it all on you.” A gentle hand touched his
shoulder.

“You are not the only one,” Aaron admitted softly, “I judged you as well. I didn’t ask to bring you pain or make you feel guilty. I brought it up so I may clear the air between us. So I may explain.”

“You have nothing to—”

“It was my father’s,” Aaron cut him off, sliding his hand down George’s arm to take his hand, “The outfit I wore belonged to him, to the King before me. I wore it to honor him. Lafayette and others tried to talk me out of it, tried to offer me other choices, but I refused. I didn’t do it to hurt you, but to feel as if my father was there with me.”

“You did not hurt me.”

“Don’t lie.”

“You didn’t hurt me that bad,” George amended, “but it is all in the past and we have moved beyond such misunderstandings.”

“We have. We truly have,” Aaron agreed, pulling George towards the water, “Let’s swim before we eat.”

“Do you know how to swim?”

“Of course I do!”

“Are you sure? You didn’t seem very skilled at it yesterday,” George teased, pulling his hand away to slide off his shirt. He threw it back towards their blanket and used a quick spell to keep it from blowing away.

“That was your fault,” Aaron protested, taking his own shirt off and throwing it aside. George kept his eyes off his husband’s newly exposed skin as they moved towards the water.

“My fault?”

“Yes. You’re the one who threw me off the board.”

“I only did that three times.”

“Four times,” Aaron corrected, pausing at the water’s edge while George ventured further. The water was cool, but not cold enough to shock his skin. He kept his back towards Aaron as he looked out at the horizon. The water appeared to stretch on forever, making them seem so small. George knew that on the other side of the waves was a large island with a King who refused to take his sights off Frihet. He pushed the thoughts out of his head. He didn’t have to worry about that anymore.

*SPLASH!*

Cold water suddenly ran up George’s spine. He jumped in shock, turning around just in time to see Aaron lowering his leg back to the ground.

“Did you just...” he trailed off, narrowing his eyes as he put the pieces together.

“I didn’t do anything,” Aaron quickly said, a knowing smile appearing on his face.

“You’re playing with fire.”
“I’m pretty sure I’m playing with water, but we can agree to disagree.”

“I’m not sure you want to play this game.”

“Don’t you remember what I said before? It’s not really a game if I’m the only one playing.”

“My dear husband, you are walking a fine line.”

“Last I checked, I’m on solid ground, not a line,” Aaron replied, his smile turning into a smirk. He knew he was getting under George's skin, knew he was being a smart ass, yet George loved it. Loved their banter. Loved their small games. Loved how easy it was for them to go at it. He couldn’t help but smile.

“Let me fix that,” he offered, whispering a spell under his breath. His magic around Aaron’s waist and yanked him forward through the water until he was pressed against George’s chest. George grabbed his hips and leaned back, falling into the shallow water. Aaron squealed as they went down, the water covering their bodies. Giant waves crashed over them, soaking them from head to toe. George kept hold of Aaron so he couldn’t escape just yet.

“Let’s see how you like it!” Aaron playfully snapped, lightly shoving George under the water. George would resist if he wanted, but he let Aaron push him under. He opened his mouth, filling it with as much salt water as he could. When he resurfaced a moment later, he squirted the water into Aaron’s face. The Prince gasped in shock.

“I warned you that you were going to lose,” he teased.

“The game’s not over yet,” Aaron declared, trying to stand up. George easily let him go as he used another spell to send himself further out into the water, putting some space between the two of them. The waves tried to push him back towards Aaron, but George kept his footing and stayed where he was.

“Get back here!”

“Why don’t you come and get me?”

“I will!!”

The Prince made his way out towards George, marching through the water with a look of pure determination on his face. George waited until he was almost within arms reached before diving under the water and swimming farther away. Aaron jumped towards him, his fingers trailing over George’s leg, but Aaron’s hand was too slow. Their game of cat and mouse continued for a while, George getting away at the last second while Aaron tried as hard as he could to catch him in time.

“You’re not being fair!” Aaron complained, breathing heavily as he made his way towards George yet again. He couldn’t make things too easy for the Prince. Then it wouldn’t be as fun.

“You’re just not trying hard enough,” George teased. He was standing in a few inches of water, having made his way closer to shore to avoid Aaron's last attempt. The Prince narrowed his eyes, muttering something under his breathe.

CRACK!

Aaron vanished, reappearing an inch away from George. He took hold of George’s face, one hand on each of his cheeks, and pulled George in for a sweet kiss. George’s hands found their place on Aaron’s hips as his eyes slowly shut. He could taste the salt water on Aaron’s lips.
“Got you,” Aaron muttered before deepening the kiss. George's chuckled, licking Aaron’s bottom lip until he opened his mouth and let George’s tongue in.

**CRACK!**

Aaron vanished, leaving George standing by himself in the water. He opened his eyes and looked around, finding the Prince up on the sand with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes were glowing bright and an aura of magic was covering his body. He looked beautiful, and George only loved him more, but such a look could only mean trouble for George.

“What are you--” George started to ask before he noticed that the water was starting to recite. His eyes followed it, widening when he saw the large wave forming. The wave grew and grew until it towered over him. George tried to move, tried to get to the sand and away from the wave, but his feet refused to budge.

“How is this fair?!" George called to Aaron.

“You’re just not trying hard enough,” Aaron echoed his earlier words as he smiled innocently at George. He should have seen that coming, but he still rolled his eyes at Aaron’s sass. Suddenly, the wave crashed back to the surface, sending a wall of water towards George. He shut his eyes and mouth as it covered him from head to toe. It only lasted a few seconds, but it more than enough for George.

“I win!” Aaron declared, sound too proud of himself.

“Because I always let you,” replied George after he spit out some water and wiped off his face.

“That’s a lie.”

“It’s not.”

George’s used the argument as a distraction, working quickly to break the spell on his feet. He just needed a little more time.

“It is!”

“It’s not!”

“It–AH!”

George broke free from the spell, snapped his fingers and charged at Aaron before he had a chance to react. He knocked the Prince to the ground, being careful not to hurt him, and pinned him down in the sand. Aaron rolled from side to side, but he wasn’t able to throw George off.

“You’re getting me all sandy!” Aaron complained. George loosened his hold, but before Aaron could escape, he placed a kiss on the Prince’s forehead.

“I’m happy to see you using magic more,” he commented. Aaron froze, his eyes widening for a moment. He relaxed a second later and offered George a bright smile with an easy shrug.

“I’m not in Tyst anymore. Now I can use it whenever I want, so why not use it?”

“That’s very true,” George agreed, truly happy to see Aaron comfortable and happy, “Though I like it less when you’re using it against me.”

“You started it.”
“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t recall. I must have some memory loss brought on by my old age.”

“You’re not that old,” Aaron protested, kissing George’s cheek, “You just never want to admit that you start most of the trouble.”

“Me? Start trouble? I think you’re confused, my dear husband.”

“I assure you my mind is very clear.”

“Well, mine is fuzzy at the moment. Perhaps I’ll take a nap right here,” George suggested, laying more of his weight on Aaron.

“No! Get off!” Aaron shouted, pushing on his shoulders.

“Quiet Aaron, I’m trying to sleep.”

“Go sleep on the blanket then!”

“But it’s more comfortable here.”

“You’re crushing me.”

“Are you implying that I weigh too much?”

“No, I just–Get off!”

“Nope.”

“George!”

“Aaron!”

“You’re insufferable.”

“I know.”

“Get off!”

“No.”

“But I’m hungry!”

“Okay,” George replied, snapping his fingers and teleporting them to the blanket. His spell was quieter than Aaron’s and he made a mental note to teach Aaron it later. He rolled off the Prince in order to sit up and open the basket. Aaron sat up a moment later, pouting at George as he crossed his arms. “What?”

“You’re quite a handful, George.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, you are.”
“I do make life exciting, don’t I?” George wondered with a smile as he took out a piece of cake and passed it over to Aaron. He waved his hand, clearing the sand from their skin and drying them off. He grabbed one of the cloaks and set it around Aaron’s shoulder to keep him warm.

“You do,” Aaron replied, taking the cake and starting to eat it in small bites before shifting closer to his side. George pulled out the bottle of wine, easily uncorking the top. He poured them both a glass before wrapping his arm around Aaron’s shoulder. He moved the Prince closer, placing a soft kiss on the top of Aaron’s head.

“You’re a worthy opponent, I’ll give you that.”

“I did win,” Aaron insisted, leaning his head against George’s shoulder as he took a sip of his wine.

“You did.”

“It was a lot of fun.”

“It was.”

“Do we have anything else to eat?”

“Yes. I packed us a variety. Do you want fruit, bread, or something sweet?”

“Something sweet.”

George gently turned Aaron’s head and placed a kiss on his lips. Aaron laughed, shaking his head before he gave George his own kiss. George’s heart fluttered at the soft noise. With each passing moment, he fell more and more in love with the Prince.

“Very funny.”

“I try.”

George went back to the basket and pulled out some fruit covered in chocolate. He took a bite of one of the piece of fruit before offering the rest of Aaron. The Prince ate it quickly, stealing another from George’s hands.

“Do you think the others miss us?”

“I doubt it. Alexander and John are probably throwing a party right now.”

“Theodosia would never allow that.”

“I doubt she could stop him.”

“You underestimate Theo’s power.”

“If Eliza helps her, then perhaps they can stop, but I wouldn’t put it passed the boys to try and do something wild. It’s how they are.”

“Speaking of Alexander, how is his book coming along? I’ve seen him working on it, but I haven’t asked him if it’s going well,” Aaron asked, taking more fruit from the basket. George was glad to see that he liked the food George had picked out.

“It’s going alright, but he’s hit a rather big wall. It’s hard to write about a topic that people won’t talk about. He asked Lafayette if he could talk to some prisoners about their abilities, but Lafayette
refused. So far, he’s written over twenty letters complaining to Hercules about Lafayette’s decision.”

“That sounds like Alexander.”

“It does. He won’t give up until he figures out a way to finish his book. He’s goal isn’t to encourage the use of mental magic, but instead to educate people about what happened with it.”

“I hope to read it one day.”

“I’ll make sure that he gives you a copy.”

A brief silence fell over them as they continued to eat the food and drink their wine. Together they stared out at the ocean, listening to the waves and enjoying the warm, salty air. It seemed as if they were a world away from everyone else, as if they were completely separated from the events and issues that usually plagued daily life.

“I wish we could do stuff like this every day,” Aaron muttered. George held him tighter, understanding his feelings. George wished that life could always be so carefree and easy, filled with laughter and fun.

“If that’s what you want, then that’s what we’ll do,” George promised. He would do whatever it took to make sure Aaron’s life was happy, even if that meant sacrificing his own happiness.

“It’s not very realistic.”

“It could be.”

“George—”

“I’m serious, Aaron,” George cut him off, setting his wine aside to turn towards Aaron. “If that’s what you want, then I will do whatever it takes to make it happen. I would do anything for you.”

Aaron looked away, staring out at the water while George watched him. It felt good to say the words, good to tell Aaron how he felt, even if it wasn’t the three words he wished he could use. He wanted Aaron to know how much he mattered. Needed the Prince to understand how much George cared.

“Anything is a very tall order,” Aaron whispered.

“I’m up for the challenge,” George replied with conviction. Aaron gave him a soft look and moved closer to connect their lips. This kiss felt different than the others. It was more intense, bordering on desperate. It was as if Aaron was trying to tell him something through such a small action. Aaron pulled away, allowing them both to breathe, before climbing into George’s lap. He placed his hands on George’s shoulders and pulled him into an even deeper kiss.

“You said anything right?” Aaron asked. The words were so quiet that George almost didn’t hear them.

“Anything,” he confirmed.

“Then take me to bed.”

George's mouth fell open at the words as his eyes widened. His mind went blank, then it started to spin. That was not what he expected to be asked. He never imagined Aaron would ask in such a way, or so soon. He wasn’t sure what to do, or what to say.
“We don’t have to,” George started to explain, “I don’t expect anything from you, nor do I want you to feel like you have to do it to live up to other people’s–”

“You said anything,” Aaron reminded him, cutting off his explanation, “and that’s what I want. I know that’s what I want.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Aaron said quickly, a little too quickly. Doubt creep up into George’s heart.

“I don’t–”

“Do you not want to?” Aaron asked, a pained look flashing in his eyes before he tried to buried it underneath concern. George’s mind was spinning too fast for him to catch up. He wanted to. Heaven knew he wanted to, but he couldn’t. Not if Aaron felt like he had to, like it was part of his job or duties. He couldn’t be that man, couldn’t be that horrible husband who used their naive partner for pleasure.

“No, no. That's not it. I just–I don’t want you to feel like you have to.”

“I don’t!” Aaron declared, grabbing George’s face and staring into his eyes, “I swear to you, I’m not asking because I feel as if it’s what’s expected of me. I’m asking because I want to.”

“Don’t you want to think this through? Take some time to make sure it’s the best choice?”

“I have. Believe me I have. I can’t get you or the idea out of my head. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

George's heart and mind went to war with one another. He wanted nothing more than to take Aaron to bed and declare his love, show the Prince everything there was to know, but his mind refused. It was too soon. Aaron wasn’t ready. He wasn’t ready. Something would go horribly wrong. He needed more time to plan, more time to make sure everything went perfect.

George had been quiet for so long that Aaron's hands slide off his face into the Prince’s lap. Aaron tried to hide his disappointment, his pain and confusion, but it was written all over his face. He ducked his head as he started to hide away. His walls were starting to go back up as fear backed Aaron into a corner. George’s heart screamed loud enough at the reaction to drown out his mind.

“Neither can I,” George confessed. Aaron lifted his head to meet George's eyes, looking so unsure now. His earlier confidence had run away in the face of George’s uncertainly. “But I fear that if we do, if we don’t make sure we’ll ready first, that it could destroy us.”

“I’ll admit that I don’t know what to do or how to do it, I’ve never even tried to take someone else to bed, but when I think about it at night, I can only think about how badly I want you. I want you to teach me. I won’t demand or force you if you're not ready, but I need you to know that I want you. All of you.”

Even the most logical part of George’s mind couldn’t fight against such a deep confession. Some of Aaron’s word started to echo in George’s heart, spreading out into his body. He let out a soft groan, leaning forward to bury his face in Aaron’s neck. Why was it so much harder to go to bed with his husband then with anyone else?

“Don’t say things like that,” he ordered weakly.

“Like what?” Aaron asked in confusion.
“Nothing.”

“Oh, for the love of the gods!” Aaron exclaimed, pushing George backwards until his shoulders were flat on the ground. “Do you want me or not?”

“I do.”

“And I want you. Is that too hard for you to understand?”

George silently shook his head. Aaron pressed their foreheads together and let out a soft sigh.

“Then please, take me to bed,” he whispered, “Show me how to do it.”

“But–”

“If you don’t, then I’ll go back to the house and do it myself!”

That was an idea that George would never get out of his head. He shut his eyes for a moment in hopes of gathering his thoughts. As George made an attempt to win back his control, Aaron pressed his mouth against his neck. At first Prince’s kisses helped to soothe his mind. They were nothing more than soft, kitten like kisses along his neck and shoulders, but Aaron soon started to add his teeth and tongue into the mix. It was still playful, still borderline innocent; however, it stirred the fire in George’s stomach.

“Should I stop?” Aaron offered, pulling away. George opened his eyes, meeting Aaron’s unsure stare.

“Never,” Geroge whispered. He grabbed the back of Aaron’s head and pulled him into a deep kiss as his other hand rested low on Aaron’s back. George knew what he wanted, knew that he was ready, and Aaron believed he was too. He wouldn’t hold them back any longer, but they were going to do this right.

“Hold on,” he warned as he snapped his fingers. They suddenly landed on the large bed in the middle of their bedroom. Aaron sank back into the blankets, wrapping his arms around George’s neck to start another kiss. George’s own hands trailed up and down his sides, feeling his skin and looking for weak spots. Aaron wiggled when George went over his stomach, let out a sharp gasp when his thumbs pressed into his hip bones, and let out a heavenly sigh when George touched his neck.

Aaron’s hands went on their own exploration, though it was full of hesitation. He placed his hands on George’s shoulders before slowing sliding them down to his lower back. His fingers slid around George’s hips carefully, mindful not to tickle him as they moved over his stomach and back up towards his chest.

“You’ve been torturing me,” Aaron broke the kiss to complain, “Every night, when you take off your shirt, I couldn’t help but wish to feel your skin.”

“That wasn’t my intention,” George admitted, though it pleased him to hear about Aaron’s desires for him.

“I doubt you feel that bad.”

“You’re right. I hardly feel bad at all. You have been torturing me as well. Coming out wearing such an outfit this morning. Letting me see so much skin without any warning. You’re lucky I let you leave the house.”
“You shouldn’t have,” Aaron replied without a pure, “You should have kept me here this morning, but now you can keep me all day and night.”

“I’ll keep you forever,” George promised, capturing Aaron’s lips for a moment before making his way to the Prince’s neck. He pressed kisses over the area, much like Aaron had earlier, but he soon found a good spot to sink his teeth into the skin and create a dark mark. Aaron gasped as George sucked on the spot. His hands dug into George’s back as if he was trying to ground himself.

“Wait—” Aaron panted. George froze, his heart sinking at the word, “what about the food and the blanket?”

“Do you want to pause to go get it?” George offered. Aaron quickly shook his head. “Then we’ll deal with it at a later time.” He returned to Aaron’s neck, finding another spot to leave his mark. Aaron pressed up into him and held on tighter. George enjoyed the little gasps and whimpers he made, but it wasn’t enough. George wanted to hear more.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, leaving Aaron’s neck alone for a moment to kiss his cheek.

“All of it.”

“All of it? What do you mean by all of it?”

“I’ve heard stories about the things you can do in the bedroom,” Aaron confessed, turning his eyes away from George’s. Such a sweet, innocent thing. George’s stomach burned brighter at the idea of teaching him more. “Things I think I want to try.”

“Should I have you write a list?”

“That’s actually not a bad idea.”

“I was kidding!”

“I’m not.”

George placed his hand on Aaron’s cheek and kissed his nose. There was a long list of stories that Aaron could have heard and countless things he could want to try. George doubted that he would be opposed to any of them, but one day was not enough time to do them all, nor enough time to talk about the dangers or risks of some acts. Small, sure steps were needed.

“We have countless days and nights to enjoy one another, my dear husband. We don’t have to do everything right now. If I take all your first experiences today, you will be bored of me tomorrow.”

“Can we at least start with.....” Aaron trailed off. George smiled, raising a knowing eyebrow.

“Say it,” he ordered. Aaron bit his bottom lip as he reached up to run his fingers over George’s cheek and around his head.

“Sex,” he whispered softly, saying the word and then burying his face in George's neck. He bite a few different places, prompting George to close his eyes and enjoying the sharp feeling, “Can we start with that?”

“We can. I’ll teach you everything you need to know.”

“I-I want to be the one....” Again, Aaron trailed off and hid his face. George had had quite enough of that.
“Aaron, my sweet, you don’t have to be so shy. Nothing you say in here will scare me or make me care for you any less,” George assured him, forcing him back so George could look into his eyes, “Speak your mind. Follow your heart. I’ll guide you when you need my help.”

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“Of being bad at this. I want to make sure everything goes perfectly, but I can’t stop my nerves from making my thoughts become twisted and dark.”

“I already know it’s going to be perfect,” George said with pride.

“How?”

“Because you are already perfect. You are everything I could ever want in a husband, in a person who I share everything with. No matter what happens, I will enjoy every moment and it will not make me look at you any differently.”

“You sure?”

“More sure than I’ve ever been about anything.”

There was a brief pause, a moment when the simply stared at one another. Aaron broke the silence, and George’s mind.

“I want you to take me.”

“Gods help me. You will be the death of me.”

Chapter End Notes

Of course I had to make you all wait one more week for the actual smut, but at least you all know it’s coming now!

Thank you all for your comments! Make sure you thank my amazing Beta SadSeaChild for all the hard work they did! Without them, I have no idea where I would be!!
“You can die after we’re done,” Aaron suggested. It still surprised him how easily such words came to him. He never felt nervous or scared to tease the General. Instead, little jabs flowed out his mouth without any second thought. There was an ease to his words, a lightness in his heart when he said them. He slowly moved his hands up George’s sides and pulling him down into another kiss.

Kissing the General was just as easy. Aaron didn’t feel scared to start a kiss. Didn’t get nervous when he took George’s hand. He felt awkward asking to go to the bedroom, but only because he feared he’d be a terrible lover. He was comfortable with George. Happy. He had never felt so relaxed in his life. This is what he wanted. This feeling. This marriage. He never wanted such tender moments to end, only wanted to create new ones with his husband.

“I make no plans to leave you alone so soon,” George replied, breaking the kiss in order for his mouth to find it’s way back to Aaron's neck as George's hands squeezed his hips. Aaron let out a sigh, enjoying George’s tongue against his skin. He gasped when the General returned to using his teeth. Parts of his neck were already throbbing from earlier and he was sure that he would have dark marks tomorrow from George's teeth, but he didn’t care. He would proudly wear George’s marks everyday if he could.

“George–” Aaron whispered, his thoughts hitting a wall when George bit a new, tender spot on his shoulder. Aaron shuddered as George sucked over the spot. He was too good at finding all of Aaron’s weak spots, places that even Aaron didn’t know could cause such pleasure. Aaron needed more now. Needed George to get on with it before he went mad with desire.

“One moment,” George muttered, finding another spot that forced a groan passed Aaron’s lips.

“Please. Please,” Aaron begged. He tried to figure out what to ask for, going off the running list of things in his head, but he couldn’t decide on just one. There were so many things he wanted to try and he didn’t know where to start.

“Patience, my darling husband. There’s no rush. We have all the time we could want or need,” George assured him, leaving a trail of kisses from Aaron’s neck down to his chest. “I want to see how you handle this first.”

“Handle wha–oh sh–” Aaron cut off his swear by biting his bottom lip. George chuckled and repeated the action, slowly running his tongue over Aaron’s other nipple. The feeling was odd, though not unpleasant. It warmed Aaron’s chest and sent sparks of pleasure through Aaron’s veins. George pressed his tongue against the nipple before sinking his teeth into the skin around it.

“Shit!” Aaron gasped, arching up into George’s mouth.

“Finally,” George said with pride, “You cannot imagine how long I’ve been waiting to hear you
“swear.”

“Sorry, I know it’—”

“Don’t. Aaron, don’t apologize. Never apologize for something like that. Something so small and meaningless. I don’t care if you swear. All I care about is you being honest and truthful with me and yourself. I want you to let go and just enjoy yourself. Here, in this bed, in any bed, nothing else matters but the two of us together.”

“George,” Aaron whispered, unable to think of what else to say to the man’s words. His heart fluttered, the love he had for George only growing.

“Let’s see if what else I can get you to say,” George suggested, moving his hands up to Aaron’s chest. He returned his mouth to one of Aaron’s nipples while his fingers went for the other. Aaron shut his eyes as fireworks started to go off in his head. It was easily to tell that George had done this before. His fingers moved with so much skill, rolling Aaron’s nipple before pulling it just right. Sparks of fire ran down Aaron’s spine at the touches.

For a moment, Aaron wondered who was making so much noise before he realized all the gasps and moans were coming from his own mouth. He threw a hand over his lips, sealing off the embarrassing noises as George kissed his way across Aaron’s chest in order to switch sides. A gentle hand grabbed his wrist and tried to pull his hand away from his mouth, but Aaron refused to let it win.

“What’s wrong?” George asked, looking at Aaron in confusion. Aaron shook his head. Nothing was wrong. George’s confusion faded into concern. He let go of Aaron’s wrist and started to pull away.

“I sound stupid,” Aaron muttered, only lifting his hand enough to let the words out.

“That’s not true.”

“It is.”

“It’s not.”

“It–Ah! George!” Aaron moaned as George’s fingers got back to work.

“It’s not. You sound heavenly. The best sound I have ever heard,” George told him, kissing the middle of his chest while his fingers played with both of Aaron’s nipples. Aaron tried to hold still, but the touches made his hips wiggle. His water shorts were too tight, almost to the point of pain.

“I don’t like how I sound,” he said, mostly to himself.

“I like it,” George whispered, kissing all over Aaron’s face until he couldn’t help but smile. George’s hands paused as he stared into Aaron’s eyes. Aaron looked back, seeing the honesty behind George’s eyes and knowing that what George said was true. “I like it so much that I plan to keep you here for days until I’ve had my fill of those noises.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. I’ll send a messenger to everyone we know. No one is to disturb me until I turn my husband into a pile of mush with my tongue and hands.”

“I hope that is not all you plan to use,” Aaron teased, his shoulders relaxing at George’s words and attention. He trusted his husband, knew that George would never do anything to hurt him, never lie about such a thing. Aaron’s confidence quickly returned, as did his banter.
“Should I add something else to my list?” George wondered. His lips twisted into a knowing smirk as he raised a taunting eyebrow at Aaron. Aaron bit his lip at the question. He knew the word to say, but he was too shy to let it slip passed his lips just yet. George left him alone, returning to his chest before kissing lower and lower. His mouth stopped at the start of Aaron’s water shorts.

“I believe it’s time these come off.”

“You first,” Aaron demanded without thinking. George pulled back, tilting his head for a moment before reaching down toward his own shorts. Aaron sat up, closely watching George’s hands. He could do this. He wasn’t nervous. He wasn’t.

“Aaron,” George’s voice washed over him, “Are you alright?”

“You’re so much better than me,” he whispered, unable to help himself from voicing his fears. George shook his head as he grabbed Aaron’s hands. He kissed the back of both of them, then Aaron’s palms before setting them both on his chest.

“You need to stop telling yourself such lies, dear husband. You are you and I am me. We are no better than each other but on the same ground.”

“I can’t stop thinking that I’m going to be horrible. That you’ll look at me and run away.”

“I would never do such a thing. Never. You have nothing to fear. Nothing. Here,” George slide Aaron’s hands down his body, “You do it. You decide if I’m what you want.”

“You are what I want,” Aaron insisted.

“That doesn’t chase the fear from my mind either,” George confessed, “I also fear that you will look at me and decide this is the last thing you want.”

“I could nev–how could you think that?”

“Because you are so beautiful, Aaron. So beautiful that it makes my heart trip over itself when I look at you. I try not to compare myself, but it can be so hard at times.”

“You have nothing to...” Aaron trailed off as he thought about their situation. It was clear that neither of them had anything to fear, but their worries refused to allow them to move forward, which didn’t sit right with Aaron. He had an idea, a plan that would help them both. Aaron pulled his hands away, noticing the look of fear that flashed in George’s eyes.

“Together,” Aaron declared, placing his hands at the top of his own shorts, “We’ll do it together.”

“Are you sure?” George asked softly.

“I’m sure. Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Then together.”

“Together.”

They stared at one another for a few seconds before their hands started moving. Aaron kept his eyes on George’s face as they pushed down their shorts, partly because he was too embarrassed to look down and because he wanted George to know that he didn’t care how he looked. He cared more about George’s mind and his soul. No matter what, he would always love George. Always.
It didn’t take long for them both to shed the last of their clothing and there was a clear change in the air. Aaron wasn’t sure who made the first move, but they were suddenly kissing and running their hands over one another. Aaron felt like he was on fire, his skin burning hot, yet he didn’t want to stop. He never wanted to stop. He gathered all his courage and reached down between them.

George let out a sharp gasp, pulling away from Aaron’s lips to stare at him in shock. Aaron prayed that he wasn’t wearing a similar look. He hoped that he looked confident. George’s cock was heavy in his hand, different than Aaron expected. It wasn’t a bad feeling, simply new and unusual. Aaron slowly moved his hand up towards the head, rubbing his fingers across it. George shifted his head to the side, biting his lip as he took a deep breath.

“If I’m not supposed to be quiet, then neither are you,” Aaron warned, reaching up to touch George’s cheek as his hand wrapped tighter around his cock.

“I’m no–”

“You are,” Aaron cut him off, gently twisting his hand. It was a move that he often favored using on his own member, and it had a similar effect on George. Aaron now understood George’s desire to hear his noises. Everytime he moved his hand George would make a new sound and each was better than the one before. Aaron tried different things, hoping to hear every sound George could make.

“Am I doing this right?” Aaron asked as he tightened his grip. He believed so based on the noises George was making, but he wanted to be sure, wanted to know that he was helping George feel good. Honestly, he just wanted to know that he was doing a good job. That he wasn’t a failure when it came to stuff like this.

“There isn’t really a wrong way to do it,” George replied, sounding breathless. He held on tightly to Aaron’s hips, shutting his eyes for a moment before leaning forward to rest his face against Aaron’s neck and shoulder.

“But does it feel good?”

“Gods yes. You have no idea how much power you have over me.”

“Show me,” Aaron ordered. George pulled away to look at him in confusion, “Show me how to make it even better for you.” George shifted just enough to reach down and take hold of Aaron’s wrist. Aaron looked for the first time, his eyes widening. George had felt large in his hand, but now looking at his cock made it seem even bigger. Aaron watched intently as George guided his hand up and down, twisting it at just the right moment to make him shudder.

“Heavens above,” Aaron whispered to himself. George gave a low chuckle.

“You truly know how to make a man’s ego grow.”

“That’s the last thing we need.”

“My ego is nothing compared to yo–Ah! Aaron!”

Aaron smiled in triumph, rubbing his thumb harder against the head of George’s cock. The General moaned louder, but Aaron wanted him to say his name again. He wanted to hear George call out for him until his voice was hoarse, until his voice was echoing off the walls around them. George’s fingers squeezed his wrist painfully tight for a second before pulling it away from his cock. Aaron sat up in fear and concern.

“Wha–”
“There is too much attention on me and not enough on you,” George explained, reaching to pull Aaron into a soft kiss. “I’ll need to get something first, then I’ll show you how good I can make you feel.” Aaron could only nod his head at George’s words, watching the man climb off the bed and walk towards the bathroom. Aaron let his eyes roam over the General’s body, no longer ashamed by his deep desires. That was his husband. His alone. He had every right to stare and want.

“Will it hurt?” Aaron asked when George returned with a container in his hands. Aaron had a good idea he knew what it contained. The man paused, sitting on the end of the bed with a look of concern. It never failed to amaze Aaron how George could go from being in the heat of a moment to caring so deeply for Aaron’s feelings. It made him love the man even more.

“I won’t lie to you, it can hurt, but I’ll try to avoid it as much as possible. If you wish to wait, we can do som–”

“We are not going through that again,” Aaron cut him off, “I’ve already decided what I want and I plan to get it. I only wanted to be prepared for what’s coming.”

“You’re rather demanding,” George teased, pushing Aaron back against the mattress and kissing him roughly. George had a great fascination with biting Aaron’s bottom lip until he moaned in pain and pleasure. Aaron dragged his nails down George’s back, making sure to leave small red lines behind just to hear George gasp and whine.

“If you don’t hurry up, then I’ll have to take matters into my own hands.”

“Shhh, my little spark. I’ll take care of you if you give me a moment.”

“Spark?” Aaron asked. That was a new nickname he had yet to hear before.

“Yes,” George replied, kissing down Aaron’s chest quickly before one of his hands pushed Aaron’s legs farther apart. Aaron held his breathe at the touch, his nerves trying to resurface. “You’re the spark of life, the one who gives me the power to do so much more.”

“I don’t have that much power.”

“You do. You truly do. You are kind and graceful. Gentle, but strong. You bring light to the world like a bright flame against the darkness and you start a fire inside me. I will always make sure that you are allowed to burn, allowed to shine.”

“Georg–oh shit!” Aaron choked on his feelings and words as one of George’s hands wrapped around his cock. The other disappeared between his legs and pressed against the hole that was there. Aaron let out a loud whimper, covering his face in shame. It was an odd feeling, having someone’s fingers in such a place, but he wanted it so badly. He would do so many things in order to get George to touch him again and again.

“You mean so much to me,” George whispered, his hand slowly moving up and down as Aaron wiggled against the blanket. “I hope you know that.”

“I–I do!” Aaron assured him. He let out a choked cry when George’s first finger gently pressed against his hole. His hands flew to the blanket. He gripped it tightly until his fingers hurt. It helped ground him as all the new feelings threatened to take him away.

“You will tell me if I hurt you.”

“I will.”
“I will stop if you don’t.”

“Gods above, I told you I’ll tell you! Now hurry up!”

“Patience. I plan to take my time and ensure that you lost your mind.”

“I’ve already lo—oh fu—George!” The finger pushed and pushed until it gently pushed inside. Aaron’s mind went quiet at the feeling. It was strange, but not unpleasant. He shifted around before George’s hand moved away from his cock to hold onto his hip, forcing him to go still. The finger pushed deeper. Aaron tilted back his head with a loud groan.

“Good?” George wondered.

“Weird, but good. Really good,” Aaron replied, shivering when George pulled the finger back out slightly before reaching even deeper. Every movement was slow and gentle, which Aaron was grateful for, but George was clearly skilled. He knew just where to touch, how fast to go to make sure nothing hurt, yet also keeping Aaron on the edge of excitement.

“If I could keep you here forever,” George muttered, kissing Aaron’s lips softly as he gently slipped another finger in, “I would. You are such a gift, such a vision.”

“Y–you–ah!” Aaron tried to reply, but his mouth refused to cooperate as George’s fingers shifted inside him. He grabbed onto George’s shoulders to ground his mind as the fingers pressed deeper. The strange feeling faded quickly, replacing with a heat that made Aaron feel as if he was burning alive.

“My beautiful husband.”

“Geo–Fuck!” Aaron shouted, arching his back as if he’d been shocked. Pleasure blinded his vision, taking control of his mind and leaving him breathless.

“A true vision,” George whispered.

“I did—I let me talk!” Aaron demanded. George’s fingers finally paused enough to let his mind clear. “I didn’t know it could feel this good. I don’t even know what you’re doing, but it feels amazing.”

“This is just to get you prepared,” George replied with a pleased smile, “Imagine how you will feel when it’s my cock instead of my fingers.” Aaron barely noticed when he added another finger, too blind by the amazing feeling that was clouding his thoughts. He pulled George down into a messy kiss. Their teeth clashing together as Aaron tried his hardest not to dissolve into a mess of moans and whimpers. George did something, Aaron wasn’t sure what it was, but it forced him to cry out from the amount of pleasure that rocked his body.

“Enough of this torture,” Aaron panted. His stomach was twisting in a new way. Such a feeling was familiar. It wouldn’t take much more for him to ruin their first moment together. George had to stop, had to give Aaron a chance to regain his control.

“Not yet,” George replied, “I have yet t–”

“You have to stop. If you don’t–Ah! George, pl–please!”

“Let go, my darling. Let go and enjoy yourself for me.”

“I don–I don’t want,” Aaron tried to explain. Thankfully, George paused for a split second. “I want it to happen with you inside me. You said your cock was next.”
“I did say that,” George muttered. His dark eyes scanned Aaron’s face, “Are you–”

“If you finish that question, I will force you to sleep on the couch for the rest of our trip even after you give me what I want,” Aaron snapped. George only laughed at the threat and carefully removed his fingers. He took hold of Aaron’s legs, gently moving them to wrap around his waist as he moved his hips closer to Aaron’s.

“Ready?” he asked. Aaron pulled George down for a slow kiss, taking a moment to calm his mind and enjoy his husband’s presence. He felt safe in George’s arms. Safe and cared for. He never wanted this feeling to fade. Never.

“Ready,” he muttered, “Take me, old man. Give me your cock.”

“Heavens,” George growled, biting at Aaron’s neck as he lined up and slowly pressed forward. Aaron gasped, digging his nails into George’s skin at the intense pressure. George’s fingers had been nothing compared to his cock. Nothing. It didn’t hurt, at least that’s not the way Aaron would describe it. He just felt...full? For some reason, the word made sense in his head. He was full of George. Full of pleasure. Full of everything he wanted. He let out a soft whimper as George pushed deeper.

“Pain?” George wondered. Aaron couldn’t help but smile at the rough nature of George’s voice. He could feel the man’s hands twitching on his hips. It was nice to hear and feel how affected George was by all of this. Seeing the man lose some of his calm control sent a hot fire down Aaron’s spine straight to his own cock. Only he had such power over George. Only he could make the man feel this way.

“No pain.”

“More?”

“Please?”

“Whatever you desire,” George said, giving Aaron more of what he wanted, “I will give you everything. Ask for the world, and it will be yours.”

“I–I don’t want the world,” Aaron replied, turning his head to capture George's lips in between his gasps and moans, “I want you. Only you.” George smiled and kissed Aaron’s forehead as he pushed deeper and deeper until finally their hips were pressed together and George could no longer go forward. Aaron couldn’t help but reach down and run a hand over his stomach. Part of him assumed that he would be able to feel George through his skin, feel the man’s cock pressing against his walls, but his stomach was still as flat as always.

“You flatter me,” George whispered, his words holding a hint of amusement. Aaron own cock gave a small twitch as he shifted back and forth to see how he could affect the feeling himself. Aaron stuck his tongue out childishly, letting out a surprised squeal when George quickly captured it in his own mouth. They kissed for a long time, taking a moment to simply share in one another. Aaron knew he was ready when George pulled away. He wanted this more than anything.

“Move.”

“Is that how you ask for something?”

“Move, or else.”

“Still no.”
“Please?”

“Much better,” George assured him with a smirk.

“What do you want from me?” Aaron snapped, narrowing his eyes in frustration.

“My name.”

“George. George please. You have to move. You need to. I want to feel your coc–”

“Alright, alright, enough,” George cut him off. He tightened his hold on Aaron’s hips and slowly started to pull his hips back. Aaron gasped as the full feeling retreated. It didn’t disappear completely, as George didn’t pull his cock all the way out, but Aaron still missed it more than he cared to admit. It felt like an eternity before George pushed forward again, filling Aaron up once more.

“Too slow,” Aaron whined.

“Patience.”

“I have none when it comes to getting your cock in–”

“Shhh,” George ordered, covering Aaron’s mouth with his. Thankfully, his complaining seemed to work. George quickened his movements slightly, though not enough for Aaron’s likely. George had made a critical error. He let Aaron know what his weakness in, and Aaron was not above using it against him. Aaron turned his head to the side, breaking the kissing and keeping his lips far from George’s.

“Faster.”

“Wait for it,” George assured him, kissing up and down his neck as he kept up the same slow rhythm.

“George, please,” Aaron begged. He pitched his voice low. George’s rhythm skipped a beat. Aaron smirked to himself. “Please. Fuck me faster with your cock. I want everyone to know that you had me.”

“Aaron,” George whispered. The word sounded almost like a plea. George’s tightened his grip, sure to leave marks behind later as his hips pressed forward quickly. Aaron moaned as his nerves sang in pleasure.

“Like that! Just like that!”

“Like this?”

George suddenly went slower, so slow that Aaron couldn’t help but whimper from his need.

“Or like this?”

George snapped his hips quickly. Aaron lost count of how many times. Too lost in his pleasure as he moaned and begged for more. He raked his nails down George’s back, hoping to motivate him to keep the with the fast pace.

“Which is it?” George teased.

“George,” Aaron muttered.
“Do not think I’m so easily controlled, my sweet husband,” George warned, licking Aaron’s neck before biting right under his ear.

“Shouldn’t you know how to follow orders better?”

“I should. But I’ve decided to have you my way.”

“Your way will keep us here forever.”

“That is my plan.”

“George, please,” Aaron begged.

“I will never tired of those two words,” George teased. He finally increased his rhythm, rolling his hips faster and faster. He moved his hands away from Aaron’s hips to place them on either side of his head instead. He hovered over Aaron now, allowing Aaron’s hands to roam over his chest and stomach as he moved. Suddenly, something in George’s movements changed. Aaron yelped in surprise, shocked by the noise. George froze.

“No no! Don’t stop! Please don’t stop!” Aaron said quickly, “It just fe–”

“Good?”

“Great! Better than before.”

“Perfect.”

Aaron ran his hands up and down George’s chest before moving down to his stomach. One of them dropped off to wrap around his own cock, but George quickly grabbed it and held it captive as he started to move his hips again. Now, each movement drew a loud moan from Aaron’s lips as sparks of pleasure danced in his visions. He didn’t know what George was doing, but he was creating such a feeling that Aaron feared he would lose his mind.

Aaron tried to free his hand, tried to reach back towards his own cock. The great twisting of his stomach had returned with a vengeance, however it refused to build to the point that Aaron needed. A few strokes, no more than ten, would be enough. If only George would let go of him. George’s moving hips, the draw of his cock in and out of Aaron didn’t help either. It kept him on edge, at the top of the mountain without pushing him over to the other side. It was maddening.

It didn’t help that he could hear George panting and moaning in his ear as he kissed Aaron’s neck or bite at his shoulder. The man’s noises tightened the fire in Aaron’s stomach. Everything was too much. Every touch. Every bite. Every movement George made. Every sound. Aaron didn’t know where to put his focus or what to do.

“George,” he whimpered for help.

“Just a little longer,” George assured him, “then we’ll come together. You can hold on for me. I know you can.”

“Tortur–”

“Shush. I could do mu–much worse.”

Aaron’s eyes widened at the hitch in George’s words. He used his still free hand to grab the back of George’s neck and move him in for an easy kiss. George didn’t do as well as before, his tongue
uncoordinated against Aaron’s. Finally, he let go of Aaron’s hands and moved his own back to Aaron’s hips. His hips moved faster, rocking Aaron into the mattress.

“Now,” he ordered. Aaron’s hand flew to his cock. He squeezed himself just right, stroking in time with George’s hips. Aaron didn’t keep track, but it didn’t take much for either of them to come. Aaron let out an embarrassing noise, something between a cut off groan and a whimper, as he spilled into his hand. George didn’t seem to notice as he rocked his hips a few more times before going still.

“Fuck,” he muttered, sounding exhausted as he leaned forward to rest his head next to Aaron’s on the pillow. Aaron wrapped his arm around George’s shoulders and held him closer as his breathing evened out. He could feel George’s heartbeat underneath his hand. He shut his eyes as he focused on the beat. Over time, it went from a rapid drumming to a slow, but steady rhythm. Aaron smiled to himself just as George started to shift.

Aaron bit his lip to keep quiet as George slowly and carefully pulled his softening cock out. Aaron wasn’t sure if he should feel disgusted by the evidence that George left behind, but he only found himself proud of the fact that he had been the one to share in such a moment with George. He turned on his side to watch as his husband got up and moved towards the bathroom.

“I love him,” Aaron whispered to himself before a soft smile appear on his face.

“George!”

“One moment. I’m just getting us a clo–”

“I love you!”

_Crash!_

Aaron flinched as a number of things fell to the floor in the bathroom. A few seconds later, George came rushing back into the room with a surprised look on his face. Aaron sat up with a smile, reaching out towards George to pull him back into their bed. Aaron was almost giddy at his words, proud of himself for saying them. Proud that he had finally shared his feelings.

“Aaron, you don’t…” George trailed off as he stepped closer. He didn’t take Aaron’s hand nor did he come close enough for Aaron to grab him. The shock expression on his face had yet to fade. Aaron pulled his hand back in confusion. “You don’t have to say that just because–”

“I didn’t,” Aaron cut him off, “I’m not saying it because of what we did. I’m saying it because I feel it. Because I know I do. I love you.”

“Are you–”

“I will slap you if you ask that. The other times made sense, but don’t you dare question this.”

“I’m just trying to understand and make sure that you know what you’re saying.”

“I know what I’m saying and I know how I feel, Goerge. I swear on my life that I’m telling you the truth. I would never lie to you, not about something like this. I mean it. I love you.”

George stared at him for a while longer before slowly moving forward to take a seat on the edge of the bed. Aaron’s heart skipped a beat in fear. This was not the reaction he expected. He thought George would be happy, maybe even excited by the words. Maybe right now wasn’t the best time, but Aaron couldn’t help it. He needed to tell George. Needed to say it. Perhaps the General didn’t feel the same way? That could be the reasoning behind his silence.
“It’s okay if you don’t say it back,” Aaron softly offered, shifting across the bed to give George space, “I know it’s rather soon and I don’t want you to feel as if–” George’s hands flew out and grabbed Aaron’s. He squeezed tightly, preventing Aaron from moving another inch.

“I love you too,” George whispered, “Forgive me for not saying it right away. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I was just...It’s surprising to hear that you felt the same way.”

“How could I not? Have you seen yourself? You are an image of perfection. Not only that, but I have never met someone so kind and gentle. So caring and smart. You are amazing, George. Truly amazing and you have stolen my heart.”

“I don’t wish to steal anything. I will only take what you give.”

“Then I will give you everything,” Aaron insisted, “I will let you have every part of me. I know I don’t have much to give, but you can have it all.” George pulled on his hand, prompting Aaron to move back towards him. George quickly grabbed him and shifted him into his lap. Strong arms wrapped around his waist, holding him close.

“I love you more than the world, Aaron. You have so much to offer, more than you could ever imagine. If I tried to list all the things I loved about you, we would be here for so long I fear you would fall asleep.” Aaron giggled at the words, hiding his face against George’s chest as the man’s hands ran up and down his back. “Truthfully, I was hoping to tell you of my feelings much sooner, but then I started to worry that they were one sided. I didn’t want to say it before you were ready.”

“But we had sex?” Aaron pointed out weakly.

“That does not equal love.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. People can have sex without loving the other person. And some people in love never have sex. It’s not a requirement for love.”

“I didn’t—I’m sorry that I—”

“Hush, my sweet spark,” George whispered, kissing his head. Aaron felt so foolish for assuming, but George’s words helped calm him. He settled down quickly as he enjoyed the touches that the man provided.

“To me, that was not sex. That was something quite different.”

“I have nothing to compare it to, but it was nothing like the stories I’ve heard,” Aaron confessed. “Because that was making love. Sharing a part of yourself with someone that you truly care about. You won’t hear stories about something like that. Few people want to share such precious moments with anyone else.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever cared about someone as much as I care about you.”

“You are rather sweet when you’re not making so many demands.”

“Hey,” Aaron protested with a pout. George only chuckled and easily lifted him up into the air. Aaron grabbed onto George’s neck held tightly as the man carried him towards the bathroom.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” George suggested, “then we’ll go clean up the beach.”
“Or we could get cleaned up and take a nap?”

“That’s even better.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The remaining days of their vacation went by too quickly for Aaron’s liking. He blinked and they were packing their bags to return home. After multiple trips to the beach, a tiring, but fun shopping trip with Hercules, a playful sparring match with Lafayette, and countless hours spent in bed with George, Aaron was sad that they were leaving. They created so many new memories that Aaron would never be able to forget.

Memories that he would hold close to his heart for the rest of his life. Memories such as the night they spent under the stars. George pointed out all the stars he knew and told Aaron stories about the adventures he had throughout the years. It had been a quiet, romantic night that only led to Aaron falling more in love with George.

Aaron wished he had such amazing tales to share, but George promised that they would make their own and they did. They tried cooking in the large kitchen; however, the evening had ended with tears of laughter at the mess they made. Nothing was funnier than seeing George covered head to toe in flour. Aaron took the time to create a pattern on his head, leading George to chase him around with the bowl of batter before they tripped over each other and ended up with batter on the ceiling. Cleaning the mess up had been just as fun, though Aaron felt like he had to learn some more water spells to keep up with George’s mischief.

“Do you have everything?” George asked for the third time as Aaron came out of their bedroom. Aaron smiled fondly as he took the man’s hand. Aaron checked and double checked every room to ensure that nothing was left behind.

“Yes. I checked the closet and all the drawers. We packed everything.”

“You’re–”

“Yes, George. I’m sure. The bags are all packed and waiting in the carriage.” The question had quickly become George’s catch phrase. Not a day went by without the man asking if Aaron was sure. It was sweet how caring he was, cute that he kept repeating the same question over and over again. Aaron teased him about it, kissing George before he could finish speaking before giving his answer straight away.

“Alright, alright,” George gave in, kissing Aaron’s forehead, “Thank you for checking”

“You’re welcome. Once we say goodbye to Lafayette and Hercules we can head out,” Aaron replied, grabbing Aaron’s other hand and forcing the man to place his arms around Aaron’s waist as he moved his own hands to rest on George’s chest. “Or we could stay another week?”

“I know you wish to stay, my spark, but we need to go home so we can get back to work.”

“The work’s not going anywhere,” Aaron argued, “Can’t it wait a few more days?”

“Not this time. But we’ll come back soon.”

“Promise?”
“I promise.”

“There you two are!” Lafayette declared, walking into the living room and quickly pulling Aaron away from George. The King wrapped his long arms around Aaron’s body, squeezing him tight and refusing to let Aaron pull away. Aaron smiled and returned Lafayette’s affection with light touches of his own. He no longer felt awkward or out of place with the King.

It was as if he had a brother, something he had always wanted. Lafayette teased him, but he was also protective and sweet. Aaron couldn’t lie, he enjoyed the man’s hugs and affectionate behavior. It had been easy to drop the man’s title, easy to relax once he knew that Lafayette only had love and truth in his heart.

“Do you really have to leave so soon?” Lafayette asked, giving Aaron an extra hard squeeze before stepping back to look at his face.

“I’ve been trying to get George to stay all day, but he won’t listen to me!”

“You cou–”

“Laf,” Hercules cut him off, walking into the living room. George wrapped an arm around him and pulled Hercules in for their own private moment.

“But I’m going to miss them,” Lafayette muttered. Hercules and the King were staying for another week to talk to sea captains and members of the Royal Navy. It was all official business now, but they still got to see the sea every morning and night.

“I’m going to miss you too,” Aaron replied, pulling Lafayette into another hug. His words were as true as could be. He was excited to see Theo and Bellamy again, but he wished the King got to join them. He wished that George and the rest of them could stay on the beach forever. Here, the troubles of life were so far away. Aaron felt at peace, as if he didn’t have to worry about anything. He knew he wouldn’t feel the same at home.

“Lafayette,” Hercules called, “Don’t forget about your gift. They’re carriage needs to leave soon if they want to make it back on time.”

“Oh yeah! I nearly forgot about that.”

“Gift?” Aaron asked in confusion as Lafayette pulled away. The King reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a tightly rolled up scroll. He passed it to Aaron with a bright, knowing smile on his face. Aaron glanced at George for help, but his husband didn’t looked shocked at all by the turn of events. Slowly, as if the paper was going to bite him, Aaron took the scroll and unrolled it.

“A deed?” Aaron observed, quickly reading it. His eyes widened as he studied the details. It couldn’t be. He had to have misread something. There was no way that Lafayette would do this. “This can’t be...This is...for the house?”

“It’s for you. Everything in this house and the land attached to it is all for you,” Lafayette assured him with a soft smile.

“We can’t—I can’t accept this.”

“You can.”

“Lafayette–”
“I order you to take it.”

“But—”

“Please?”

“Why?”

“So you and George can have a place to visit whenever you like. I have no need for this house anymore, and I know you’ll put it to better use. Besides, I made up my mind a week ago when you first arrived and you can’t change it after a reaction like that. I know you like it here, Aaron, and I want you to be able to enjoy this as much as possible.”

Aaron stared at the King in shock, unable to even understand the words for a few moments. This house was his. His. Tears pricked at the back of Aaron’s eyes as happiness flowed through his veins. Aaron had never owned a house or land, never been given a place of his own. He quickly wiped at his eyes and pulled Lafayette close again.

“I can never repay you,” Aaron muttered, “First the dragon egg, now this...”

“I don’t want you to repair me, or even try such a thing,” Lafayette replied, kissing both of Aaron’s cheeks, “This is simply what our family does.”

“Family,” Aaron echoed as Hercules and Lafayette switched places. Hercules kissed his cheeks the same way, though he lingered for a moment on the second kiss to stay close to Aaron’s ear.

“Let him have this,” Hercules whispered, “Giving you things makes him feel good, makes him feel at ease knowing that he’s cause you some level of happiness. He wants you to find comfort here and wants this to be your home. It’s does take awhile to get used to, but it’s part of Lafayette’s personality.”

“It’s too much,” Aaron protested, “I’ve done nothing to deserve such a gift.” Hercules pulled him into a tight hug, allowing Aaron to rest his head against his broad chest. Aaron could hear his heartbeat, and the soft noise calmed his stomach. He didn’t have to fear his emotions, didn’t have to hide behind a mask. He could be honest, could admit that receiving such a gift made him nervous, but also excited.

“It’s not. This is only a fraction of what you deserved. Let yourself have this. Let yourself be happy and enjoy this. You’re family to us, Aaron. This is your home and this is what our family does. Expect more surprise gifts in the future.”

George reached for Aaron the second Hercules pulled away. Aaron quickly went to his husband, pressing himself against George’s side as he let the information sink in. A few tears trailed down his cheeks, but George quickly brushed them away and placed a gentle kiss on Aaron’s head. He held Aaron close as they finished their goodbyes, allowing Aaron to lean on him the whole time.

Aaron glanced around the house, astonished that it was now his. Theirs. They could come back as soon as he wanted. Maybe next time they could bring Theo, Bellamy, and the others with them. They would be able to spent countless hours enjoying themselves and creating new memories. Aaron couldn’t wait.

Lafayette hugged Aaron no more than six times, nearly dragging Aaron back into the house to prevent them from leaving on time before Hercules whispered something in his ear that made him stop being so clingy. Aaron leaned out the carriage window to fiercely wave, already missing them as soon as they were out of his sight. George pulled him back into the carriage to give him a soft kiss.
They settled down for the long trip ahead, sitting as close as possible as George pulled out a book for them to read. Aaron leaned against his husband shoulder and followed along with the story as best as he could as he thought of what the future might hold for both of them. A change had taken place, both between them as a couple and inside Aaron’s heart. Hercules was right. Aaron should let himself have this, should let himself be happy. And that’s what he was going to do. He loved George and George loved him. That’s all that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Scream at me friends! Let me hear you!

Also, remember that I have a [tumblr](http://www.example.com). So while I’m busy at work tomorrow, (I’m a nanny) you can come scream in my ask box and give me something to look forward too.

Quick Updating Note
Next Saturday, there will be NO new chapter.
Instead, I will post TWO chapters Thanksgiving weekend to celebrate the holidays and catch you all up. As finals get closer, know that there may be other times when a chapter doesn’t happen or comes out a little late. School comes first for me. Always.
As promised, there will be TWO chapters this week, but I decided to post one today and the other tomorrow.

I hope you all like it! Let me know what you think!

George slowly trailed his fingers down Aaron’s spine, enjoying the feeling of his bare skin and the marks spread out across his back. He stopped at the edge of the blanket that covered Aaron’s lower half, deciding against taking a peek, and ran his fingers back up. He repeated the process from the beginning, unable to stop himself. He noticed a smile on Aaron’s lips as he turned another page in his book. His husband enjoyed such touches, even if he would never admit it out loud.

The candles in their bedroom were burning low. The world outside was dark and calm. Their fire was burnt down, leaving only coals behind, but they didn’t need the roaring flames where they were under the blankets. Such tender moments like this were the best part of life. Quiet moments spent together with nothing weighing on their hearts or minds.

“You’re playing with fire, dear husband,” Aaron muttered as George’s fingers dipped lower and lower with each pass. It was clear that he was no longer reading his book, his eyes frozen on the top of the page as George paused to rub his fingers into Aaron’s lower back. Like him, Aaron had started to forgo his shirt at night. The sight of his beautiful skin often led to late night activities. George couldn’t help himself. Keeping his hands off his husband was an impossible task, especially when Aaron made such beautiful noises when he was touched.

“Do you plan on burning me, my little spark?” George wondered, using his new favorite nickname. It fit Aaron well, capturing both his personality and his appearance. Aaron hummed, pretending to think about the question as he set his book aside. George pulled him closer and placed a kiss on his cheek. Aaron’s smile grew as he wiggled closer still until there was no space left between them.

“Perhaps I do.”

“I would wear each marks with pride.”

“Of course you would, but I could never hurt you like that.”

“It doesn’t have to hurt.”

“Is this another sexual thing?”

“It is.”

“Then we can try it another time,” Aaron declared, hiding his face in the pillows, “I’m already worn out from earlier.”

“We barely did anything,” George teased as he moved Aaron to rest on his chest instead. They had only been back home for five days and already they crossed off a variety of new experiences. Some
worked out, such as Aaron wearing George’s military jacket and hat, but other didn’t and they agreed to never speak about them again. George tried not to overwhelm Aaron. There was no need to rush or try everything all at once, though both of them were equally excited to try new things. They only gotten to a few things on Aaron’s list, which was long and detailed, but George promised they would eventually work through every last thing.

“Say that to my sore ass.”

“Turn around and I will.”

Aaron rolled his eyes and didn’t reply as he moved his head to rest over George's heart. It was his favorite spot when they were together. He enjoyed the sound of George's heart, saying that it brought him comfort to hear the steady beat. George enjoyed it too as he could kiss Aaron’s head, run his fingers up and down his back, and hold him tightly all at the same time if he wanted to.

“Watch your fingers,” Aaron warned when George let them dip underneath the blanket.

“I am,” George replied, watching as his hand slide beneath the blanket. He grabbed a handful of Aaron’s ass, enjoying both the feeling of it and the way Aaron wiggled at the touch.

“George....”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Now, remove your hand.”

“Give me a kiss and I will.”

Aaron let out a dramatic sigh as he shifted up just enough to connected their lips in a soft kiss. George’s hand quickly slid out from underneath the blanket to grab the back of Aaron’s head, keeping the kiss going for as long as he wanted. He could feel Aaron smiling against his lips and wrapped his other arm tightly around the man’s waist. His husband was not going anywhere, not for a long time.

Tap Tap Tap

They both froze at the sound of someone lightly knocking on their bedroom door. George waited with baited breath to see if the noise would continue. It could have been mouse or something in the walls. Or someone who thought better about waking them up and moved on after a brief moment. They might not have to get up. Might not have to move apart.

Tap Tap Tap Tap Tap

The knocking got louder and more frantic. George sighed, throwing an arm over his face as Aaron jumped out from underneath the blankets. Whoever was at the door better have a good reason for bothering them. By the time George pulled his shirt over his head and climbed out of bed, Aaron was already dressed and staring at the door. George wasn’t surprised.

While they often shared public kisses, Aaron was still reserved about anyone knowing any other details of their relationship. Alexander’s teasing and John’s knowing looks made him uncomfortable and shy. George could understand Aaron’s desire for privacy, but in a house like this, it wouldn’t
take long before someone saw something they weren’t supposed to.

“I’ll get it,” George offered, making his way towards the door and unlocking it. He opened it just enough to see Philip standing a few inches away with his stuffed wolf in his hands. George opened the door wider before crossing his arms over his chest. It was well passed Philip’s bedtime and there was no reason for him to be out of bed.

“How aren’t you in bed?”

“I can’t sleep,” Philip sadly replied, holding the wolf closer to his chest. It had been Alexander’s toy when he was young, but Alexander had passed it along to Philip as soon as the boy arrived at the house. It was worn out from being so well loved by both of them, yet Philip refused to let anyone take it away.

“Why not?”

“I had a bad dream.”

“Did you try to find Eliza or Alexander?” George wondered. Eliza would be able to give Philip something to soothe his worries while Alexander would be able to talk Philip to sleep. George was supposed to only be a last resort.

“No...”

“Why not?”

“Cause I wanted to see you instead.”

“All right. Let me grab a candle and I’ll take you back to bed,” George declared, moving away from the door to find a light source. He could use a spell, but he knew that it was better to leave the candle with Philip to help chase away his dark dreams. He was still a child, still susceptible to the dark and things he didn’t completely understand.

“What’s wrong, Philip?” Aaron asked. George glanced over his shoulder to see that Phillip had crept into the bedroom and was running a hand over his eyes. Aaron had knelt down in front of him, a look of pure concern on his face as he beckoned the boy to come closer.

“I’m just sad,” Philip answered, hiding his face in the wolf as Aaron stared at him.

“Why are you sad?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to sleep with us for tonight?”

“N-” George tried to protest.

“Can I?” Philip asked in shock, his eyes widening as he peeked out from behind the wolf.

“Of course you can,” Aaron assured him, pulling Philip close and picking him up with ease as he started back towards their bed, “The bed is big enough for all of us and we’ll keep all the nightmares from getting you.”

“Aaron,” George warned. He had restraints about letting Philip or Martha sleep in his room. It could quickly become a habit if they weren’t careful and the children needed to learn that they couldn’t always run and hide under George’s blankets when they had a bad dream.
“We’re not supposed to,” Philip pointed out, giving Aaron such a serious look that George’s heart almost melted. Almost.

“Well, tonight you can because I said so,” Aaron replied, setting Philip on the bed and crawling in next to him, “Besides, this is my bed too so I can make my own rules.” He gave George a challenging look, daring him to say something against his decision. Realizing that there was no way he could win this fight without angering his husband and upsetting Philip, George let out a defeated sigh and returned to the bed. Phillip pressed himself against Aaron’s side, holding onto the man’s shirt as George squeezed in on the other side.

“May I remind you, Phillip, that that is my husband,” George teased as they all settled down. “You can’t have him.”

“I don’t wanna take your husband,” Phillip said, “but he’s nice and warm. Even warmer than Moon.”

“Moon?” Aaron asked. Philip offered up his wolf as an explanation. “Oh, how sweet.”

“Alexander said he turns into a real wolf while I’m sleeping, but I’ve never caught him doing it.”

“Does he now? He must be very special.”

“He is. I love him and he loves me. Even more than he loves Alexander, but you can’t tell him that.”

“I promise I won’t.”

“Alright you two, time to settle down and sleep,” George reminded them, giving them both a stern look.

“Will you tell a story, George?” Philip begged.

“What a wonderful idea!” Aaron agreed with a knowing smile. George made a mental note to get back at Aaron in the morning. He clearly knew what he was doing and would have to pay for it later. Yet George was too weak to order Philip out of his bed or criticize his husband’s excitement.

“Oh, okay, I will, but you both need to stay quiet or I’m taking Philip back to his room.”

They both went silent, watching George with wide, interested eyes. George thought for a moment about the story he wanted to tell as he rolled onto his back. He stared at the ceiling as he got started with his tale.

“Once upon a time....”

Halfway through, George paused and looked over at Aaron and Philip. A bright smile appeared on his face the moment he realized that both of them were fast asleep, their eyes close and mouths hanging open. Philip had his chest resting on Aaron’s chest with Moon pressed against Aaron’s face. They were so calm and peaceful, a true treasure to behold. George gently reached for the blankets and pulled them up over his sleeping family before shutting his own eyes. He was just starting to drift off when...

Knock Knock

George glanced at the door in confusion, slowly and carefully climbing out of the bed to make his way across the bedroom before the knocking could wake Aaron or Philip. He opened the door to find Martha standing before him with her hands on her hips and a pout on her lips. Her favorite sassy
position, just like her father.

“Martha, what’s wrong?”

“Can I sleep in here?” she asked, lip starting to tremble as her fierceness broke away.

“Martha-”

“I wanna sleep in here.”

“Why can’t you sleep alone or with Eliza?”

“Because I had a bad dream and I wanna sleep with you instead!” Martha snapped, raising her voice.

“Watch your tone,” George warned. Within seconds, tears of frustrated started to form in Martha’s eyes as her hands slipped off her hips. Her sudden change in attitude was alarming and create a cause for concern.

“I wanna sleep with you,” she cried, quickly wiping her tears away before stomping her foot in anger. George quickly scooped her up in his arms and shut the door behind him as he carried her into the room. Martha pressed her face against his shoulder, soaking his shirt with her tears.

“You’re too old to be acting this way,” George warned as he rubbed her back, “but for tonight you can sleep in here with Philip and Aaron.”

“And you,” Martha added, “I just wanna stay with you so you can’t leave again.”

“Leave again?”

“Yeah.”

“Martha, you know that I have to go on trips sometimes, but I’ll always come back.”

“But what if you don’t? What if one day, you never come back?”

George paused on his way to the bed, looking at Martha with wide eyes. She stared back at him with a teary expression, sniffing loudly as she tried to keep it together. Was that why Philip came to find him? Was he having the same horrifying thoughts? They were so young, so innocent. They shouldn’t be worrying about such things yet. Not for a very long time.

“That will never happen,” he promised.

“But it happened to Aaron’s parents,” Martha replied knowingly. George frowned, his eyes narrowing at the words.

“Who told you that?”

“I heard Alexander and Bells talking about it because he was sad one day.”

“Who was sad?”

“Aaron. Cause he doesn’t have a mommy or a daddy anymore and sometimes there are things that remind him of them.”

“You still have your fathers.”
“I know that, but I don’t want to lose you like Aaron lost his parents. Cause he’s still sad about it and that’s not good. I don’t wanna be sad all the time.”

“No, that’s not good at all, but do you want to know what he has instead?”

“What?”

“He has me. And you. And Philip. Alexander and Eliza. Theo, John and Bells. He has all of us, just like you have me. We are a family, and no matter what happens, we will always be a family. When Aaron is sad, we’ll make sure that he knows that we love him. Just like we do when you or Philip are sad.”

“Or Alexander and Eliza.”

“Or John. We will always make sure that we are there for one another. Always. And I will never leave you, Martha. Not for a very, very long time.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Can I still sleep in here?” Martha asked, her tears gone from her face as she stared at him with a hopeful look.

“Of course you can. Just be sure that you don’t wake up Aaron. He’s cranky when he wakes up,” George answered, carrying Martha over to the bed and helping her under the covers. He climbed in after her and allowed her to rest on his chest as they watched Philip and Aaron sleep.

“I like him,” Martha declared, her words absolute.

“Aaron?” George clarified.

“Yeah. I like him. He makes you happy and he’s nice.”

“I like him too.”

“No, you don’t,” Martha protested, a yawn breaking up her sentence, “You love him.”

“You’re right. I do,” George agreed, running a hand over her hair, “Now hush and go to sleep, my darling girl.”

“I am,” Martha whispered, her eyes already drifting close now that she was comfortable and warm. George glanced at Aaron with a mixture of confusion, worry, and some sense of betrayal. How often did Aaron have thoughts about his parents? He was so young when they passed, but he grew up with countless stories about them. Did he wonder what they would think of him? About how different his life would be if they were still alive? What thoughts bounced around his head that forced him to be driven to sadness? Why did he mention any of this to George?

George couldn’t believe that he was just now learning about the pain that plagued his husband’s mind. He could understand that Bellamy was aware of it, being that he was such an old friend of Aaron’s, but Alexander and the children? George would have to speak with Aaron soon and make sure that Aaron’s thoughts didn’t turn dark the same way Martha’s had. The last thing he wanted was Aaron keeping such pain from him.

He would need to think a plan, a way to ask Aaron about it without the Prince thinking that George
was trying to dig into his past. It would have to be a careful process, one that couldn’t be rushed. As George continued to think about it, he started to drift off. His thoughts were soothed by the soft snores and noises made by the children and his husband. He would have to deal with his worries in the morning when he had a clearer head.

“Philip, stop running in the house!” George ordered as Philip rounded the corner and nearly ran into him.

“Sorry!”

“Where are you going?” George called.

“I’m hiding!”

“From who?!”

“John!”

“Stop him!” John shouted a second later. George jumped out of the way as John rushed passed him.

“Both of you, stop running!”

“Philip, get back here!”

“Never!”

“Why you little shit!”

“Language!” George bellowed, trying to decided if he should go after the two of them or continue on his way to the dining room.

Alexander and Bellamy came around the corner a moment later, both already breathing hard as if they had just been running. Apparently everyone was breaking the rules today. George crossed his arms over his chest and gave them both a disappointed look. Bellamy glanced at Alexander, then at George before shaking his head.

“We can explain.”

“No, we can’t,” Alexander protested, grabbing Bellamy’s arm and dragging him to the side as they tried to go passed him.

“Someone better try,” George stated, moving to block off their path. They both froze. Alexander gave Bellamy a hard look as Bellamy turned his eyes to the ground. George stared at them in silence, waiting for one of them to break. When neither of them offered up an explanation, George tried another tactic. “Fine. I’ll just go ask Philip what’s goin-”

“It was just a joke,” Bellamy blurted out, “But Philip saw us and now he’s going to tell Aaron, which is not a good thing, but we swear it was just a joke.”

“And what was this joke about?”

“Bellamy!” Aaron called. George looked over his shoulder to see Aaron and Phillip walking down the hall towards them. Phillip was wearing a proud smile while Aaron looked both shocked and concerned. John was a few steps behind them, hands crossed over his chest with a scowl on his face. “Is is true?”
“No!”

“Is what true?” George asked.

“Nothing!” Alexander insisted.

“I saw them kiss!” Philip declared.

“Philip!”

“Please don’t!”

“It was just a joke!”

“Philip said-”

“Enough!” George yelled, forcing them all to be quiet, “Philip, what did you see?”

“George-”

“Alexander, be quiet or else you will not make a potion for a week.”

Alexander snapped his mouth shut, but he glared daggers at the young boy. Phillip took a step back to hide behind Aaron as he looked between Alexander, Bellamy, and John.

“Eyes on me,” George ordered. Phillip’s attention jumped to him.

“Don’t worry about them. Just tell me the truth.”

“I saw them kissing,” Philip repeated, “I saw Alexander kiss Bell and then Bell kissed John. It was gross.”

“Then why were they chasing you?”

“Because I said I was gonna tell Aaron about it.”

“And how did you see all this happen?” George asked, though he already had a good feeling that he knew the answer.

“I was hiding behind the curtains in Alexa-Wait-I mean.”

“Phillip, what have I said about spying on people?”

“Not to do that cause it’s mean and a bad thing to do?” Philip answered, ducking behind Aaron to avoid George’s incoming lecture. Hiding behind the Prince was usually a good idea, but it wouldn’t save him this time.

“We’ll talk more about that later,” George promised him, “but right now you need to go get cleaned up for dinner.”

“But I am clean!”

“I doubt that. Go wash your hands.”

“But-”

“Philip.”
“I wanna watch them get yelled at!”

“No one is getting yelled at. Go wash your hands or no dessert tonight.”

“Fine! I’m going!”

George waited until Philip stomped his way around the corner before turning to the others. Bellamy and John were blushing, looking anywhere but at one another. Alexander was glaring at Aaron as if he was hoping the Prince would suddenly burst into flames right there in the hallway. George rubbed his eyes as he tried to think of what to say.

“So was this really all a joke?”

“It better not be,” Aaron muttered. George quickly shushed him. It wasn’t the right time for such comments.

“Well,” Bellamy whispered.

“It wasn’t,” Alexander spoke up for them all. George raised an eyebrow. “We just weren’t really ready to tell anyone.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“About two weeks?” John calculated, glancing at the others who nodded in agreement. “It started while you were gone.”

“If you’re not ready to talk about it, then we won’t talk about it. I’ll keep Philip from screaming to the heavens, but you all need to know that he’s probably going to tell Martha who will tell Eliza.”

“Eliza already knows,” John admitted.

“Why does she get to-”

“Aaron,” George cut his husband off with a look, taking his hand and squeezing it. Aaron closed his mouth as he scowled at the ground.

“Thank you,” Bellamy softly replied. He avoided looking at the Prince, keeping his eyes on George or John. Alexander took his hand as John stepped over to stand on his other side.

“I do have one final question for you,” George confessed.

“Go ahead,” Alexander agreed.

“Did you keep this from me because you thought I would disapprove?”

“Heavens no,” John answered right away, “That’s not why. We’re still trying to figure it all out and we didn’t want to put the cart before the horse.”

“We know you would never disapprove of something like this,” Alexander added. Bellamy stayed quiet, glancing at Aaron before quickly looking away with a frown on his face. George kept his attention on them for now, deciding that he would deal with Aaron and his own thoughts in a moment.

“You’re right. I could never disapprove of who you choose to care for. Go wash up for dinner and apologize for calling Philip names. We’ll be join you soon.”
“Thank you, George,” Alexander whispered before pulling Bellamy down the hall. John gave Aaron a dark look before following after them.

“You have to leave it be, Aaron,” George said quickly.

“I can’t just not ask Bellamy about this.”

“You have to. They need time to work it out themselves.”

“They’ll use him!”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do. I know how Bellamy is. I know enough about Alexander and John to know tha-”

“Watch yourself,” George warned, protectiveness taking over at the idea of Aaron insulting his students. Aaron shut his mouth as he backed up.

“The last person who Bellamy even tried to pursue hurt him so badly that I thought I was going to lose him,” Aaron whispered, “I want to believe that Alexander and John will be the best thing for him, but I can’t help but worry. I can’t help but think about how bad this could go. Alexander and John grew up together. They’re as close as two people could be. What if they decide they don’t need Bellamy anymore? It would de-”

“You are thinking too far ahead, my little spark,” George told him, pulling Aaron close and holding him even when he tried to get away. Eventually, Aaron settled down and rested his head against George’s chest. “They’ve only just started and they still have a lot to talk about. You have to wait and see what happens, wait and see if Bellamy comes to you with his feelings or if he handles this by himself.”

“I can’t let them hurt him.”

“And I won’t let them. At the first sign of trouble, you can step in, but right now you need to stay out of it.”

“Alright.”

“I mean it, Aaron. I’m ordering you to leave it alone,” George commanded, leaving no room for loopholes.

“I will. I promise,” Aaron replied, “But that doesn’t mean I won’t worry about it.”

“You can worry all you want. I’ll worry about it too, but they need our support, not our questions.”

“Speaking of questions, I do have one for you,” Aaron confessed. George stepped back to look at his face, raising a curious eyebrow. “It’s about something that I heard in the village. Something I forgot about until now.”

“What is it?”

“What’s regle?”

George froze at the word, a look of shock taking over his face as he tried to figure out where Aaron could have heard such a word. It wasn’t like George was trying to hide it from him, but he had been
hoping to be more prepared than he was now. There was a lot of history behind that one word, a lot of pain and sorrow. He wasn’t sure that Aaron was ready to hear it all yet.

“It means...It means magic of the mind,” George answered. There was no point in lying to him, no point in keeping it from him anymore. It would only cause more confusion. It was best to explain clearly and answer any questions Aaron had about it before someone else got the chance. “I believe you call it mental magic in Tyst.”

“What happens to someone who uses it?”

“Why are you asking about this? You could ask Alexander about it instead. He’s writing a book on the subject.”

“He’s writing about the history of it, but when we were traveling I overheard two women talking about a boy using regle just a few days before. They said something about him using it to do horrible things to another boy. So what will happen to him? I didn’t think anyone could use regle anymore.”

George sighed, glancing up and down the hall as he thought about how to answer such a question. This was not the right place to have such a conversation, nor the right time. Dinner was only in a few minutes, yet George had a feeling that they wouldn’t be eating with the others tonight.

“Let’s go to my office to talk,” he offered, taking Aaron’s hand and leading him back down the hallway.

“Should I not have asked?” Aaron wondered as they walked.

“No, no, I’m glad you asked, but I would rather not have such a conversation in the hallways. This is not a topic for Philip or Martha. At least not yet.”

The rest of their walk was covered by thick silence. George collected his thoughts, outlined how he wanted this conversation to go, and calculated how he expected Aaron to react, yet he knew that he was really flying blind. He pushed open his office door and summoned a chair for Aaron to sit in before moving to take his own seat behind his desk.

“Truthfully, it all depends. If this was the boy’s first offense, then he’ll be sent away for a month as a lesson where he’ll learn why he can’t use such magic and how to prevent it from happening again. He’d perform a few community tasks to show that he had truly learned from his mistake before being allowed to return home. But if this was his second, or even third time, they may bind his magic in order to prevent him from continuing to use his powers against others.”

“Bind his magic?” Aaron whispered in shock.

“It may sound horrible, but it’s the only way. We can’t allow people to use regle. Not in anyway, shape or form. Even a small display could inspire others to push the limits.”

“I didn’t think people could still use regle so easily.”

“No one is taught about it, not anymore, but people who are born with the ability usually end up using it at some point in their lives. Either by accident or by hiding it until they use it for the wrong reason.”

“But why be so careful and reserved about it?”

“To prevent history from repeating itself.”
“What do you mean?” Aaron asked. George took a deep breathe as he thought about his options. He wasn’t sure if now was the best time to tell Aaron such a dark tale, a tale that often haunted George at night, but as Aaron leaned forward in his chair, George knew he had to tell it. The Prince’s eyes were wide and opened, curious about the world he didn’t know, the world that George knew too much about.

“A long time ago, back when I wasn’t even around—”

“That is a long time ago,” Aaron teased, offering a soft smile to lighten the mood. George smiled shyly at the taunt before shaking off Aaron’s words to focus on his thoughts. He could still remember the stories his mother told him, the tales of nightmares coming to life. Pain. Suffering. Horrible events that shook the world to it’s core. Or at least Frihet.

“A long time ago, regle magic was used by people working with creatures. It was easier to train large numbers of them when one human could give them direct commands instead of spending months or years getting them used to humans. It allowed for better relationships between everyone. Humans could tell hostile creatures to leave the town alone or face death, invite helpful creatures in, and help keep the peace between everyone.”

“It was still only used sparemly. Once creatures were trained, there was little use for it besides maintenance and upkeep of the commands. Some of the most powerful Regle users were rumored to be able to create a link that went both ways. They could speak to the creatures and give them commands, but the creatures were able to reply. They could have full conversations. According to the myths, that’s how centaurs were able to learn all the human languages.”

“But?” Aaron wondered, jumping to the twist that they both knew was coming.

“But, as is the problem with most things, people tried to use regle for the wrong reasons. At first, there were just a few isolated events scattered throughout the kingdom. A trainer in the South trained creatures to steal from travelers. Someone in the North tried to take control of the wrong creature and ended up as a meal instead. Small things. It’s just the way humans are. We always try to push passed the limits society or natures places on us, but we believed that we would be able to stop such wild acts and maintain the peace that had been created.”

“Then a woman named Catherine took control of half the kingdom right under the nose of the Royal Family. She started out innocent, as everyone does. She was a griffin trainer in the Northwest for many years. Countless people went to watch her train the creatures.”

“They said that she acted as if she was having a full conversation with them, replying to questions and laughing as if she had heard a joke. Catherine was powerful, probably the most powerful Regle user who ever lived, but after many years of training griffins, she started to believe that she could also train humans.”

“Train humans?” Aaron cut him off, a look of confusion on his face. George sighed and rested his face in his hand for a moment before he gave a clear nod. There had been a line in the sand, a line put there to protect everyone, yet Catherine didn’t care. She paid little attention to the rules she broke, or the consequences her actions caused.

“Regle had never been used on humans, or at least it wasn’t widely popular to do so. Creatures and animals were okay, but humans shouldn’t be forced to follow commands against their will. Catherine tried to change that idea. She believed, through regle, that she would be able to rid the world of all chaos and pain. She started small, using her powers on people in the local village, but she soon spread her power until she had half the kingdom under her control.”
“No one even noticed for a while. Crime rates vanished, but nothing else had changed. Then visitors to the area started to come home different. They were permanently happy. Felt no pain, no sorrow, no anger, but they also didn’t feel true love, or joy. They were stuck in contentment. It took a few more weeks before the rest of the Kingdom, and the Royal family figured out what had happened.”

“What happened then?” Aaron pressed for more information. George shut his eyes as he remembered his mother’s words. He couldn’t blame Aaron for not knowing. It was Frihet’s sole past and the events had not been widely published after the truth was discovered. The shame and pain was not something that should be spread across the borders.

“The King and Queen set out to find the source of the problem, but Catherine got scared and sent an army against them. She forced people to fight against their own family members and friends. She became the chaos and pain that she had been trying to prevent. The Kingdom was pulled apart by a horrific war.”

“Finally, someone was able to get close enough to Catherine to kill her, but by that time the Kingdom had already lost so many people. Sadly, we learned the hard way how dangerous and evil regle could be. It was decided on that day, the day Catherine was killed, that regle would no longer be allowed in Frihet at any level. Not to train creatures. Not on accident. Never again.”

“You make it sound as if you were there,” Aaron spoke up, standing from his chair and moving around George’s desk to touch his cheek. He stared down at George with a look of concern and worry. George looked back at his husband, wondering if his pain was clear in his eyes. “As if you experienced all of this.”

“As I said, it was before my time; but my parents were there. My mother-” George cut himself off. Was he ready to tell Aaron about them? Was he ready to open that part of himself up?

“George,” Aaron whispered sweetly. He leaned forward and pressed their lips together. The kiss was too fleeting for George’s taste. He wanted to kiss the worry off Aaron’s face, chase away the sadness that haunted his eyes, force all the pain in Aaron’s heart to retreat into the shadows it came from. “We don’t have to talk about such things if they hurt you.”

“My mother was there during everything. She was the person who was able to get close enough to Catherine to kill her and end all the suffering. My father, on a visit to the region, was placed under Catherine’s spell and returned home a changed man. He no longer loved my mother. No longer loved anything in life. He got up, did his work, and came home without any emotion on his face. He went through each day without truly experiencing it.”

“She told me how it was horrifying to watch, to see the lack of feeling in my father’s eyes, and it made her so mad that she came up with a plan to get revenge on whoever caused him to become so lifeless. When it was revealed that a Regle user was behind everything, my mother swore to save the kingdom the only way she could,” George rushed to explain. He had to tell Aaron, had to give up the past to get to the future.

“How?”

“She acted like she agreed with Catherine’s idea, that humans needed to be control to maintain peace. By doing so, she was able to gain Catherine’s trust and learn the secret to resisting regle. When it came time to kill Catherine, my mother was unstoppable. It was her sword that put an end to Catherine’s dark magic.”

“There’s a way to resist mental magic?” Aaron said in awe.
“There is, but I don’t know what it is. My mother never told me, never told anyone. She died knowing that secret. I think she died with many secrets, too many for me to count.”

“I’m sorry.”

George shook his head. The Prince didn’t have to apologize or give George any sympathy. It’s been years since his mother’s passing, years for him to come to terms with the stories she told, the deeds she performed, and the details she kept from him. The pain had faded to a dull ache in the back of his heart, one that he could ignore most days.

“Don’t be,” he assured Aaron, “My mother was a hero. My father was proof of what could happen if regle isn’t controlled and kept away from society. I’m proud of them, proud to be their son. I know hearing about such events isn’t pleasant, but we’ve learned from our mistakes and created a better world for everyone.”

“I’m sure they’d be proud of you as well,” Aaron said, his words so firm that George would never be able to argue against such a statement.

“Thank you,” George replied, pulling Aaron down into his lap and kissing his cheek. “I lo-”

“I’m proud of you too,” Aaron suddenly declared, cutting George off. His words were so sudden that George froze in shock.

“I-Yo-What?”

“I’m proud of you,” Aaron repeated, “Proud of everything you’ve done. For your kingdom. For your King. For me. I’m proud to be your husband. Proud to be here with you.”

“Aaron,” George trailed off, unable to think of how to reply. The words shouldn’t mean so much to him, yet his heart beat against his chest so hard that he swore Aaron could hear. It felt good to hear someone say that, good to know that someone was proud of who he was, of what he’s done and how hard he had worked. “Tha-”

“Don’t thank me. Just know that I mean every word. I truly mean it,” Aaron protested, wrapping his arms around George’s neck and kissing him sweetly. George shut his eyes, letting Aaron’s words echo in his mind as he enjoyed the kiss. Just when he thought he couldn’t love the Prince anymore, he would always say or do something that made George’s heart go fonder.

“I know you do,” George replied as he pulled away, “but please let me thank you. Please. I need to. I didn’t know how badly I needed to hear those words until this moment.”

“I’ll say it as often as you need me to. I’m here to....to...”

Aaron trailed off, his eyes going wide as he pulled his hand back to place it on his chest before looking at the door. George stared at him in concern. Was he in pain? He didn’t look distressed, more shocked and confused.

“Aaron?”

“The egg!” he suddenly exclaimed, scrambling out of George's lap, “Something is happening to my egg!” George jumped out of his seat and followed after Aaron as he rushed out of the room and down the hall. He sent a spell towards the dining room to summon John to their bedroom. They would need his help if the egg was hatching. John would know what a newborn dragon needed.
Chapter End Notes

Hey! If you have a quick moment, check out this link and fill out this poll to help me decide on my NEXT story! Thank you!

Till tomorrow!
Here is the second chapter for this week! Hope you guys like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Aaron threw open the door to their bedroom and rushed towards the dragon egg’s nest. The signal spell was working overtime to warn him that the large egg needed his attention. He felt a burning in his chest, a sign that something was about to happen. Something big. He knelt down by the nest, staring at the egg intently as the heat grew and grew.

“Is it going to hatch?” George asked from the doorway.

“I think so,” Aaron whispered, reaching out to gently touch the egg’s shell. It shook under his fingertips, swaying from side to side before going still once more. He couldn’t believe it was happening! Couldn’t believe that the egg was finally going to hatch.

“I’m here!” John declared, rushing into the room with Alexander and Theodosia right on his heels, “Is it hatching?”

“It’s moving,” Aaron answered, hoping that was a sign that it was truly the right time. He would be devastated if this was a false alarm. He didn’t take his eyes off the egg, not wanting to miss a single moment.

“Theo, I need some warm blankets. Alexander, get me a bowl of hot water and a clean cloth. Hot as in boiling,” John ordered, kneeling down next to Aaron and rolling up his sleeves, “Make sure the children stay away. Too many people in this room could overwhelm it.”

“Right away,” Alexander replied before leaving the room with Theo right behind him. George hovered over Aaron’s shoulder, keeping his distance but remaining a solid, comforting presence. Aaron reached back towards him, squeezing the man’s hand tightly as the egg started to rock again. After months of waiting, of watching the egg with excitement, it was finally happening! Aaron would have to write to Lafayette about this moment. Have to make sure the King knew how amazing it felt.

“It’s going to be slimy,” John warned, “and it might need some help getting out of the shell. You’ll need to be the first person to touch it.”

“So it can imprint on me?”

“That, and so it’s magic can connect with yours. It will create a stronger bond than just a simple imprint.”

“Will I feel it?”

“No,” John explained, shaking his head as he leaned towards the egg to look at it closely, “but the dragon will, and it will always know who you are.” Aaron nodded his head as the egg gave a more violent shake. John leaned back, keeping his distance as the egg moved around.
“Got the blankets,” Theo announced, returning to the room and handing them over. John first spread one across Aaron’s legs before laying the others around the egg without touching it. Aaron ran his fingers over the egg, feeling every bump and line until he had it completely memorized. Alexander came back a moment later with a steaming pot full of water. He set it down on the ground next to the nest and went away to stand by the door with Theo.

CRACK

The egg split, the smallest crack appearing down its side. Aaron let go of George's hand as he held his breathe, but the egg then went completely still. Aaron waited and waited, yet nothing happened. He glanced at John; however, the man only shrugged his shoulders.

“Sometimes it takes time. This is only my third dragon hatching and each one has been different.”

“Come on,” Aaron whispered, turning back to the egg, “you can do it. You’re ready.”

CRACK

Another crack ran the other way, allowing for a part of the shell to fall away. Aaron gasped as a tiny beak poked itself out of the hole. At his noise, the beak ducked back inside.

“Sorry!” Aaron offered, lowering his voice, “I’m just excited to meet you. You’re doing great. Take your time, little one.” The beak slowly returned as the egg rocked side to side. The cracks expanded, giving the beak more room to poke out. Soon, the dragon’s head popped through the shell while the body stayed stuck inside. The head was slightly smaller than Aaron's head and a deep purple color with a few light blue and green spots around the dragon’s dark blue eyes.

The dragon scanned the room before it’s eyes landed on Aaron. He reached out slowly to rest his fingers against the dragon’s scales. A sharp feeling ran up his arm into his chest. Aaron bit his lip to stop a gasp of pain from leaving his lips as the feeling quickly faded away. He blinked in confusion, trying to understand what just happened. The dragon moved into his touch, staring at him with wide eyes.

“Hello there,” Aaron softly greeted the creature, “I’m Aaron. I’m going to take good care of you.”

Hello, Aaron a soft, childlike voice answered, the words echoing inside his head. Aaron froze, staring at the dragon in shock as he tried to understand what just happened. You are much smaller than I expected, but that's okay. You'll do.

“How-” Aaron cut himself off, thinking back to the story George had just told him. He knew what was happening, had experienced a few times when he was young. The last thing he needed was George finding out. “How about we get you out of that shell? Nice and slow now.”

I think I’m stuck...

“John, how do I help him out?”

She please. She.

“Try and get your fingers inside the shell to pull it apart, but be careful about his neck,” John replied.

“I think it might be a girl,” Aaron admitted, taking the dragon’s words to heart as he followed John’s instructions. He carefully reached around the dragon’s neck to poke two fingers inside the shell on either side. Slowly, he pulled the shell apart until the dragon was able to get her front legs through. She used her claws to grab onto the blankets and started to wiggle the rest of her body.
“That’s it! You’re almost there.”

**You are very kind. We are going to get along quite well.**

The rest of the shell broke away and the dragon was free. She shook out her small purple wings and long thin tail, spraying Aaron with a slimy substance. He didn’t mind at all, too enchanted by the dragon’s amazing color to care about the mess. Her whole body was the same deep purple color. The mixture of light blue and green spots trailed down her back all the way to her tail. Her wings were small, but much longer than he expected.

“I didn’t know she would have feathers,” he confessed.

“Some of them do,” John answered, “but not all of them.”

**You sweet thing.**

Aaron’s face heated up at the dragon’s words. He wasn’t quite sure how he could hear her voice so clearly, or how she could speak to him so well, but he had no one to ask. No one to go to for advice. He learned of his gift at a young age, yet he still had no way of controlling it. He tried his hardest to avoid using it, but it seemed as if the dragon needed to communicate through his mind. Hopefully no one else would notice.

**That cloth would be nice....I’m rather sticky.**

“Oh yeah,” Aaron muttered, reaching towards the pot. He whispered a spell to protect his hands before grabbing a cloth and dipping it down into the burning hot water.

“Careful with her wings,” John warned as Aaron started to wipe her off. He started with her legs, being mindful about her sharp claws before working his way down her body to her tail. She wrapped it around his wrist, squeezing softly and holding on as he worked.

**Save your questions. I will answer them all once I have eaten and you have named me.**

“What kind of dragon is she?” Theo asked.

“She looks like an Aarde, though she could also be a Berg,” John explained, “It’s hard to tell. Most dragons look the same when they’re first born, but if her purple color fades, then she’s a Berg. If she’s an Aarde, the purple will stay, but she’ll lose her feathers on her wings and her tail will grow sharp hooks.”

**He clearly knows his stuff.**

“How long will it take us to know?” Aaron wondered.

“At least six weeks.”

**I could save you the trouble...**

Aaron shook his head, hoping the dragon realized his movement was for her as he continued to wipe her off. Once he was done, with her help, he took one of the blankets and wrapped her up before pressing her against his chest. He ran his fingers over her scales, shocked by how small and adorable she was.

**Don’t get used to it.**
“It’s clear that you’ve bonded,” John observed as Aaron cooed at the dragon.

“I think so,” Aaron replied. The dragon pushed her tail out from the blanket and let it wave in the air.

“She’s smaller than I expected,” Theo admitted.

*Hey, that’s what I said about you!*

“She’ll get bigger with time,” John promised, standing up from the ground and picking up the pot, “but we should get her some food and water right away. And she’ll have to stay with you until she’s big enough to handle herself.”

“She can stay with me as long as she likes,” Aaron muttered, giving the dragon a bright smile.

George stepped forward and rested a hand on his head. Aaron shifted his attention to his husband, offering him the same bright smile.

“George, look at her.”

“She’s beautiful,” George replied, leaning over to kiss his forehead, “We’ll make her a bed right next to ours so she can stay as close as she wants. Whatever you need for her, I’ll make sure you have it.”

“Thank you.”

*You have a fine mate.*

Yes, he did. He truly did. George couldn’t get any better. Aaron knew he had never loved a person as much as he loved the General, and there was no one in the world that would be able to be replace him. He made a face, summoning George down for a soft kiss.

“Let’s get dinner,” Alexander loudly suggested, “I’m starving.”

“You better hope there’s still food left,” John teased, moving away from Aaron towards him instead Aaron carefully stood up and moved towards the door with the dragon in his arms. He noticed John taking Alexander’s hand and tried not to made a face. Theodosia shot him a stern look as she moved to stand by his side. She peeked at the dragon, a soft grin chasing her look away.

“She’ll suit you well,” she whispered.

“I hope so.”

“I know so.”

*I like her.*

“Thank you, Theo.”

“You’re welcome. Bellamy told me that you found out about his relationship,” she whispered as they left the room. George wrapped his arm around Aaron’s shoulders and stayed closer; however, he remained quiet as they walked. Theo glanced at him, but a brief look from George was enough to get her to keep going. “He thinks you’re mad about it.”

“I’m not mad,” Aaron protested, “Just confused and worried.”

*You’re a little mad he didn’t tell you right away.*

Aaron stopped walking, shocked by the dragon’s words. How did she know that? Aaron hadn’t
even admitted that to himself.

_I'm in your mind. I can hear you just as you can hear me._

So you can read my thoughts?

_I can. You're mad at your friend for not telling you right away. You don't like secrets, hate them actually, but you're trying to mask it with worry because you don't want to hurt him._

I just thought he would have told me sooner. I thought he trusted me.

“Aaron?” George asked in concern, “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” Aaron quickly replied, quickly continuing down the hall to play off his sudden pause.

“Are you sure?”

There was George's favorite phrase. Not a day went by that Aaron didn’t hear it at least one, not that he really cared. George only asked because he was concerned. Aaron wish he could tell his husband the truth, tell him the secret that Aaron carried everyday of his life, but he knew that he would never be able to. George made that very clear without even knowing it.

“I was trying to think of all the things we’ll need for her.”

“Don’t overthink it,” Theodosia suggested, “We’re here to help.”

“I know that. I’m just excited.”

“What are you going to name her?” John asked over his shoulder. Aaron glanced down at the dragon in his arms as they walked, thinking if over carefully.

_Do you have a name already?_

_I do, but you won’t be able to pronounce it. Give me a new one, one that you can use for me instead._

“Indigo,” Aaron announced. He based the name off the dragon’s purple color, hoping that she would always be so bright.

_I like it._

“Very original,” Alexander grumbled. Three months ago Aaron would have taken Alexander’s words to heart, but now he knew better. He could tell that Alexander was only teasing with how he gave Aaron a over the top glare. John still punched his shoulder with a scowl in Aaron's defense.

“I like it,” George loudly admitted. Aaron gave him a kind smile, earning a soft look in return.

_And I like him...._

_George is an amazing person. I couldn’t have asked for a better husband._

_It’s clear how much you love each other_

_Is it?_

_Neither of you are at all subtle._
Well, I’ve somewhat given up on trying to hide my affections.

**So has he. Just make sure I’m not around when you decide to mate.**

Aaron almost tripped over his feet at the Indigo’s word as they walked into the dining room. He could hear the dragon’s laughter in his mind. He swore he even saw a smile on her face.

“Is that the dragon?!” Philip yelled. He tried to get up from his chair but Eliza pulled him back.

“Yes it is,” John answered as he moved towards the table, “but we need to give it space and not crowd around it until it’s until she is ready to see you. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Aaron replied.

“She?” Martha echoed, kneeling on her chair and stretching her neck to try and get a peek of Indigo beneath the blanket. Aaron held the dragon closer to his chest protectively.

*She can’t hurt me.*

*I know that....*

**But you’re still worried. You are often worried about things beyond you-**

*Not now please.*

“That is not how we sit on a chair, Martha,” George warned as he moved to take his own seat at the head of the table. Martha pouted, but she settled down in her seat. Thankfully, there was still food left and the plates quickly started to serve as soon as Aaron sat down. Aaron looked at the food then at Indigo, trying to decide if she could eat anything or if he should move to the kitchen and get her some milk.

*Milk? I’m not a kitten.*

*Then what-*

**Let me have that piece of meat.**

*Please?*

*Please.*

She grumbled, and it was clear that her manners were a little rusty, but Aaron still grabbed the small piece of meat off his plate to offer it to her. Aaron took a bite of his potatoes, aware that everyone was watching him. John and Alexander started to whisper while Eliza asked Theo about the hatching and soon the attention moved away from him. Indigo quickly ate her meat, poking her head out for more.

*What else do you have?*

“She’s pretty,” Philip said as he stared.

“Yes,” Aaron agreed, offering Indigo a small piece of carrot, “she is.”

*Try this.*
I will not.

It’s good.

It’s not meat.

“It seems we’ve added another child to our table that refuses to eat their vegetables,” George teased. Aaron smiled his way as Philip and Martha ducked their heads. Both such picky eaters at time.

I am no child!

You were only just born. You’re a baby still.

This is not my first life. Nor my last. I will-

Shhhh. Peace, Indigo. Peace. I’m only joking.

She went quiet for a time, though she did take the carrot and a few more piece of meat from Aaron’s fingers. It was clear to him that she was not a true newborn. She spoke too well, knew too much, and was too skilled to be completely new to living. Aaron would have to look in the library for more information on the topic so he could better understand.

Soon you’ll be able to ask your questions.

I don’t wish to bother you.

You won’t. I realize now that you are rather new to this yourself. I take no offense to your earlier joke. I’m not used to people trying so hard to understand while also being so comfortable with me.

Could your previous owners communicate with you this way?

No...You are the first. And I have my own questions about that, but they can wait until another day. Your husband is looking at you as if he you are part of his meal.

Aaron looked under his lashes at George, realizing that Indigo was right. He knew that look in the General’s eyes. One of love mixed with passion. Aaron’s face heated up as he focused his attention back on his meal, repeatedly sending George shy looks as they ate.

“Can I hold her?” Philip begged, “I’ll be careful and gentle and make sure to hold her hea-”

“You can,” Aaron answered, cutting the boy off as he stood up from his chair. Might as well get Indigo used to the rest of the family.

Family.

Aaron bit his lip as he moved around the table. The word had become a heavyweight in his heart ever since Lafayette and Hercules used it. He felt as if he was betraying his sister and uncle by finding such a home here without them, but he felt happier among George and his students. He had his friends, Bells and Theo, by his side, and he felt as if he could finally be himself. Hearing Indigo echo the word made the weight a little lighter. It would take time for his heart to ease, but he had all the time he could want.

“Me too!” Martha added, bouncing in her seat.

“You can hold her next,” Aaron promised as he knelt by Philip’s chair. Once the boy was in the right
position he set Indigo in his arms. Philip didn’t move a muscle, barely even breathing as he stared at the dragon. Indigo stretched her beak out to press it against his shirt. Aaron swore the boy started to melt at her soft touch.

“I love her,” Philip whispered, “I love her so much.”

*Children are always the most loving of you humans.*

*They are*

“Philip, why are you crying?” Eliza asked.

“Sh-She’s so tiny,” Philip sobbed, tears gathering in his eyes “And cute. I can’t take it.”

Indigo chuckled, wiggling her way out of the blanket to stretch her beak towards Philip’s face. She nudged his chin gently one way then the other to get his attention.

“She’s beautiful,” Philip declared through his tears.

“She is,” Eliza agreed.

“Just wait until she gets bigger.” John added. Philip only cried harder at the idea, squeezing Indigo tightly against his chest. Indigo poked at his face in an effort to calm him down.

*Poor child. Don’t cry. Especially not about me.*

“Oh Philip,” Aaron cooed, placing a hand on his head, “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“I ca-I’m so happy.”

“Oh my sweet boy,” George muttered, getting up from his seat to move to Philip’s side.

Philip echoed his feelings to George over and over again, overcome by his emotions. George listened intently, rubbing the boy’s back as he let his tears flow down his cheeks. Aaron smiled at Philip’s reaction, unable to help himself. The boy was so pure and innocent. So sweet. It wouldn’t take long before he was chasing after Indigo at every given chance.

*He’ll never catch me.*

*You say that now...*

“Can I have a turn now, please?” Martha politely asked. She only used her manners when she truly wanted something, a habit that Aaron picked up right away, but he couldn’t deny her. Not this time.

“Of course,” Aaron said, gently taking Indigo out of Philip’s arm. The boy turned to George and fell into the General’s arms, pressing his face against George’s neck as he continued to cry. Hopefully, George would be able to help him calm down. Aaron carried the dragon over to Martha and knelt down by her chair.

“Hold your arms out. Yup, just like that. Ready?” Aaron wondered. Martha suddenly shook her head and shrank away from Indigo.

“I’m scared,” she admitted.

“Scared?”
“What if I hurt her?”

“You won’t. I promise you won’t.”

“Can you help me?” Martha begged, her eyes wide with concern.

“Of course I can,” Aaron assured her. He placed Indigo in her arms, but kept his hands on the dragon to keep her supported. Martha stared at Indigo for a long time without saying a word until she finally took over holding onto the creature.

“I wish I was a dragon,” she whispered to herself. Aaron didn’t comment on her words, staying close to make sure Martha felt safe, but not hovering too much. “I would be red and have really big claws.”

*I like this girl. She has her moments.*

*I like this girl.

She has her moments.*

**Most people do.**

“What about me?” Alexander wondered, “Can I hold her too?”

“Why not?” Aaron agreed, “Might as well let everyone meet her.” So that’s what they did. From Martha to Alexander to Eliza to John, Indigo was passed around the room. She clearly loved the attention, snuggling up to everyone and making her own comments to Aaron. She liked Alexander’s voice. Enjoyed Eliza’s scent. Marveled at the feeling of John’s hands. And loved the sound of George’s heartbeat. Once Indigo was returned to Aaron’s arm, she let out a loud, wide yawn.

“I think it’s time for all of us to go to bed,” George declared. Aaron expected the younger ones to put up more of a fuss, but Philip took Eliza’s hand while Martha’s took Theo’s and they quickly walked off to bed. Alexander, John, and Bellamy bid them good night before wandering off towards Bellamy’s room. Aaron didn’t have the strength to care about what the three might be getting up to.

“You look beyond exhausted, my spark,” George commented, wrapping his arms around Aaron’s waist. Aaron leaned back into him as the events of the day took over. He knew he didn’t physically do much of anything, yet his body felt tired and sore.

*Spark?*

*Just a nickname.*

**Makes sense.**

“It’s been a long day,” Aaron softly confessed.

“It has,” George replied, “Let’s get you and Indigo to bed.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Before Aaron could move or protest, George lifted him up off the floor and started towards their bedroom.

**Well isn’t he strong.** Indigo purred. Aaron giggled, pressing his face into George’s chest and holding on tightly as the man walked.
“This never gets old.”

“What never get old?” George asked.

“This feeling. How happy you make me feel. How wonderful this all is.”

“I hope that feeling never goes away,” George said as he pushed open the door to their room and set Aaron back on his feet. “I hope you are always as happy as you are right now.”

“I know I will be,” Aaron promised, pulling George in for a gentle kiss before setting Indigo down on the bed to free his hands. He removed his shirt, throwing it aside to take care of later, and removed his day pants in favor of his looser sleeping clothes.

“I love you,” George declared, appearing behind Aaron already dressed and ready for bed. Aaron leaned back into the touch. He shut his eyes at the amazing, calm feeling in his chest.

“I love you too,” Aaron echoed, letting a bright smile grow on his face, “I love you so much.”

Dragons can live for many years, and when their bodies finally pass on, their souls find a new body in order to continue their lives. It is the cycle that we live. Over and over again until we are no longer needed by the world.

I’ve never heard of such a thing, Aaron admitted. He plucked another flower from it’s home and placed it in the bouquet he was making for the dining room table. The task was easy, leaving his mind open to Indigo’s questions. George was busy in his office. John and Eliza were working with the children on their lessons. Bellamy was helping Alexander with a new potion idea and Theodosia was cooking away in the kitchen. Now was the perfect time for both Indigo and him to get the answers they wanted without anyone coming to bother them.

They barely had a moment alone over the last week. John wanted to check up on Indigo as often as possible and the children were enchanted by her every move. Aaron, Theo, and Bellamy tried to spend more time together, walking through the gardens or reading the library. Aaron hadn’t even realized how much he missed his friends or how much they missed him until they were all sitting together as if nothing had changed.

George was the only person who gave him any space, spending more and more time in his office. Aaron let him be, not wanting to get in the way of his work, though he was curious as to what was pulling his husband’s attention away. George seemed out of it during their meals and at night he went to sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Alexander said that he was working on a project for Lafayette, but that was all he knew.

I’m not surprised that you didn’t know. The information has been lost over the years when people lost the ability to communicate with us. You’re the first person I’ve been able to tell and this is already my third life.

I thought you would be older than that, Aaron confessed. Indigo poked at his cheek from her place around his neck. Her tail was wrapped around his left arm with her head resting on his right shoulder. She looked like a very expensive living scarf, but she swore the position was comfortable.

There are many who are older than me, and also a few younger. It’s a very special day when a new dragon soul is born, though it doesn’t happen as often as you might think, she explained. Her voice was a welcoming presence in his mind. It reminded him of someone else, someone he knew, but for the life of him he couldn’t remember their name or how he knew them.
How does it happen?

That I can’t explain, not because I don’t want to tell you, but because I don’t know why myself. It just happens. We can all feel it when it does. A new dragon soul is a special thing. Sometimes it aligns with an older soul passing on for the final time, but other times it’s random and unexpected.

That makes me feel better.

It does?

You don’t have all the answers, just like me.

I don’t expect you to know everything, Aaron. You’re still so young and there are bound to be things you don’t know, Indigo assured him.

That’s a relief.

How long have you be able to use this gift?

Since I was young. I discovered it on accident one day. At first, I was scared that something was wrong with me. I could hear the voice of the animals in my head and ask them my own questions. It was like living a dream, but also terrifying because I wasn’t sure how I was doing it.

Who else knows?

Theo, Bellamy, and Bellamy’s mother. She’s the only adult we ever told. The voices were getting louder and I didn’t know what to do. She was the one who told me to keep it a secret, to make sure no one else ever found out.

I’m sorry you have to keep it a secret, Indigo told him, squeezing his arm with her tail. Aaron shrugged. It used to bother him more as a child when he was still too young to understand. Once he was older, once he knew his kingdom’s history, it made sense why Bellamy’s mother tried to hard to protect him. If anyone found out that would be the end of him.

Why do your people fear this gift so much? Why do they deny their magic in such a way?

Can’t you just look in my head and find your answers?

I could. But a relationship like this should be built on trust. I will not go looking for things that you are not willing to share.

Aaron moved on to another flowerbed, kneeling down to look for the best flowers. He wasn’t sure how to go about telling Indigo the tale, wasn’t sure he was even the best person to tell it. He hadn’t been there. Didn’t know the details. He only knew what his uncle had told him and what was written down in the history books.

Before my uncle was king, before my father, and even before my grandfather, the Kingdom of Tyst was filled with magic. People used it everyday, just like they do in Frihet, but over the years, people used it for everything. There was nothing done by hand anymore. Not even raising children. Crime was a horrible problem and people were out of control.

My great grandparents decided to change all that. First, they passed a number of laws that ban the use of magic in certain places. Then they tried to change how magic was taught in schools. They
offered money to people who obeyed without protesting, building grand libraries for some towns or gifting a team of creatures to another. It took many, many small steps, but soon they had made magic almost completely illegal except in the case of emergencies.

But then a group of people pushed back against the laws. They claimed the laws were reaching too far into people’s personal lives. They thought my grandparents were turning into dictators, taking away the people’s freedom and turning them all into mindless subjects. They stormed the castle. Attacked my family. Killed innocent people. But my great grandfather defeated their leader and used the event as proof of how bad uncontrolled magic could be.

After that, the people in Tyst stopped using magic all together for a number of years. They only started to use it again in order to protect towns from disasters or to keep invading armies away. Everything is now down by hand. The very idea of using magic is unthinkable.

For a society of magic users to not use magic... she muttered.

I didn’t realize how odd it was until I arrived here. You simply get used to how the world is and never think about how things could be different. All magic is considered to be out of the question, but mental magic, what Frihet calls regle, is a criminal offense with a sentence of death.

Heavens above, why is that? Why punish someone for such a wonderful gift?

It was my great grandmother’s idea. The leader of the rebellion was a mental magic user and she wanted to make sure that no one ever gained so many followers. She went after every person she could find and charged them with forcing people against their will. They were killed. Soon, the trait vanished from our Kingdom. At least, that’s how it seemed.

Yet you have the gift.

But no one can ever know. I’m not safe. Not even here. Frihet has it’s down dark past with mental magic and it’s best if we keep this a secret and avoid using it around the others.

Having to hide who you are is a heavy price to pay for the mistakes of others.

It is. But it’s one that I’m willing to bear. He grabbed a few more flowers, deciding that he would give them to George, before standing up and heading towards the house.

You’re a brave man, Aaron.

I don’t always feel like I am. I feel like I’m hiding and being a coward...

There is a time and a place to stand up against the status quo, but there are other times when you must buy your time and wait.

I think I’ll be waiting forever.

He stopped in the dining room first, placing the flowers in a vase and summoning some water to help them remain fresh. They were a perfect addition to the table with their dark red and bright blue colors. Aaron took the remaining flowers to George’s office. He gently knocked and waited for a reply. When he didn’t get one, he slowly opened the door and peeked inside.

George was sitting behind his desk with one cheek resting in his hand while he composed a letter. Halfway through he paused, let out a loud sigh, and grabbed the paper off the desk. He crushed it into a ball and threw it to the side into a large pile of already toss aside letters.
“George?” Aaron spoke up.

“What is it?” George replied, grabbing a new piece of paper and starting again. He didn't look up at Aaron as he dipped his quill.

“Is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine. Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

“Are you sure? Do you need any help?”

“No thank you. Why don’t you find Theo or Bellamy and see what they’re up to,” George suggested, still not looking up from his work. Aaron walked farther into the room as he summoned a vase and set the flowers inside. He placed the vase on the corner of George's desk, hoping to catch the General’s attention. It didn’t work. George still didn’t look up. Still didn’t pause his work.

“Perhaps you should take a break? That might help your mind beco-”

“Aaron, while I appreciate what you are trying to do, I need to be left alone until I have this finished,” George cut him off. His words were polite, but his voice was low and harsh. For a brief moment, Aaron was back in his uncle’s office. He shoved the memory aside. George was nothing like his uncle.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Aaron agreed, stepping away from the desk. He glanced back at George when he reached the door. He just couldn’t push away his concerns.

That is a man who has something weighing on his heart. Indigo pointed out. Aaron couldn’t help but agree.

I just wished he would let me help him.

Sometimes, space is truly what a person needs. Be there for him when he needs you and all will be well.

Aaron sighed, but he took Indigo’s advice and left George’s office. It was just a phrase. It would pass and things would go back to normal. Patience would be key, and the gods knew that Aaron had more than enough patience to last him a lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think of Indigo? Are you excited to see more of her?

Please don't forget about my poll! It will be opened until November 30th. So far, there is one clear front runner. I'm interested to see if that remains true.
Dear General George Washington of the Frihet Royal Army,

In such a fragile time, I look to you for guidance...

Tyst has stationed troops along our Western border....

No fights have been reported...

Yet.

Tensions are rising....

Our people are scared....

I plan to send our own troops to maintain the peace....

Diplomacy is our first option....

Be prepared for the second....

I hope it will not come to that, not again, but we must be ready....

We must all be ready....

Signed,

King Gilbert du Motier de Lafayette

“George? George!?” Alexander snapped, waving a hand in front of George's face. He finally snapped back to the present, glancing over to see Alexander and John staring at him. Alexander had a deep frown on his face while John’s expression gave off a mixture of concerned and confused. George cleared his throat and turned his attention back to the map laid out over the table. The words from Lafayette’s letter continued to echo in the back of his head. He couldn’t escape them. Couldn’t stop them from pulling at his mind.

“Repeat your idea,” he sternly ordered. Alexander and John shared a look, but neither of them protested. Speaking out against him met more than it did before. George was no longer only their teacher or guardian. Now he was their General and there was work to be done.

“Based on what we know, I suggest that we keep only one squad inside the town. We don’t want to provoke the Tyst’s troops by showing off our power; however, we should then place two additional regiments within the border here and here,” John explained, pointing to his proposed locations on the map. Colored figures representing Tyst’s and Frihet’s forces were standing face to face along the Western Border of Frihet’s territory close to the Himmel Mountains. Matching the colored ships that were stationed through the Farlig Sea.

“You believe we should prepare for an attack?”

“We should prepare for the worst.”
“With this plan,” Alexander spoke up, “The diplomats and their guards know that they have more than enough support, but Tyst will have no idea how much troops are really there until they make a mistake.”

“It’s a good plan,” George agreed. “I’ll propose the idea to the King and we’ll see if he see it the same way. Do you have any recommendations on what regiments we should send?” They continued to talk about every small detail from how many men to what route they would take to the border. They even covered escape routes for civilians and emergency plans for the troops. Nothing could be left to chance. There was too much riding in this. Too much at stake.

Lafayette’s letters had arrived six days ago, each filled with distress and anger. A number of Tyst’s villages along the border claimed that Frihet had extended into their territory and now Tyst troops were watching over the area. The presence of so many troops sent panic through Frihet’s citizens. Hundreds of letters arrived at the castle, each begging Lafayette for help. He sent Lord Schuyler and his daughter with a small group of soldiers to reopen negotiations about the borders while George came up with a plan.

“Anything else?” George asked, reading over the list he scribbled out as they talked. He wanted to make sure he didn’t forget about anything as he would later transpose their plan into a formal letter to be sent by raven to Lafayette.

“We need to tell Aaron about what’s happening,” Alexander insisted. George paused and lifted his head to find Alexander with his arms crossed over his chest. He prepared himself for a fight. One that he knew had been coming the moment he told Alexander and John about the letters.

“No.”

“George-”

“Lt.”

“Don’t pull that shit with me. He’s your husband, George! You can’t keep this from him.”

“I can and I will.”

“He deserves to know.”

“He doesn’t need to know. We don’t need to put him in that situation.”

“You keep saying that, but you won’t tell us what you’re talking about!” Alexander snapped, slamming his hands down on the table. A few of the colored figures fell. George set down his quill and straightened his back to stand at his full height.

“He has a point,” John confessed, “We can’t understand if you don’t explain it.”

“I shouldn’t have to explain myself,” George protested, “You are both old enough, and of high enough station, to know not to question your general.”

“We are not blind soldiers who march to just anyone’s drum,” Alexander argued.

“You taught us that,” John softly added.

“I’m regretting it,” George muttered as he rubbed his eyes and carried the list over to his desk. He was torn between being proud of them for standing up to him and being annoyed that they would dare to speak out against his orders when he made his wishes very clear. “If Aaron learns about this,
he will be forced to support one side over the other and I will not be the one who demands that he choose between his family, his kingdom, and us.”

“I’m sure we all know who he would choose,” Alexander claimed. That was the problem. George wasn’t sure. Aaron was clearly loyal to his family and loved them dearly, yet he hadn’t seen them in months and had grown to love George. If he had to choose, would he stay with George or demand to return home to his Uncle and sister? George didn’t want to take that chance. Either choice would come with terrible consequences.

“That’s not the point,” George clarified, “The point is that we should never put him in a situation where he feels he has to make such a choice. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“How is lying to him any better?” Alexander sharply protested.

“Alexander, enough. I’ve made my decision and it’s the best choice for everyone.”

“For everyone? Or for you? You’re just can’t stand not being in control of everyone! You would rather keep Aaron in a box then let him decide his own fate!”

“Alex!” John gasped.

“He knows it’s true!”

“Both of you, get out and take care of your chores. Don’t come back unless I call for you,” George growled. John froze at his tone of voice, a sad look flashing through his eyes before he rushed out of the room. Alexander pressed his lips together, clearly wanting to say more but biting his tongue this time. He turned on his heel and marched out of the room, making sure to slam the door behind him. He thought they were passed all this, yet here they were.

George let out a loud sigh as soon as they were gone, pressing his fingers against his eyes as a headache threatened to take over. While he could see Alexander’s point of view and he understood why John felt the way he did that didn’t change his own thoughts about his decisions. It wasn’t about control. It wasn’t about keeping Aaron in a box or cage instead of letting him be free to make his own choices. It was about protecting everyone. About keeping them all safe, and making sure that no one, except for him, had to make any hard choices. No one ever said being a General was easy.

George removed the figures from the map, hiding them in one of his desk’s drawers, before sitting down to start composing his letter to Lafayette. It felt odd to write out the man’s full title. Made him feel as if war was on the horizon once more, as if tomorrow they would be marching off to battle. George made sure to include all the details that Alexander, John, and him had worked out while also making his own suggestions and personal notes based on what he knew about the landscape.

Once the letter was finished, he signed it using his full title and sealed it with his military symbol before standing from his chair. As he left his office, he threw his page of notes into the fire to ensure that no one else would discover their plan. Keeping secrets wasn’t easy. Burning notes, hiding figures and maps, and looking over his shoulder as he sent messages to Lafayette had become a normal part of his life. Every new action placed a heavier weight on his shoulders and his heart. It was the best course of action, even if George didn’t completely agree with it himself.

He placed the letter inside his jacket pocket as he walked through the house. The halls were quiet, the children still in class with Eliza and everyone keeping business with their own work. The kitchen was empty for now, though it would soon be busy as they started to prepare for dinner. George quickly made his way through the room and outside into the crisp fall air. He headed straight for the stables, bypassing Nessie, who tried to get his attention with a high whine, and made his way over to
the bird cages where they kept the ravens.

“Just a moment, Nessie,” he promised as he picked out his favorite bird. He offered her a few treats as he attached the letter to her leg. He carried her outside, running his fingers over her feathers.

“Fly as fast as you can, my dear,” he softly begged, “The King needs this letter before the sun sets.” As soon as he let her go, she took off towards the capital as fast as her wings could take her. It didn’t take long before she became only a speck in the distance. He waited a moment more before returning to the stables. Nessie whined again, nipping at his jacket as soon as he walked into her stall.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry, but life has gotten busy and I haven’t been able to get away until now,” George cooed, petting Nessie’s neck to calm her down. The griffin nudged at his neck before trying to push him towards the door. “No no. We can’t go for a ride. Maybe later today, but not right n-”

“What are you doing in here?” George snapped, ignoring Aaron’s question in favor of asking his own. He didn't mean for the words to come out so harsh, but it was too late to take them back. Aaron took a step backward at his tone, frowning in confusion as he glanced to the side. He gestured to something George could see.

“I was helping John feed the fish in the lake. We just got back and now we’re going to feed the other animals,” he answered. He held up an empty metal bucket to help support his explanation. “Is everything-”

“Hello, George,” John called, gently cutting Aaron off, “Does Nessie need fresh straw?”

“Not at the moment. Just some water.”

“Can we take Nessie for a ride?” Aaron asked, stepping into the stall again. Nessie excitedly moved towards him and pressed her beak against Indigo’s as Aaron stroked the feathers on her neck and back.

“Not today,” George replied, “I have things I need to do and I don’t have the time.”

“Oh,” Aaron muttered, clearly trying to hide his disappointment, “Perhaps tomorrow?”

“Perhaps.”

“Aaron,” John shouted, pulling Aaron’s attention away, “Can you run to the kitchen and get me a few apples for the horses? Get a snack for us too.”

“Sure! I’ll be right back.”

George watched him run off and for a moment he was glad to be rid of him. Aaron’s never ending questions only made it harder to bear so many secrets. It didn’t help that Aaron was so understanding, never putting up a fight or demanding a real explanation. It made George feel worse about everything. His relief was quickly replaced with guilt. Aaron deserved better, deserved to know what was happening, but George refused to go back now. He had chosen his path and there was no going back.

“General?” John whispered, quietly making his way into Nessie’s stall. George straightened his shoulders at the title as the griffin huffed. Nessie turned up her beck at John and made her way to the
corner to get as far away as possible, “I have a suggestion, sir.”

“Go on.”

“I suggestion we tell Bellamy about our situation. He’s the son of a castle guard and he has experience with Tyst military and politics. He would be able to provide useful insight into their thinking and strategies without feeling as if he’s working against his family or kingdom.”

“What makes you think that Bellamy won’t tell Aaron?”

“Bellamy loves Aaron dearly, but he knows better than anyone that sometimes it’s better to keep things from the Prince for his own safety. He kept our relationship a secret. And he only wants the best for Aaron, just like you.”

“If you can ensure that he won’t tell Aaron, then you can invite him to our meetings,” George agreed, seeing the merit behind John’s idea, “but if he tells the Prince, then it’ll be on your head.”

“I’ll make sure he keeps it a secret, sir,” John promised. He stepped out of the stall and got back to work feeding the animals just as Aaron returned to the stables. John put him to work, giving George the opportunity to make his escape. He ducked back into the kitchen and ran straight in Yuma.

“And where are you going in such a hurry?” the woman asked, waving a wooden spoon in front of his face.

“To my office,” George answered honestly.

“Is there something in your office that’s more important than your boy?”

“What?”

“You heard me,” Yuma replied, giving him a fiery look before tapping him sharply on the shoulder. George backed away, placing his hand over the spot as he tried to rub the pain away. Yuma was deadly with a spoon in her hand, “Aaron was just in here and said you were in the stables, but now you’re running off.”

“I have stuff I need to do.”

“You better not be ignoring that boy, George. If I find out you are, I’ll remind you why you should fear me.”

“I already fear you,” George confessed. Yuma smiled, but she quickly hid it away and gave him a stern look instead.

“I mean it. Don’t you hurt that boy.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” George promised, grabbing Yuma and placing a kiss on the top of her head before stepping around her.

“He’s been through enough.”

George paused at the words. He glanced over his shoulder at Yuma, but she had already returned to her preparing their evening meal. He should return to the stables. He should give Aaron the attention he deserved, the attention he needed and be the husband he was meant to be, but he couldn’t. His kingdom needed him. Lafayette needed him. The needs of the many were more important than the needs of one. Aaron would understand. Hopefully.
“It’s one thing for them to bitch about land, but this is on another level,” Alexander muttered as Bellamy read over the letter they had received from Lafayette. The King had approved their plan and set the troops as they suggested, but now he informed them that Tyst was outright trading with the Northern Islands, which was clearly against a previous treaty they had signed with Frihet and Morker.

Lafayette didn’t know what to do. It was well within his right to protest Tyst’s actions and demand an explanation. He could even make a request that any items already traded be destroyed or given up in order to restore the treaty, but he feared creating a second tense situation between the two kingdoms. Frihet’s ships were keeping their distance from Tyst’s waters and Morker had yet to act. Lafayette was at an impasse with no idea where to go.

“They’re playing with fire, that’s for sure,” Bellamy commented, passing the letter back to George with a scowl on his face, “They want Lafayette to speak out.”

“But why?” John asked as he studied the map and figures. George sighed, rubbing at his eyes as he set the letter on his desk. It was just one thing after another. They solve one problem only to have another blindsided them. A never ending circle of tension and worry. They were a powder keg about to explode. They needed to put out the fuse before the blast destroyed everything they held dear.

“You want the political explanation or the realistic one?”

Both.”

Knock Knock

Everyone looked towards the door at the first knock before jumping to action. Alexander and John hid the figures in their jacket pockets while George shoved his pile of letters in a desk drawer. Bellamy folded up all the maps and moved them to George’s bookshelf before pulling out a game board and setting up the pieces in random positions. Within a matter of seconds, the room was transformed from a war room into an everyday office.

“Come in,” George called, preparing himself for Aaron’s countless questions and sad looks. However, the door swung open with a bang and Eliza waltz into the room. She stopped in the middle of the floor and crossed her arms over her chest. Theodosia followed after her, pausing to shut the door quickly, before moving to stand at Eliza’s side.

“Ladies, what can I do-”

“Whatever you’re up to, we want in,” Eliza declared, cutting George off with a narrowed look. She turned up her nose at him as she tried to act as tough as possible. Inside, George smiled at Eliza’s bravery. How far she had come from the shy little girl she once was. Now she was a brilliant healer who wasn’t scared to stand against anyone. He couldn’t be more proud.

“What makes you think we’re up to something?” Alexander replied, crossing his own arms and popping out his hip. Bellamy and John stood with him. George prayed to the Gods that his office wouldn’t become a battlefield between his students. He could only fight so many battles in one day.

“We know what’s going on in Tyst,” Theodosia stated, giving Bellamy a pained look before turning her attention to George, “and we want to help if you’ll allow it.”

“How did you find out?” George wondered. He narrowed his eyes at Bellamy, but Theodosia quickly shook her head.

“I have sisters who still work in the castle, as well as my parents,” she clarified, “They’ve been
sending me letters and mentioned that the King was sending troops to the border as well as more ships to the North.” The boys shared a look, then looked at George to make the final call. It wasn’t an easy decision. The more people who knew their secret, the most likely that Aaron would learn about it, but Theo, like Bellamy, had a direct connection to people inside the Tyst castle. Such information could give them the edge they needed.

“Aaron can never know,” George reminded them both.

“If he finds out, it won’t be from us,” Eliza swore.

“We can keep a secret,” Theodosia added.

“Then let’s get back to work.”

Bellamy, Alexander, and John returned the room to the way it was and started to fill the women in about the newest update. George pulled out the letter and let Eliza read it over before taking Theodosia’s own letters. Her family members had written enough detail to be helpful, though they didn’t have too much insight. Theodosia promised that she would ask them for more information as soon as possible.

“You were saying something, Bells, before the girls came in,” Alexander reminded them. Bellamy stared at him in confusion for a moment before it came back to him.

“Oh yeah! Politically, Tyst is doing this because it could give them the chance to renegotiate the treaty based on trade needs,” he explained to the room.

“However...” Theodosia muttered.

“What they really want is to make Frihet look like an aggressive kingdom who is trying to control them. First, they started a fight over the border, which Frihet had to respond to the only way that made sense, with troops. Now they’re breaking the treaty, and again they hope that Frihet will feel forced to speak out. They’re making it look as if Frihet is pushing into Tyst’s business.”

“Why do they want that?” John asked.

“To justify war.”

“We already went to war!” Alexander snapped, “and they lost. Gave up after a week of fighting! Why would they want to go back to that!? Why put your own people through all that shit for nothing?!?”

“What about Aaron?” Eliza softly added, “What was the point of marrying off a Prince if the goal is just to go to war again after a few months?” The room was quiet for a moment as they tried to find the answers inside their own heads. Both Alexander and Eliza made good points, but there were so many more questions and no clear answers. Nothing made sense. What was Tyst doing? What were they up to? And why?

“It must be the King,” Bellamy said to Theo, not doubt in his words. They shared a look between them before they were forced to look away. Both so young, yet their eyes were full of too much sorrow and darkness. “He has to be following a plan or something. A plan that will land him on top. Just like always.”

“I’ve heard very little about King Timothy,” George spoke up, thinking about to the number of times Aaron avoid the subject, “Perhaps it’s time someone told me more about him.”
“I’m not sure it’s our place,” Theo confessed, “He’s Aaron’s Uncle and...and Aaron still feels very strongly about him.” George noticed how she didn’t say love. Often times, family loyalty had nothing to do with such tender emotions. They were built and maintained through blood, not the passion or other affairs of the heart.

“Aaron isn’t here,” John pointed out. Theodosia still looked unsure by the idea.

“Whatever you say will never leave this room,” George promised, “But we can’t win against someone we don’t understand.”

“So far all we know is that he’s an asshole,” Alexander murmured.

“You’re not wrong about that,” Bellamy confirmed. Theo stared at George, trying to find something in his eyes. George could do nothing else besides offer her a strong look. This is what they needed to do. He needed to know more, but he would never force her to speak.

“As long as you’re sure,” Theo whispered. Again, she shared a look with Bellamy before they both came to an agreement. “This may take a while.” George waved his hand and summoned enough chairs for all of them. He locked the door to ensure that Aaron couldn’t surprise them as they all settled down to listen.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” Bellamy admitted, looking at Theo. She reached over and took his hand, squeezing it tightly while giving him a reassuring smile. “After so many years, we’ve got used to how things were and never realized how wrong it was until we got away from it. The difference between home and here is shocking. King Timothy is controlling and ruthless.”

“I could have told you that,” John muttered.

“Quiet,” Eliza snapped at him. Bellamy ignored them in favor of staring at George as he talked.

“It doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from, if you get in the King’s way, he’ll strike you down. He’ll make sure you never even think about trying to stand against him again. He was harsh with servants, even harsher with his advisers and those closest to him. A single mistake could mean termination, or worse.”

“What’s worse than being fired?” Alexander wondered.

“Whippings,” Theo answered, a far off look on her face. Eliza grabbed her other hand and pulled it to rest in her lap. Theodosia offered her a soft smile, but it didn’t chase away the pain on her face. George frowned at the news. He would never dream of doing such a thing to another person, yet part of him wasn’t surprised that the King would do something so horrible.

“You can’t imagine the relief we both felt when we arrived here and talked to your servants,” Theodosia went on to say, “No punishments. No set in stone schedules. No rules about not speaking or laughing or smiling.”

“You couldn’t laugh?!”

“Not when the King was in a mad mood. The whole castle would be as quiet as a graveyard most days. No one dared to speak or laugh or have any fun. Making the tiniest noise in the King’s presence would land you in a heap of trouble.”

This was Aaron’s guardian and protector? The man who raised him after his parents’ death? How do you raise a child in silence? How do you stop them from laughing or having fun? How do you- Suddenly, Aaron’s earlier behavior made more sense than ever before. His shyness. His hesitation to
speak out. His fear of bothering George or arguing about a topic. He was scared of being punished. Scared that this house was the same as his childhood home. George shook his head and scowled. No child, prince or commoner, should be forced to grow up in such a way.

“We lived by a strict schedule everyday. My mother is one of the cooks, and she’s lost count of how many times the King has broken dishes or destroyed the dining table because the meal wasn’t served at the right time. His anger know no bounds,” Theodosia told them.

“But it doesn’t stop outside the castle either,” Bellamy added. “My mother is one of the King’s guards, as you know, and she went with King Timothy on his trips around the kingdom. There are festivals in his honor and celebrations, but she told me that the King has had whole towns destroyed or burned for not paying their taxes on time or for disobeying any small law.”

“That can’t be true,” Eliza muttered in disbelief.

“When we were younger, I thought so too,” Bellamy confessed, “He was our king. Our hero. Our leader and Aaron’s uncle. But the older I got, the most I saw him for what he truly was. A monster. An abusive King who uses his power to control his people and ensure a long reign. The Kingdom is trapped with a powerful, controlling King who now has his sights set on Frihet. And he doesn’t want anyone to interfere.”

“If we are the aggressor, then Morker will be happy to align themselves with Frihet, and Tyst cannot fight war on two front. However, if Tyst is the victim in all of this, then Morker will see no reason in get involved.”

“That doesn’t explain why he started the first war and gave up so easily.”

“I have a theory behind that,” Theodosia whispered, “but I pray I’m not right about it.”

“Speak your mind,” George gently begged. He was willing to hear anyone’s opinions or theories on the subject.

“It didn’t make sense to me at first why he would marry Aaron off so quickly, yet now I think it was the King’s way of making Frihet look even worse to the other Kingdoms. To end the war, Tyst proposed a marriage; one that is supposed to bring forth a strong alliance that would keep war at bay for a long, long time. Now, if Frihet gets too aggressive, if you step too far out of line, you will look like—”

“We’ll look like tyrants,” John cut her off. Theodosia nodded her head.

“King Timothy will claim that you not only took their prince, but are now trying to take control of the whole kingdom. He’ll call Aaron back home based on the idea that your aggressive behavior must extend to him since he’s the Tyst Prince, and try to use Aaron as evidence against you.”

“Aaron would never let that happen,” Eliza assured them.

“You don’t know how far Aaron would go to stay on good terms with his family,” Bellamy warned.

“The King could also go to war to get the Prince back,” Alexander added, “He could claim that we’re forcing Aaron to stay against his will or something like that.” George rubbed his forehead. It made sense now even to him. Aaron was a pawn in a bigger game, a tool for the King to use that would give him the right to attack Frihet. Aaron couldn’t never know, must never be told about this. It would break him. Destroy his whole world.

“What do we do?” George asked, focusing his attention on Bellamy and Theodosia, “Do we protest?
Do we remain quiet?”

“Protesting will only lead to war.”

“But remaining quiet will allow Tyst to grow bolder.”

“We can’t let the Northern Islands start to believe we’re weak!”

“Yet we’re not ready for another war.”

“What about the people?”

“Our trade routes?”

“I do have an idea,” Eliza spoke up, cutting off the others and taking the floor, “But I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“Let’s hear it,” George ordered.

At first, George couldn’t figure out what woke him up. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he looked around the room. The sky was still dark outside, the moon shining through their window. Their fire had burned itself down, leaving only bright red coals behind. Nothing was out of place. No danger or anything that was a cause for alarm. Nothing except Indigo sitting on his pillow in front of his face. Her bright eyes glowed in the darkness as she stared at him.

“Go back to sleep,” George whispered, turning away and shutting his eyes. A hard poke on the back of his head forced him to open his eyes again to give the dragon a tired, annoyed look over his shoulder. It was the middle of the night. Shouldn’t Indigo be bothering Aaron instead? What could the creature want with him? “What?” Indigo pecked his forehead before nodding over George’s shoulder.

George frowned in confusion and glanced over his shoulder. Aaron was still fast asleep, but his face was twisted in pain. He had kicked the blankets off his body at some point in the night. His legs were bent with both his arms thrown in different directions. Indigo crawled over George’s body to rest on Aaron’s stomach, making a sad noise as Aaron turned his head back and forth. His hands turned into fists before his arms moved to cover his chest. A nightmare. Aaron was having a nightmare. A horrible one by the looks of it.

George thought back to the conversation he had with Bellamy and Theodosia. There were countless things that could be haunting Aaron. Countless memories filled with pain, sorrow, and anger. It was surprising that this was the first time he was having such a terrible dream. A small voice in George’s head warned that this might not be the first time, just the first one that George actually noticed. His heart ached more. He had to do something. Had to help in some way.

Without thinking, George grabbed Aaron’s shoulder and started to shake him. It took a few seconds and a couple hard shakes before Aaron’s eyes finally flew open with panic written across his face. Aaron glanced around the room in confusion until his attention landed on George. Indigo made a small noise, but that wasn’t enough to pull Aaron’s gaze away from George’s face.

“What?” Aaron asked, sounding so lost and small. He reached out towards George but quickly pulled his hand back at the last minute. George’s heart ached at the sight. How long had Aaron been stuck in his nightmare? How many times had this happened?

“It’s okay,” George whispered, his voice soft and gentle, “I’m here. It was only a dream.” He gently
took Aaron’s hand and kissed the back of it before letting it rest against his cheek. Aaron stroked his thumb over the skin, staring at George with wide, far away eyes. “What was it about?”

“What?”

“Your nightmare.”

Aaron’s hand pulled away as if he had been burned. He turned his face away and suddenly got had to fix all the blankets instead of answering the question. Indigo let out a few loud noises when he moved her out of the way but he didn’t stop. The dragon found a new home in George’s lap, giving him a pointed look. Dread filled George’s stomach and heart. Something was wrong, but he wasn’t sure what to do.

“Aaron?”

“Sorry,” Aaron choked out, throwing the blanket back over his feet and legs, “I didn’t...Did I wake you up?” He paused to stare at George, waiting patiently for an answer.

“You didn’t,” George honestly replied, “Indigo did.”

“I’m sorry,” Aaron said again, getting back to the blankets. He tried to get rid of every single wrinkle he could find until the blankets were completely smooth, “She should know better.”

“Please, tell me what your dream was about,” George begged, grabbing the Prince’s hands and forcing him to hold still, “Tell me what’s wrong. I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.” He knew that talking about it had helped Bellamy and Theodosia. It would probably help Aaron too. He just had to know that George would listen, that George would try his hardest to understand and help ease the pain.

“I rather...I rather not talk about it right now,” Aaron rushed to say, “I’m sorry for waking you up. I know you’ve been busy with work and you need all the rest you can get. I’ll talk to Theo tomorrow and start taking the potion again. It will keep me-”

“Aaron, stop. Please stop. You don’t have to do that. I’m not upset with you and you don’t have to torture yourself in such a way.”

“I-”

“Shhh,” George cooed, pulling Aaron across the bed to hold him against his chest before he could apologize again. It took a moment, but finally Aaron relaxed and buried his face against George’s chest. His shoulders relaxed as he melted into the embrace. George ran his fingers up and down Aaron’s back to chase away any leftover tension. Indigo quickly took over Aaron’s pillow, leaving the Prince nowhere else to go.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?” George whispered. Aaron nodded his head. “I’ll be here when you change your mind.”

“Don’t let go,” Aaron murmured, his voice so soft that George almost missed the words. “Please don’t leave.”

“I’m not going to. I’ll never leave you,” George promised. He placed a kiss on Aaron’s forehead before squeezing him tightly to emphasis his point, “You’re safe now. I’ve got you and I’ll keep your nightmares away.” Aaron was so quiet for so long that George assumed he had already fallen asleep, but when he closed his own eyes, Aaron suddenly spoke up.
“Will you be busy tomorrow?”

“I don’t believe so,” George answered. They sent out their newest plan to Lafayette, but he would be surprised if they got an answer by tomorrow.

“Do you think...” Aaron trailed off.

“Do I think what?”

“Do you think that you’ll be able to spend some time with me? We could go on a picnic before the weather gets too cold?”

The phrasing of Aaron’s question hit George like an arrow to the chest. His heart squeezed so tightly that his throat closed up. His work was important, and he knew Aaron would eventually understand, but that probably didn’t stop Aaron from feeling left out or alone. When was the last time they spent a moment alone outside sleeping together? Had it really been so long? Was George turning into a bad husband who couldn’t spare his love a single moment?

“Or not,” Aaron offered, “It was just an idea.” George had taken too long to answer, too lost in his own thoughts. Aaron was starting to retreat, starting to pull out of his arms. If George didn’t do something soon, Aaron would get curious and it would only be a matter of time before he started asking Bellamy or Theodosia about what was going on. George had to make sure he didn’t find out. Had to make sure Aaron stayed out of the loop. A picnic would be the perfect way to get Aaron off the trail and give him time to focus on something else for a change.

“A picnic sounds like a brilliant idea,” George said quickly, pulling Aaron back and holding him tighter to stop him from escaping, “I was trying to think about where the best picnic spots are. I think I know the perfect place.”

“You do?”

“I do.”

“You don’t have to go if you don’—”

“I want to go. I would love to go.”

“Okay,” Aaron muttered, “We can go for lunch. I’ll pack a basket for us.”

“Perfect,” George agreed.

“Thank you, George. I know you’re busy and everything, but thank you for trying so hard with everything.”

“You don’t have to thank me...”

“I know, but I wanted to.”

“I—”

“Shhh. Time to go back to sleep.”

“So bossy.”

“Only to you,” Aaron teased. George smiled and kissed his head one last time before shutting his eyes.
“I love you,” Aaron whispered, shifting closer and holding George tight.

“I love you too,” George echoed. He prayed that Tyst would give up soon. He hoped that this wouldn’t last much longer. His heart and mind could only take so much.

Chapter End Notes

What do you all think? How do you feel about George's choices?

Just a reminder, if you're bored (and you love me enough), you can always talk to me on my tumblr
Why can’t I go along? Indigo whined, nipping at Aaron’s fingers as he tried to pack the basket. He pushed her away with a stern look on his face. Sometimes, having a dragon was more like having a bratty child, though he still loved her dearly.

Because this is about George and me.

He won’t even notice I’m there.

But I will. I think it’s best for you to stay away from him for a while after you woke him up last night.

I was only trying to help you.

I know... Part of him couldn’t help but be thankful for Indigo’s help. Waking up from the nightmare to instead find safety in George’s arms made the rest of his night much easier, but waking George up was not helpful in the long run. The General was busy, spending more and more time in his office. Skipping meals to speak with visitors. Sending message after message by raven. Aaron knew something was wrong, but he didn’t want to pry. If it involved him, George would tell him.

Right now, Aaron needed to be supportive by staying out of the way. His Uncle always used to say that the Kingdom came first. No one was more important than the majority. It still hurt that George didn’t ask Aaron for any help, but he knew it was probably for the best. Aaron didn’t understand Frihet’s politics as much as Tyst’s. He wouldn’t be much help anyway. At least not with whatever issue was going on at the moment.

Next time, please don’t wake him up. George doesn’t need to worry about me right now. Not when he’s busy with other stuff.

You shouldn’t have to suffer alone. He’s your husband. He should be helping you.

There are more important things than just me. I understand that. You have to as well. I can’t always be at the top of his list.

You should be.

That’s not how the world–

“What are you doing?” a gentle, kind voice suddenly asked as Aaron added three apples to his basket alongside the carrots and loaf of bread.

“Hello Yuma,” Aaron greeted with a smile. The woman made her way over to him and looked inside the basket with a deep frown. Her ‘judgement face’ as Aaron called it. Yuma was horrible at hiding when she was criticizing someone in her head. “I’m packing a picnic for George and myself.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because this basket looks like you’re going to feed some horses and rabbits.”
“It’s not that bad!” Aaron insisted, ignoring Indigo’s comment.

“You’re right,” Yuma agreed, “It’s not the worst I’ve seen, but let me help you make it better.”

“I don’t want to cause any trouble,” Aaron muttered, shifting the basket out of her reach.

“You? Cause trouble? That would be the day,” Yuma teased. She grabbed the basket from his hands, moving so quickly that Aaron had not time to react. For an old woman, Yuma still got around.

“Yuma!” Aaron protested, trying to get it back.

*Beaten by a little frail woman,* Indigo commented. Aaron could hear the smirk in her words.

*She’s the opposite of frail.*

“Don’t make me get my spoon, boy,” Yuma warned.

“Your spoon?”

She only laughed as she took out the apples and replaced them with a large block of cheese and a knife to cut it. Aaron liked Yuma in a way he didn’t quite understand. There was something calming about her presence, something that set his heart and mind at ease when she was around him. Her gentle voice and kind touch had made the first couple weeks in the house much easier, which Aaron was forever grateful for. He wondered, at times, if Yuma was what having a grandmother was like. Aaron had read so many stories about them, but he had never had the chance to experience such a relationship himself.

“Yuma?” Aaron softly spoke up.

“Yes?”

“Do you...” He trailed off, thinking better about his question. It wasn’t his place. He shouldn’t ask.

*You should.*

“Speak your mind, young Prince,” Yuma ordered, “Don’t hide from me.”

“Do you have any children?”

“Of my own?”

“Yes.”

“No. And I never wanted them,” she answered, adding a bottle of wine to the basket, “Instead, I took care of George for most of my life. Now I get to take care of you.”

“I’m an adult,” Aaron argued. He didn’t need a caretaker anymore.

*You say that, but...*

*Quiet, or you’re eating carrots for the rest of the day.*

“But you have the heart of a young child.”
“I do n–”

“I’m not saying that you’re immature, Aaron. I mean that you see the good in the world. You believe in people and keep looking for the silver lining. After everything that’s happened in your life, you keep trying. That’s the heart of a child. Someone pure and kind. Someone who hasn’t let the harshness of the world take hold.”

“That’s...I don’t...No one has....”

“You’re adorable when you’re at a lost for words.”

“You’re a menace.”

“When you’ve lived as long as me, you learn that it’s more fun to be a menace then waste time being overly polite.”

*She has a point here.*

“I hope I get to live as long as you then.”

“I do too. Now, get over here and look at the basket.”

Aaron moved towards Yuma, leaning against her as she wrapped an arm around his waist. Indigo stretched out to rest her head against Yuma’s cheek. The basket was now filled with a variety of food. Meat, cheese, wine, bread, even a few sweets. It was perfect. Simply perfect. George would love it. Hopefully.

“Thank you,” Aaron whispered.

“You’re welcome, dear boy. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you. Nothing.”

“The same to you.”

They shared matching smiles before Aaron covered the food with a cloth and placed it by the door. Other servants soon entered the room to start preparing the midday meal. Aaron stayed out of their way as much as possible, but he couldn’t help looking over their shoulders or asking them questions. Most of them humored him, answering his questions before asking their own. Others were more reserved. He had since learned to give them more space, though he caught them smiling often.

Soon, lunch was carried off to be served around the house. They didn’t eat together as Alexander was too often in his study, or Eliza at her hospital, or Bellamy and Theo training somewhere. It was easier to eat apart and then come back together at dinner. Aaron continued to wait, keeping an eye on the door for when George arrived. The minutes ticked by.

“Aaron,” Yuma softly said, “Do you know what time he said he was coming?”

“Well...No. I just said lunch, but we always eat lunch at the same time,” Aaron answered.

“I’ll check on him,” Lena, a young servant who had two younger brothers still in school and an older sister working as a sea captain, told them.

“Thank you,” Aaron muttered, watching her leave the kitchen. Aaron made sure to keep his face blank as time moved forward.

*He forgot...Of course he forgot.*
He didn’t forget. He’s just running late. He has a lot on his plate and sometimes time slips away from him.

Or he forgot.

Indigo, please. He wouldn’t forget. He wouldn’t. He’s not like....He’s not.

Lena soon returned and reported to Yuma right away. Aaron watched them whisper to one another, feeling his heart sink.

He forgot...

I’m going to pee on his pillow.

You are not!

Just try to stop me!

“I’m sorry, Aaron,” Yuma gently said, “but George said that he’ll be having lunch in his office today. He didn’t say why.”

“It’s okay,” Aaron lied, hiding his disappointment, “I’m sure he has a good reason.”

“You have every right to be upset.”

“I’m not upset. I understand.”

“Aaron–”

“I win!” Philip yelled, running into the kitchen and slamming into Lena. “I win!”

“You cheated!” Martha screamed as she rushed in after him, “You always cheat!”

“I did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did not!”

“Did–”

“You better stop your screaming or you can both go hungry until dinner,” Yuma warned. She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t have to. Her words cut like a knife and the children both went quiet.

“Were you too racing again?” Aaron wondered. Martha shook her head, but Philip excitedly nodded.

“You know you’re not supposed to run in the house.”

“We weren’t running,” Martha protested, “We were racing.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think th–”

“Save yourself the trouble, Aaron,” Lena warned, “Martha knows how to argue. Gets that from her
“He’s very proud,” Martha claimed.

“Can we have lunch now?” Philip asked, moving to wrap his arms around Yuma’s legs and looking up with a smile on his face.


“Nooo!” Philip exclaimed, “That’s all gross! I want an apple.”

“Just an apple?”

“Yup.”

“What about some cheese, and bread? And maybe a sweet for dessert?” Aaron suggested. Philip looked over at him with wide eyes, clearly excited about his last word.

“That sounds good.”

“Then would you like to join me for a picnic?”

“I wanna go!” Martha cried.

“You can come. The three of us,—”

Excuse you?

“—The four of us can go have a picnic and have some fun.”

“Let’s go!” Philip declared, grabbing Aaron’s hand and pulling him towards the door.

“Wait, wait! I need to grab the basket!”

Lena grabbed it instead and placed it in Aaron’s hands before waving them out the door. Martha fell in step next to Aaron as they walked across the grass. It was a beautiful fall day. The sky was blue as far as the eye could see and the leaves on the trees had just started to change colors.

“Where should we go for our picnic?” Aaron asked the children.

“The forest!” they said together.

That was easier then I expected.

I agree.

They walked through the trees until they found a large clearing. Aaron wished he had remembered to bring a blanket, but the children didn’t care. Philip threw himself on the grass and got comfortable while Martha found a rock big enough to sit on. It was the simple things.

“You have to eat good if you want dessert,” Aaron warned.

You sound like a father.

I sound like George.
“Can I hold Indigo while we eat?” Philip asked, turning his big eyes on Aaron.

“Sure,” Aaron agreed, unwrapping the dragon from around his neck and placing her on Philip instead, “But be careful.” Martha abandoned her rock to moved closer to Philip, reaching out to pet Indigo’s tail. Aaron got the food out, passing both children a piece of bread and meat. Philip tried to feed some of it to Indigo, but she turned her face away.

_This child..._

_He’s trying to be helpful._

_Then let him feed you._

_You’re in a sassy mood today._

“Aaron,” Martha got his attention as she took Aaron’s bread from his hand and popped it in her mouth before he could stop her. “Do you miss your family?”

“Sometimes,” Aaron confessed, “Why?”

“I miss my daddies, but I don’t wanna tell George.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t wanna make him sad. I like it here too, but I miss my home.”

“Martha, George won’t be upset about you missing home or wanting to see your fathers. He would understand and do whatever he needed to do to make you feel better,” Aaron assured her.

“But what if he gets mad?” Martha softly wondered, a sad look on her face. Aaron understood her way of thinking way too much. He couldn’t stand to see the look on her face.

“He won’t. I promise, he won’t. We can talk to him tonight at dinner. Maybe we can take a trip and go visit your fathers together.”

“Really!?”

“Of course!”

“Daddy would love that! Papa probably would do, but Daddy loves when people visit cause then he can show off.”

“Her daddy is a show off,” Philip agreed.

“Hey! Only I can say that!”

“No fighting,” Aaron warned before an argument could break out.

_You’re good with them._

_I try to be,_

_It helps that you’re young at heart._
Aaron placed his hand against the ground and made eye contact with Indigo. He smiled to himself as he felt a warm feeling flow from his heart into his palm. He pulled his hand up, summoning three daffodils from the ground.

“How did you do that?!” Philip cried out.

“Teach me! Teach me!”

You’re getting better.

They’re still on the small side.

It takes time.

“I can’t do it alone,” Aaron explained to the children, “Indigo helps me. Through our bond, I can make any plant I want grow. It’s not easy and I’m still learning.”

“Make a rose!”

“No a lily!”

“I can make whatever you both want, but we’re going to do something special with them.”

“What are we gonna do?”

“We’re going to turn the flowers into crowns,” Aaron explained, pulling the daffodils out of the ground and twisted their stems together. “Then we can wear them.”

“I wanna do it,” Philip agreed.

“Me too!”

“Then let’s get started.”

Aaron grew a few more daffodils and showed Philip and Martha how to twist them into a crown as they continued with their meal. The small yellow flowers were the first plant Aaron had learned to grow. Indigo had explained that every single plant needed a specific thing to be grown. Some were simple, such as happiness for daffodils, but others took more time to cultivate.

Trees were the hardest as they took powerful, long lasting emotion to make them grow so quickly. Aaron didn’t have that level of control yet. In a similar way, plants like Euphorbia, for persistence, or Heliotrope, devotion, or even King’s Spear, regret, had to be fed by a proof of such emotions. In time, Aaron would be able to learn which memories and thoughts fuel which plants. Currently, he knew a total of fifteen plants, but his goal was to learn a new one every other day.

It’s easy for him to make pink and red roses for Martha as sweetness and love came easy to him. He was mindful to make sure that the plants he grew were free of thorns, a trick that took two whole days full of practice to master. Martha twisted the roses into a crown and placed it on her head, declaring herself Queen of the Forest. Not to be outdone, Philip begged Aaron to help him make a better flower crown than the simple yellow daffodils.

Aaron started with two pale roses, for joy and grace, before adding a chrysanthemum against a
background of white and green ivy leaves. He helped Phillip turn them into a crown then placed it on the boy’s head and wrapped some of his curls around the leaves. Now King of the forest alongside Martha, Aaron took Indigo off the boy’s shoulders and let the two play in the clearing. They ran after one another with laughter echoing off the trees. Aaron smiled as he watched.

_Simple things_. Indigo repeated.

_It always is_, Aaron agreed. He kept his eyes on the children for a long time before turning his eyes to the ground. He could feel the heat in his heart and his desires in the back of his mind. A few more flowers was all he needed, but was it the best choice to make? He hated feeling so unsure, hated feeling as if he was walking on a tightrope and able to fall at any given moment.

_Do it._

_I can’t..._

_You must try._

Aaron took a deep breath and pressed his palm against the ground. In the blink of an eyes, as easy as it was to breathe, red and coral roses grew up from the dirt alongside sunflowers and tulips of all colors. Aaron got to work using the best flowers for his own flower crown. He took his time, making sure every leaf and stem was in the right place.

_Put that there._

_What about here?_

_To the left._

_It’s off center if I put it–_

_Let it be off center. Let it be imperfect._

“What are you making?” Philip asked as he returned to Aaron’s side. Aaron finished the crown, leaving the main roses off center as Indigo suggested.

“A flower crown.”

“For who?”

“George.”

“George won’t wear a flower crown,” Philip told him. Aaron knew that, but that didn’t change his mind.

“He doesn’t have to. He can keep it in his office instead.”

“But they’ll wilt.”

“Oh, did I forget you to tell you my big secret?”

“What secret?” Martha demanded, joining them with her arms crossed. Aaron smiled. She always showed up when that word was said as if it made her ears start burning no matter how far away she was.
“These flowers will never wilt, never die as long as I live and feel,” Aaron explained, “They can last forever, or at least it will seem that way.” If his happiness faded, then the daffodils would start to wilt, or if he lost his love, but Aaron didn’t see that happen. Not truly. He might feel odd today, but deep down he was still happy with his life.

“I want a dragon for myself!” Philip declared, “A dragon just like Indigo so I can grow plants too!”

“Maybe when you’re older, George will give you a dragon of your own.”

“He’ll never do that.”

“You shouldn’t say never. You’ll often be proven wrong.”

“Can we head back now?” Martha asked, “I wanna show Eliza my crown.”

“We can go,” Aaron agreed, standing up. He followed the children back towards the house, carrying the crown in one hand and the basket in another. He prayed the flowers lasted for as long as he lived. He hoped that this amazing feeling, the happiness, love, and joy he felt, never faded.

Philip and Martha ran off as soon as they got inside. Aaron returned the basket to the kitchen then headed off towards George’s office. He paused outside the door, raising his hand to knock before freezing. Maybe he should wait. He could always give the crown to George another day.

For the love of the Gods!

Indigo stretched out her neck and loudly hit the door with her beck. Aaron pulled her back, staring at the door as fear gripped his throat. What if George wasn’t in the mood to see him? What if he got mad about being disturbed? There was no reply for a long time until finally George called for them to enter. Aaron opened the door just enough to poke his head inside.

“Are you busy?” he wondered, “I can come back later?”

“No, no, come in,” George told him. Aaron slowly stepped into the room, being mindful to keep his steps soft and quiet. George had a quill in his hand and was slowly composing a letter. He had yet to look up from his work, not that Aaron minded.

“I don’t mean to disturb you while you’re working, but I was hoping for just a moment of your time,” Aaron explained, giving George the opportunity to cast him out. Best to give him the choice instead of forcing the man to be bothered by his simple, childish things.

Not childish.

“Of course I have time for–” George cut himself off, lifting his eyes to meet Aaron’s, “Lunch. I forgot about the pic–”

“It’s okay. Lena told me that you were busy and I went with–”

“It’s not okay!” George snapped. Aaron’s heart skipped a beat at his tone of voice. George set his quill down and pressed his hands against his eyes before letting out a heavy sigh. “I promised you that I would go with you and I forgot. That’s not–”

“It is okay,” Aaron insisted, taking a few steps towards his desk, “I know that you have work to do and the needs of the Kingdom have to come first.”

“Aaron–”
“I’m not mad, George. Really I’m not,” Aaron swore. It was true, he wasn’t mad. He was disappointed and he wouldn’t lie about that, but he wasn’t angry. He spent half his childhood angry. He didn’t have the energy for it anymore. He understood now and it was just easier to let it go then spend his days mad at the world. “I just want you to take care of yourself. And if there is anything I can do to help, I’ll be more then happy to do it.”

“Bu–”

“I made you this,” Aaron cut him off, swearing to himself that this was the last time as he held up the flower crown, “I know it’s kind of stupid, and you don’t have to wear it, but I thought you could put it in your office so even when you’re busy I can be with you.”

“You are too good for this world,” George muttered, standing up from his chair and moving around the desk to take the crown from his hands. He placed it on his head, giving Aaron a soft smile. Aaron grinned. The colors matched George’s skin tone perfectly. He reached up to touch George’s cheek, lifting himself on his tiptoes to place kiss against his lips.

“I love you,” Aaron softly whispered.

“I love you too,” George echoed, pulling him close and kissing his forehead, “Thank you for understanding. Thank you for being so amazing.”

“You’re welcome. Should I let you get back to work?”

“I can–”

Knock! Knock!

Aaron looked over his shoulder at the door before turning back to see that George's face had gone serious. His attention flickered to Aaron then back at the door. He turned away, walking over to his desk and shutting his eyes for a moment. Aaron could see the tense in his shoulders and conflicted in his eyes. George looked more like a General than ever before. Aaron decided to make things easy on him.

Knock! Knock!

“George?” Alexander urgently asked through the door, “A letter has arrived for you.”

“I’ll leave you to your work,” Aaron said, quickly moving to place a kiss on George’s head before returning to the door.

“Aaron–”

“It’s okay, George. Really. I know how important you work is and I don’t want to make things harder on you.”

“Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me,” George replied, his feelings clear in his voice.

“I think I do.” Aaron said, giving him a bright smile as he opened the door for Alexander. The man walked into the room, looked between the two of them, before biting his lip.

“Sorry,” he muttered, “I can wait if you two are still talking.”

“No need. I was just heading out.”
“Are you su–”

“Yes, but make sure he gets to dinner on time.”

“Of course,” Alexander promised before stepping into the office. Aaron watched the door closed and felt his heart get a little lighter. He still wished that George would like him help, wished he could stay in the office and hear what Alexander had to say, but right now all he could do was be supportive and wait. He was good at that, good at biding his time. He waited years to show his uncle how useful he could be. He could do the same with George.

Is he asleep?

He is, but are you sure you want to do this?

You already know the answer to that, Aaron replied as pushed down the blankets and slowly sat up. He was mindful of every movement he made, wanting to ensure that George stayed asleep.

I don’t like this... Indigo told him, just like she did every night. Aaron ignored her in favor of staring at George's face. The tension in his shoulders were gone, replaced with a relax pose, but George’s face still showed evidence of strain. The scowl that he’d been wearing throughout the day had yet to leave him even while he sleep. Aaron could only imagine the thoughts that were going on in his head. He reached out and carefully placed his hand over George’s closed eyes, whispering the words he found two weeks ago in an ancient spell book.

A cold feeling started from Aaron’s palm and extended up his arm, letting him know that his spell was working. He slowly pulled his hand back, watching as grey and black smoke started to float up from George’s head. At first, seeing such a thing had terrified Aaron, but after doing this every night for the past few weeks he was no longer scared of the smoke. Inside each tendril was a different nightmare. Together, they made up all of George’s deep fears and dark thoughts. Aaron twisted and turned his hand until the smoke formed a small ball. It took all his concentration to pack in it tight, not letting any of it escape back into George’s mind. Once the ball was the size he wanted, Aaron pushed the smoke into his mouth.

It tasted like ash and blood, sliding down his throat slowly and leaving behind a bitter taste. Aaron squeezed his eyes shut as he forced himself to keep his mouth firmly shut. He was almost there, almost done. Finally, the smoke evaporated inside Aaron’s chest and George’s nightmares find a new home in Aaron’s own mind. Aaron laid back down, preparing himself to stare at the ceiling for the rest of the night.

It wasn’t perfect. It made it hard for him to sleep and as Aaron laid back down against his pillow he prepared himself for another long night with no sleep, but at least this way he could take away some of George’s stress. He could ensure that George got a good night of sleep without having to worry about the problems that followed him throughout the day.

This isn’t fair to yourself... Indigo commented.

It’s not about being fair. It’s about being useful.

This isn’t the right–

Please...please just let me have this. It’s makes me feel better in the morning knowing that he slept well. It’s all I can do to help...I know it’s not the right thing to do, but I have to do it. I don’t need you mad at me too.
I’m not mad at you! I just worry. You’re hurting yourself.

It’s not that bad.

Don’t lie to me. I can see how it hurts you, how it tortures you.

I’ve had worse. You know that too.

Aaron...

Will you tell me another story? Like you did last night? That helped a lot. Aaron begged. They both knew he was trying to change the subject, trying to get away from Indigo’s lecture, but the dragon sighed and gave in easily. She moved to rest on his chest, placing her beck against the bottom of Aaron’s chin.

Of course. Anything for you, my sweet prince. Anything for you....

Thank you Indigo.

Once, when I was still very young....

“Are you alright?” Yuma asked as she rolled out some dough and twisted into an intricate shape.

“Just tired,” Aaron muttered, watching closely so he would be able to do the same thing with his own dough. He asked Yuma to teach him to bake as he needed something to do while the others were busy. He had never learned to cook, but after watching Yuma and the others he felt he had to give it a try. So far he only helped by peeling vegetables or watching the water boil, but today he was going to help make some bread.

“Have you been sleeping alright?” Yuma wondered, reaching out to feel Aaron’s forehead with a flour covered hand. Aaron let her touch him, let her be a mother hen. It was nice. Made him feel as if someone at least cared. The nightmares kept him awake, kept him from being able to close his eyes even during the day. He was starting to get dark marks under his eyes, though no one else had voiced their concern.

“It’s been a tough few nights,” Aaron confessed, “but I’m making do.” Indigo gave him a look from her corner, an area set aside so the dragon could lay in the sun during Aaron’s lessons, but he ignored her knowing eyes. His words were mostly true.

“Perhaps some lavender tea before bed would help you sleep better,” Yuma suggested, pulling her hand back. She stared at him for a long moment before turning back to her work. “I am surprised though.”

“Surprised?”

“That you didn’t go with George or your friends today,” Yuma explained, “I thought for sure that the house would be empty besides the little ones.” Early in the morning, George had set off to visit Eliza’s hospital along with Theodosia while Alexander, Bellamy and John took a trip to a local creature market to oversee that all the animals had proper care.

Aaron would have loved to go along on either trip, but both parties had set off long before he knew about their plans. He wasn’t truly alone, as the servants of the household and the children were still in the house, yet he still felt lonely. He missed George. Missed their adventures and their talks. He also missed his friends. Bellamy hadn’t said much to him over the last few weeks and even Theo was
too busy to spend much time with him. The trips could have been a saving grace for him.

“That’s quite a sad look,” Yuma commented, snapping Aaron from his thoughts.

“I—” Aaron tried to come up with a quick excuse, but nothing came to mind. He turned his face away and ordered his feelings back into the depths. After a while, Aaron shrugged his shoulders, turning back towards Yuma to offer her a straight up lie. “I didn’t want to go.”

Suddenly, a poof of flour hit Aaron in the face. A thick cloud of dust forced him to close his eyes and he coughed as it invaded his lungs. He waved the dust away, only opening his eyes when it faded enough for him to breathe. He stared at Yuma in shock, but the look on the woman’s face kept him from voicing any complaints. Yuma had her hands on her hips and a fiery look in her eyes.

“Don’t you dare stand there and lie to my face. Prince or not, you better give me the respect I—”

“I’m sorry,” Aaron choked out, cutting her off as he wiped off his face, paying the most attention to his eyes. Terror crept up his spine and wrapped around his throat. She was angry with him. He knew what happened when people got angry. He had to be quick or else. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lie I just didn’t want to tell yo—” Gentle hands pulled his away and a wet cloth touched his face. He held still as Yuma wiped away the flour.

“Shhh, shhh, sweet child. You aren’t in any trouble.”

“I’m sorry. Truly I am. I didn’t mea—”

“I know you are. I forgive you. Why don’t you talk to me, darling child?” Yuma whispered, “Tell Yuma all your worries and I’ll make them go away.” Aaron shook his head. He couldn’t. He couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t tell—

**Trust her, Indigo encouraged, At least talk to someone.**

“It’s stupid,” Aaron muttered, trying to shift away.

“I doubt that.”

“I just miss them,” Aaron confessed. He bit back the rest of his confession before it could escape.

“Miss who?” Yuma pushed, pulling Aaron away from the workbench so they could sit on the small table in the corner next to the fire. Aaron leaned into Yuma’s touch, chasing after the comfort she offered. Gods, how he missed being held. Missed hearing someone’s heart beat.

“George and the others. I miss them even when they’re here.”

Yuma hummed to show she was listening as she wrapped an arm around his shoulders and held him close. Aaron shut his eyes, trying to keep the tears at bay. It hurt so much, but it wasn’t fair for him to feel this way. Being upset about such things wouldn’t change them. It would only make him feel worse. He couldn’t make them want to see him, couldn’t make them care. There was nothing he could do. “George is so busy, which I understand, but it still...It still...”

“Still hurts?” Yuma offered, “Still feels like a knife in your chest when he forgets a picnic or doesn’t come to dinner?” Aaron gently nodded.

“I know that I have no right to be mad—”

“Let me stop you right there, Aaron,” Yuma softly cut him off, pulling away and forcing him to look
at her eyes, “There is no right or wrong when it comes to your feelings. You have a right to be mad or upset or sad just as much as anyone else.”

“Being upset won’t change anything,” he argued.

“It probably won’t, but you shouldn’t deny your feelings and push them away,” she agreed, “That won’t help you either. You have to face them. Let yourself feel sad. Let yourself be upset. Be angry. Be jealous. Be yourself. Work through the pain.”

“I don’t know how...” he whispered. Hiding was all he knew. Keeping it locked away where no one could see. That’s what he had always been taught. Even if he wanted to tell someone, it was nearly impossible for him to form the words.

“Are you mad?”

“I’m no–”

“Are you mad?” Yuma repeated. Aaron stared at her for a moment before taking a deep breath.

“I guess?”

“Why?”

“Because...Because George forgot about the picnic. And he won’t spend any time with me. I’m...I’m tired of having to ask. He’s just spends the whole day in his office, but when I come in he barely says anything. Bellamy and Theodosia are in there and I know he’s been talking to them. I don’t understand why he can’t talk to me too.”

“What else?” Yuma encouraged.

“What?”

“What else do you feel?”

“Sad?”

“Because?”

“Because I hate being alone all the time. I’m trying to be patient, trying to hold out, but I miss seeing George and I miss talking to him. I just...I’m sad because I feel like I did something wrong. Like it’s my fault he won’t talk to me, but I have no idea what I did,” Aaron answered, then the words started to come out easier.

“I’m jealous because Theodosia and Bellamy get to talk to him but I don’t. They’re my friends, but it feels like he’s taking them away from me. I know that’s selfish, but they’re all I have left of my home. I can’t lose them too.”

“I’m annoyed because I can see the way everyone is looking at me, waiting for me to break down or do something stupid. They are always watching me. Always and I hate it. They think I can’t see them, but I can.”

“I’m upset because I want to tell George all of this but I can’t. I can’t because he’ll just get mad and I don’t want to make him mad. He’s already been snapping at me for small stuff. I don’t want to see what would happen if something else happens.”

“And?”
“And I’m tired. I’m tired of being upset. Tired of feeling this way. I just want things to go back to the way they were, but it doesn’t seem like that is going to happen any time soon,” Aaron muttered. It felt good to say all of it, good to let it all out. He didn’t even care about the tears forming in his eyes, though he did brush them away before they could fall.

“That’s a lot of feelings to have,” Yuma commented, “but they are all valid and no one should ever tell you that your feelings are stupid or immature.”

“It..It hurts that there’s nothing I can do. I just have to deal with it.”

“There is something you can do,” Yuma offered.

“What?”

“You're not going to like it.”

“I can’t,” Aaron said, knowing what she was going to suggestion, “I can’t talk to him. George is already stressed and I don’t need to add to t–”

“He’s your husband, Aaron. This is part of marriage. You have to face him and tell him that something is wrong or he’ll never know.”

“I don’t want him to know. I don’t want to be a problem.”

“You’re not a problem.”

“Not yet. If I tell him, then I’ll become a problem.”

“Aaron–”

“I can’t,” he says again, choking on the word. He knew what would happen. Knew he wouldn’t be able to take it. “I just want to stay in here and learn to cook and wait until George stops being busy.”

“That might never happen,” Yuma sadly warned.

“Then I’ll stay in here forever.”

“You can’t live like that.”

“Please,” Aaron begged, “Please don’t’ say anything to him. I...I’m scared.”

“Scared?”

“I’m scared that I’ll ruin this. I’m trying not to, but I have a way of always ruining things.”

“I promise you that you will not ruin this,” Yuma said, sliding off the table and moving to stand in front of him. “I won’t let you. If you want to stay in here, then you can stay in here, but you should try to talk to him. If you want to, I’ll go with you. I’ll do whatever I need to do.”

“Why?”

“Because you are a sweet boy with a big heart and you deserve to be happy. And if I could, I would hunt down every single person who has ever made you feel bad and give them a piece of my mind.”

Aaron smiled at her words, reaching out to pull her into a hug.
“Thank you,” he whispered.

“You’re welcome, Aaron. You are very welcome. You’re a joy to have here. A true gift to us all.”

“You can’t imagine how great it is to hear that.”

On one hand, Aaron felt better. It did feel good to tell someone how he felt, but it also stirred up so much anger inside him. Things used to be so simple, so easy; however, now things were tense and it felt like Aaron was back home under his Uncle’s watchful eye. At least in the kitchen he would be able to ignore the others just like they were ignoring him. It would get better over time. It had to...right?

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is full of cuteness, irony, and pain.

What do you think is gonna happen next? Are you ready for all the angst?

Did you catch the sly reference I made to the play?
The General VIII

Chapter by captain_trash

Chapter Notes

First things first, you may notice there is a new author! SadSeaChild actually helped me WRITE part of this chapter, so I decided to upgrade them from beta to co-author. You can all thank them for how heartbreaking this chapter is. Hint Hint

Second thing, the reference in the last chapter was from "Room Where It Happened." Aaron mentioned how he "wished he could stay in the office and hear what Alexander had to say" was the clue. I told you it was very sly. But as soon as I wrote that line, that's all I could think of and I listened to the song on repeat.

Anyway, enjoy the chapter! Don't cry too hard now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“George, George!” Philip cried with excited, grabbing his hand as he walked down the hallway towards the dining room. “I wanna show you the thing I made with Aaron!”

“I wanna show him first!” Martha complained.

“I asked first!”

“I’m older!”

“That doesn’t matt-”

“You can both show me at the same time,” George settled their argument. The children beamed at him before rushing towards the table. They collected their flower crowns from their seats and ran back to hold them up to George. This was the third time this week. Ever since they discovered Aaron’s new talent, they been begging the Prince for flowers day in and day out. Aaron took their demands as a challenge and helped the children make bigger and bigger creations.

“They’re lovely,” George commented, “You’ve gotten a lot better.”

“Aaron’s going to try to make an orchid tomorrow,” Martha explained.

“I think he should try a tree next, but he said it’s still too early,” Philip added.

“It’s also not the right time of year for a tree,” George replied, herding the children back towards the table for their nightly meal. It felt like it had been months since he’d had time to come to dinner, but with Tyst removing their troops from the borders and Morker stepping in about the trade agreement he felt like he could relax and breathe. He missed sitting down at the head of the table and looking out over his small family.

Theo and Eliza had their heads ducked together, talking in low whispers with pink cheeks. George could only imagine the plans they were coming up with. He was patiently waiting for them to announced their relationship, as it was obvious to everyone already how deeply they cared for one
Bellamy was sitting between Alexander and John, watching the two men debate about a comment Alexander had made earlier. The fond look on Bellamy’s face spoke volumes. George had never seen a man so in love with two fiery creatures. It was a good thing that he was so calm. He was able to add some much needed balance to Alexander’s and John’s lives.

Martha and Philip went on comparing their crowns with one another, making comments about what they liked and what they could work on. George kept an eye on them in case they started to fight. One could never know when a child’s mood would shift. His attention when to Aaron last, and the look on his husband’s face made him frown with concern.

Aaron had dark circles under his eyes, evidence that he hadn’t been sleeping well. George wondered if he was still having nightmares. Still being plagued by dark thoughts. Guilt twisted in his heart. He should be there for Aaron, should be waking him up and providing the Prince the comfort he needed, but every night he fell into a peaceful slumber and only woke up when the sun started to shine into his room. It was odd that he was sleeping so well with everything going on, but he was grateful for all the rest he was getting.

“Aaron, can we go on another picnic tomorrow?” Philip asked. Aaron didn’t reply, his eyes never leaving his plate. The was a far off look on his face as if he was in another place altogether. George reached out to place his hand on top of Aaron’s, snapping him back to the present. Aaron slowly looked over at him and offered a soft smile. The happiness didn’t reach his eyes.

“Yes?”

“Philip asked you something,” George explained. Aaron turned towards the boy.

“I’m sorry, Philip. Can you repeat that? I was busy thinking about my plants,” Aaron said.

“Can we go on another picnic?” Philip repeated.

“Of course, as long as the weather is good.”

“Yay!”

“Do you want to come with us?” Martha asked, staring at George with a hopeful look. Aaron turned his eyes on George as well, but his face lacked the same feeling. George understood Aaron lack of hope in him. Perhaps this was his chance to make it up to the Prince.

“I would love to,” George agreed.

“You have to pick a flower for Aaron to grow!” Martha demanded, “Just wait until you see him to it! It’s the best thing ever!”

“It’s not as good as John riding a dragon!” Philip protested.

“Yes it is!”

“What about me?” John piped up.

“Nothing!”

“Tell me.”

“No!”
“Tell me or I’ll tickle you!”

“Nooo! Martha help me!”

“Are you sure you’ll have the time?” Aaron wondered, catching George’s attention.

“This time, I’m sure,” George insisted. Aaron stared at him for a long moment before turning back to his food. George frowned in confusion, watching his husband for a while until Alexander pulled him away with a question. He did keep track of his husband’s food, noticing that Aaron was only moving it around his plate rather than putting anything in his mouth. The perfect illusion of eating without actually completing the task. Why wasn’t he eating? Was he sick?

After Theodosia and Eliza excused themselves Aaron rose from his seat, his plate still full. George reached out and grabbed his wrist, preventing him from running off too quickly. Aaron didn’t say a word as he stared at George in confusion.

“What are your plans for the night?” George gently asked.

“I plan to read in the library until bed. Why?” Aaron replied, “Is there something you need?”

“No. I was just thinking that I would join you.”

“Oh.” He looked shocked by the idea, as if he didn’t quite believe George. “Well, you are more than welcome to if you have the time.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay.”

He left the room without another word, though George watched him the whole time and wondered just how he could have missed this happening. He should have been paying more attention. Should have carved out time for Aaron and kept better track of him. Now he would have to fix whatever was wrong. He would have to go back and repair the damage that had been done.

“Bellamy?” George said, turning towards the man. Alexander and John paused to give George their attention as well, always protective of Bellamy. Always.

“Yes?” Bellamy replied.

“Have you talked to Aaron yet? About everything?”

Alexander and John turned their eyes towards Bellamy as he shrank down in his chair. He looked away from George, unable to meet his eyes as he picked at his nails. After a long moment, he let out a sigh and shook his head.

“Not yet. I’ve been meaning to, but with everything I haven’t had the time. I’m not sure I know what to say.”

“I understand your hesitation, but even if you don’t talk to him about your relationship, it might be a smart idea to spend some time with him.”

“He doesn’t look good,” John pointed out.

“I’ve noticed,” George noted, “which is while it would be helpful if Bellamy spoke with him.”

“It’s cause he’s sad,” Philip piped up, taking another bite of his pie.
“Philip!” Martha snapped. Philip placed a hand over his mouth as his eyes widened.

“Oops.”

“What do you mean he’s sad?” George asked. Philip moved his pie away from George and shook his head. Philip and Martha shared a look.

“I-I don-”

“You won’t get in trouble,” Alexander offered, giving George a knowing look. George nodded his head to confirm his words.

“I heard him talking with Yuma,” Philip quietly confessed, “He was upset and crying.”

“When was this?” Bellamy wondered.

“Yesterday.”

“But that wasn’t the first time,” Martha softly added, “We heard them talking a few days ago and he was upset then too.”

“I should not have to keep telling the two of you to stop eavesdropping on people, but this time I’ll let it go. Next time, you will get in trouble and there will be consequences,” George warned, giving both of them a stern look, “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Martha answered, lowering her eyes to stare at her own dessert.

“Is Aaron going to be okay?” Philip asked, a worried look taking over his face. A horrible feeling squeezed George’s heart. The children should not be worrying about his husband. They shouldn’t be worried about anything besides their lessons, and even then it shouldn’t cause that much stress.

“Of course,” George promised, “Everyone gets sad once in awhile, but I’ll check on him and make sure he’s alright.” The look didn’t go away, if anything, Philip looked more concerned and nervous. George glanced at the kitchen door.

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow,” Bellamy agreed, “Before your picnic.”

“Thank you,” George replied, standing from his chair. He pointed to Philip and Martha. “Make sure they get to bed on time.”

“We will,” Alexander assured him. George bid them all good night before making his way towards the kitchen. He pushed through the door and paused. Yuma was working away on something, glancing at him for only a second then going back to her task. George wanted to demand answers, wanted to beg the woman to tell him what Aaron had said, but he knew that Yuma wouldn’t give in. She would never give up Aaron’s secrets like that.

“Do we have any lavender tea?” he asked instead.

“We do. Shall I make you a cup?” Yuma suggested, setting down her spoon.

“Just show me where it is and I can make a pot.”

“You need a whole pot?”

“It’s not for me.”
“Ah,” Yuma said, “It’s for Aaron.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” George begged, his shoulders slumping as his emotions took over. He knew he could trust Yuma to see him this way. She watched him grow up, knew his fears and weakness, understood how much pressure he was under at any given moment.

“It was not something I could tell you, my dear boy,” Yuma replied, moving around the kitchen to grab the teapot and filling it with water, “Only Aaron can tell you what you wish to know.”

“Things used to be so easy,” George muttered, rubbing a hand over his face and head.

“That’s how life normally goes. One moment, things are easy and everything is right with the world, but the next the world is on fire and you can’t seem to stop the flames. But no matter what happens, as long as you keep going and keep trying, things will get easier again,” Yuma explained. George could listen to her talk for days without end. It was her voice who sang to him when he was sick. Her voice that echoed in his head when he tried to hit the same target again and again. His parents had been there, but their own jobs had pulled them away so often that he learned to expand his idea of family at a young age.

“Giving him tea is the first step,” Yuma added, grabbing a tray and placing two cups on it. George moved to help her, but she waved him away just as the teapot started to scream. She grabbed it off the stove and set it on the tray along with the tea leaves. “Make sure that he goes to bed early. He’s been wandering the halls at night.”

“Since when?”

“For about four days now. Said that he couldn’t fall asleep, but the walking helped clear his mind.”

“Thank you for being there for him, Yuma, especially when I haven’t been,” George muttered.

“I would do anything for you or for that boy,” Yuma replied, “but you need to do something yourself, George or you might not get another chance.”

“I know. That’s why I have a plan for tonight and tomorrow,” George told her, picking up the tray and placing a kiss on Yuma’s forehead. After his parents’ death, after every battle and fight, it was nice to still have Yuma to come home to. She was the constant in his life that he needed. The only thing he could always count on.

“Good luck,” Yuma called as he walked through the door.

“Thank you,” he shouted back. The others were gone from the dining room, the plates making their way into the kitchen to be washed by themselves. George walked through the room and down the hallway towards the library where Aaron said he was planning to spend the evening. It was time for them to talk and sort out the past few weeks.

“George!” Theodosia called, running down the hall towards him with Eliza at her side.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“You need to see this.”

“Can it wait?” George asked, glancing down the hall towards the library. All he wanted to do was visit his husband and make sure things were okay. Wanted to sit with Aaron on the couch, talk until they fell asleep or take Aaron to bed and tire him out. That’s all he wanted, but work was calling his name.
“No,” Eliza darkly replied, “It can’t.”

“What is it-”

“It’s about Tyst,” Theodosia cut him off, “and Aaron.” George’s heart stopped before starting to beat like a drum against his ribs.

“What are you-”

“We can’t talk about it here.”

George send the tray on the to the library without him, deciding that Aaron would have to wait a little longer. At least until he figured out what the women were talking about. He wanted to be able to give Aaron his complete attention, not be thinking about the issues that plagued the kingdom.

“My office. Now,” George ordered. The women set off with George following after them. He paused, glancing over his shoulder towards the library. What if this was a moment that would change their lives forever? What if he was making the wrong choice? His Kingdom or his marriage? Why did he feel as if he had to choose? Why couldn’t he have both and still be happy?

“George?” Eliza called. George turned away, rushing the rest of the way into his office. He shut the locked the door before rubbing his forehead. He banished the questions from his mind and forced himself to focus on the task at hand. He was Frihet’s General and he had to remember that. His King needed him. The people needed him. This was the right choice. It had to be.

“What’s going on now? What have they done?” he asked, turning to Theodosia and Eliza.

“These just came by raven,” Eliza explained, offering him a letter. George looked it over, recognizing both seals. “The first is from Lafayette, the second is from Aaron’s sister.”

George broke the seal on Lafayette’s, quickly pulling the letter out to read over the details. He paused halfway through as his heart sank.

“They’re moving troops across the country to the mountains. Reports are saying that nearly a two third of their army is heading for the mountain pass and should arrive there in two days. The weather has been nice so the pass is clear.”

“They could attack from the South,” Eliza proclaimed.

“But why not be quiet about it? Why be so open?” Theodosia wondered. George went back to the letter and found the answer to her question.

“Because the other third of the army is heading to the coast. They're splitting up and turning this into a two front war. They expect us to meet them in the South only to strike from the North when we’re not looking,” George exclaimed, nearly crushing the other letter in his hand as he read Lafayette’s closing remarks. He was scared, more scared than he had been before. This wasn’t any innocent move or a push back against a treaty. This looked like an attack waiting over the horizon.

“What do we do?”

“Get the boys and send word to Thomas. We’ll need to make our own plan of attack then set out to the capitol. We have to be at Lafayette’s side just in case.”

“What about the other letter?” Eliza asked. George looked at the letter from Aaron’s sister, Princess Sally.
“It’s no cause for alarm. He received letters from her all the tim-”

“No, he didn’t,” Theo protested. George looked up in confusion. “Princess Sally has never written Aaron a letter. Not once in the whole time we’ve been here, but now she suddenly wants to contact him while Tyst is making trouble? While we’re on the brink of war? She wants something, and it can’t be good for us.”

“But-” George paused, thinking back to the letter box he had given Aaron as a wedding present. It sat in their bedroom and during the first few weeks of their marriage Aaron had placed countless letters inside it. If they weren’t from his sister, then who? “Where did all the letters come from?”

“Bellamy and myself,” Theodosia confessed, offering him an apologetic look.

“What?”

“He didn’t want to make you feel bad about your present, but he knew his family wouldn’t write to him. he asked Bellamy and me to write him letters so he could put them in the letterbox and make it look like he was getting them from home.”

“Which is why he stopped using it once things got better,” George muttered to himself. Then Aaron didn’t feel the need to lie to him anymore. It wasn’t so much a lie as a misrepresentation.

“We’re getting off track,” Eliza sternly told them, “That letter likely contains information about Tyst’s military. Even if the details are insignificant, there’ll still might be enough information for Aaron to figure out that something is going on.”

“This letter is between Aaron and his sister-” George tried to tell them.

“He’ll find out that we lied,” Theodosia insisted. George looked down at the letter in his hand.

“And once he does,” Eliza warned, “who knows how he’ll reaction.”

“We have to do something. Aaron won’t handle being lied to very well. He never has.”

“But reading his mail?”

“This is not the worst thing we’ve ever done,” Eliza pointed out. They both knew it was true. War brought out the worst in people. It challenged your heart and mind. Pushed people to the their limits. Could he do this? Could he break Aaron's trust in such a way?

“There’s also a chance that the Princess will tell Aaron something that could help Frihet get the upper hand,” Theodosia added. That was another thing. Theo supported the idea. One of Aaron’s oldest friends believed that this was the right course of action. She knew better than anyone else how Aaron would react.

“We don’t have time to waste,” Eliza added, “And this could help us.”

“You’re right,” George agreed. He broke the seal and slid the letter out. He paused, giving it one last through. An army moving towards the mountains. Another towards the sea. There was no denying it anymore, not hiding the facts. They were heading for war and sooner or later they would have to fight back. George needed all the information he could get his hands on. Personal feelings couldn’t stop him from doing his job. He unfolded the letter and started to read.

To My Dearest Little Brother,
I do hope that everything is going well. It’s a shame that we don’t write to each other more often, but you must understand how busy I am trying to learn everything I need to know as I will one day rule our Kingdom. I hope you are being mindful of your own studies, as we both know you are often known to slack off when you don’t have me there to keep you in line. Uncle does miss your presence as well, though he shows it by bothering me at every moment possible.

We have decided to move our troops into the mountains ahead of schedule. The weather is perfect and now is the right time to make the long journey South. It is my deepest regret you won’t be able to join us during this glorious night of triumph and pride, but I will be sure to think of you the whole time.

I hope that your part of the plan is going well. It would be a disgrace to our family if you were to disappointed Uncle, again, and ruined everything that he has worked so hard to achieve. The Kingdom is counting on you to do your job and do it well. If you need any help, do not hesitate to contact me. I am always willing to give you advice, little brother. It’s what older sisters are for, after all.

I will keep this letter short, as I don’t want to take up too much of your time and pull you away from your true mission.

Remember, dearest Aaron. Be mindful and always keep your ears open.

With Love,

Princess Sally

“Are you sure that Aaron didn’t receive any other letters from his sister?” George asked as anger started to boil under the surface. He didn’t want to believe it, but the evidence was hard to ignore.

“I’m pretty sure,” Theodosia replied, “but I’m not with him all the time, so perhaps he did receive others without me knowing. Why? Do you think they’ve been in contact with one another?

“According to this, it appears so.”

“He has been spending a lot of time in the stables, and that’s where we keep the messenger ravens,” Eliza pointed out.

“But this is Aaron we’re talking about,” Theo argued, though her words were quiet and even she didn’t seem to completely believe them.

“Bellamy did say that he’s extremely loyal to his family,” George muttered.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Eliza whispered. It didn’t. For a moment, George’s mind screamed that it couldn’t be true. Aaron would never betray him. Aaron loved him. Cared about him and trusted him. He would never, and could never do something like this.

Yet here it was written in black ink. Aaron knew about Tyst’s plans. He was knew everything that was going on, but he never said a word about it to anyone. George himself remembered seeing Aaron in the stables with John. He had been in there a lot more than usual, probably so he could send and receive letters without anyone knowing. There was too many coincidences and nothing of it looked good.

“They’re ahead of schedule with their plans and they’re expecting an easy victory. Go get the boys and come up with a plan on how we can stop them from getting through the mountain pass,” George ordered as he walked towards the door with the letter still in his hands.
“What are you going to do?” Theodosia wondered.

“I’m going to go talk to my husband and see what else he knows about this.”

“Be careful,” Eliza warned as he opened the door and marched out of the room. All he could think about was the stress he had been under over the past three weeks. All the fear. All the anger at Tyst for their actions. Aaron knew, yet he did nothing. They could have had this solved from day one if Aaron had just spoken up.

A quiet voice, one that George could barely hear over his roaring anger, tried to remind George about Aaron’s shyness. What if the Prince had been too scared to speak up? What if he had been trying to help, trying to solve it himself? There were other what ifs that he wasn’t taking into account, but the voice had nearly vanished by the time George made it to the library door.

George reached for the door handle, pausing for a moment. Was this the best course of action? Was he making the right choice? His mind filtered through what could happen, what could go wrong. He weighed the pros and cons, thought about other means of attack, ways that he could retreat if he needed to. Things that always ran through his mind before a battle.

When George finally decided that this was the only way he turned the handle and slammed the door open. His heart ached at the way Aaron jumped in his seat, but his mind forced his feelings down. He was no here to comfort the prince, wasn’t here to be his husband. Right now he was Frihet’s General and his kingdom had to come first.

“You scared me,” Aaron said, shaking his head, “You should be nicer to the doo-”

“You knew,” George declared, cutting him off, “You knew this whole time and you didn’t think to tell me about it??”

“Knew what?” Aaron asked in confusion. He closed his book, setting it aside and standing up from the couch. He took a small step forward, but George moved back to kept some space between them. The last thing he wanted Aaron getting too close. He couldn’t let his feelings get in the way, couldn’t let his heart take control.

“Is this all just a game to you?” George growled. The confusion didn’t leave Aaron’s face.

“As if one war wasn’t bad enough!”

“George, I don’t-”

“First you attack our border over a stupid land treaty, scaring our people half to death thinking that they’re about to die at the hands of a small army. I could almost over look that, almost. It’s not the first time that such problems have occured. Perhaps you were doing it to get back at us for something, or because your pride was hurt after Morker did the same thing three years ago. I have given up trying to make sense of your actions.”

“I don’t under-”

“But then you violate our treaty agreement on the high seas to make us look like the aggressors. That treaty was meant to keep Northern ships away from us in order to keep our people safe. To stop those tyrants from trying to take back what they still think is rightfully theirs! If Morker hadn’t stepped in who knows what would have happened. How many more lives we would have lost in a needless war!” the words were coming out so far that George had little time to think about what he was saying.
“Please just stop and ca-” Aaron continued to try to protest, but George refused to let him get a word in. He would not be tricked again, wouldn’t let Aaron distract him from his sole task.

“Why is your army moving towards the Farlig Sea and Himmel Mountains? What do you and your sister have planned? Will you stop at nothing to take our kingdom down?!” George screamed. He had been screaming this whole time, his throat just now protesting from the strain. Aaron stared at him with wide eyes, still looking just as lost and confused as before.

“Answer me!” George demanded, “Answer me or gods help you I will-”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Aaron cried out.

“Don’t lie to me! I have your sister’s letter,” George held it up as proof, “She wants you to know that your troops are moving ahead of schedule and that she hopes your part of the plan is going well!”

“You have a letter from my sister?”

“Why are your troops heading to the mountains?” George asked again, ignoring Aaron’s own question.

“For the holiday!”

Aaron’s words threw George off, his world tilting as his mind tried to make sense of what was just said. His boiling anger quickly cooled as confusion rose up inside him. He opened and closed his mouth a few times as he tried to find the answer he was looking for. Finally, he gave up, gave in to his confusion.

“What?”

“The holiday? In three days it will be Restoration Day. We always take the army up to the mountations for a celebration! If the pass is clear, then the army will set up cannons and fire them off during the festival. Since it’s the fifth year, they are probably making camp early and extending the celebration,” Aaron carefully explained. George paused, glancing at the letter and thinking about the words it contained. Aaron’s explanation did line up with some things, but that didn’t explain Theo’s reaction.

“This happens every year?”

“Every year.”

“Then why would Theodosia not mention the holiday to me?”

“Theodosia?” Aaron echoed with a scowl, “She knows about this? Does she know about the other stuff too?”

“Answer the question,” George snapped. His confusion faded as anger bubbled back to the surface. He remembered all the stress, all the problems they were still facing. He needed a solution, needed information. So why was Aaron avoiding all of his questions? Did he have something to hide? Was he trying to throw George off to gain the upper hand?

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You need to tell me everything you know. Everything. And I want every letter you sister has ever sent you.”
Aaron stared at him in confusion for a moment before the look faded away to nothing. The Prince’s shoulders slumped and he curled in on himself just enough to make George’s heart ache. He hated seeing such a look on Aaron’s face, hating watching him retreat into himself. It hurt him to watch, but he couldn’t stop now. He couldn’t give up. He had to find answers, had to know what was going on. The quiet voice from before returned with a vengeance, screaming in protest, but George ignored it.

“Well, you’re in luck,” Aaron said, his voice lacking any emotions or tone, “because you’re holding the only letter she’s ever sent.”

“Do not li-”

“I’m not lying!”

“I don’t believe that. Your sister said that you have a plan! She said that-”

“I don’t know what she’s talking about!” Aaron told him, “I don’t know about the troops or anything. I haven’t talked to her in months!”

“Yes, you do! You have to know something!”

“I don’t know anything, but apparently you do! Apparently, things have been going on behind my back! All this time,” Aaron paused, lowering his voice and forcing George to stay quiet in order to hear the words, “All this time, you’ve separated yourself from me without a word. Kept me in the dark while our kingdoms were on the edge of war, and now, the first time you are alone with me in days, you accuse me of this. Of betraying you?”

“I didn't want to believe it,” George replied.

“Are you sure?” Aaron challenged, “because it seems like you do. It seems to me like you want me to be the bad guy, as if you’re hoping that I have some secret letters to give you.”

“I want answers.”

“I don’t have any!”

“Then why would she sent you a letter and talk about such things?”

“I honestly don’t know. I don’t know my sister as well as you might think. And I haven’t read the letter, so I have no idea what it actually says besides what you’ve just told me,” Aaron growled. He looked away, turning his eyes to the ground and shaking his head. “I don’t understand.”

“This is bigger the-”

“Not that,” Aaron snapped, “I understand that this is bigger than us. I’ve understood that since I was a child.” A quiet moment passed between them.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What?”

“The border. The treaties. Tyst picking fights. Why didn’t you come get me? I could have helped. I would have helped. I still will. I’ll write to my sister and ask her what’s goin-“ George couldn’t let that happen. He couldn’t get Aaron involved. Not now. He would have to choose, and from the way he defended his sister, George knew who would win Aaron’s heart. He couldn’t risk it. Couldn’t let
that happen.

“No.”

“No?”

“You’re staying out of this,” George ordered. Aaron took a step back as if the words had stucked him in the chest. The look of shock faded into one of hurt and betrayal.

“But I can help.”

“We don’t need your help.”

“We?”

George didn’t reply. He couldn’t say it. He watched as realization appeared on Aaron’s face along with a heavy sadness. The Prince shook his head and wrapped his arms around his body.

“You don’t trust me,” he whispered.

“It’s not about that,” George argued, though it was part of it, “It’s safer for you if you-”

“I don’t care about my safety! This is about my people, our people! My uncle should not be doing this. Lafayette should not be-”

“King Lafayette has done nothing wrong,” George reminded him of Lafayette’s true title, “Your uncle is the one who’s started all of this. It’s your people who are the aggressors.” Aaron went quiet, staring at George in silence for a long moment.

“Oh,” he muttered, “I see why you didn’t want to tell me. I understand why you kept it a secret. Afraid I would steal information? Were you afraid I’d kill you as soon as we were alone? You think all of us are monsters, so you cut me out to stop me fr-”

“It wasn’t like that!”

“That’s how it looks! I would have helped you-”

“I don’t want your help!”

“I’m your husband!”

“And the enemy!”

George said the words and immediately regretted it. The anger on Aaron’s face vanished, replaced with a look of such agony that George’s own heart started to crack. The Prince opened and closed his mouth, trying to say something but nothing came out.

“I didn-” George paused, wondering if he should first apologize. Try to mend the damage he had just done. “I did what I thought was best for my kingdom. My kingdom and my people will always come first.”

“But mine can’t,” Aaron mumbled to himself.

“That’s not-”

“You’ve made yourself very clear,” Aaron cut him off, his voice like ice, “You can have your
kingdom and your people and a home, but I can’t. I have no right to defend my family. No place in trying to help prevent a war.”

“Aaron-”

“I am nothing.”

“I didn’t say-”

“You might as well. It doesn’t matter. You have Theodosia and Bellamy to help you. You don’t even need me,” Aaron snapped, moving towards the door. George reached out to stop him, but a large, purple shield prevented him from grabbing Aaron’s arm. Aaron kept his eyes on the door, refusing to look at George.

“I trusted you,” Aaron choked out, his shoulders slumping as his anger gave way to pain. George could see the tears forming in his eyes, “I trusted you and I thought you trusted me too. I thought you loved me.”

“I do,” George insisted.

“You just don’t trust me.”

George didn’t have an answer to that. He did trust Aaron, or at least he thought he did, but his actions didn’t reflect that. He lied to Aaron. Told him everything was alright, assured him that George didn’t need his help while keeping secrets and having private meetings behind closed doors. Not only that, but then he accused Aaron of lying about his own involvement. George claimed that Aaron was a spy, a traitor, or even the enemy, yet Aaron had never questioned George’s meetings. He never protested being left out, never tried to pry into what George was up to, all things that a true spy would have done. By the gods...what had George done?

“Which means your love is based on nothing,” Aaron clarified. His words felt like daggers in George’s heart, “and I’m not sure I want that.”

“Aaron, wait!” George tried to beg, but the Prince ignored him and left the room without another word. George stared at where he had just been and tried to think about where he’d gone wrong. The quiet voice quickly returned, but it offered little comfort. It berated George, reminded him of everything he had promised to do. Protect Aaron. Make sure he never wants for anything. Make him happy. Yet George had ruined all of that in one moment. What he did, what he said, was all wrong. It went against everything he had believed, but now was not the time to feel guilty.

He had to figure out a way to fix this, figure out a way to make it up to Aaron and mend what he broke. There had to be something he could do, something he could say to explain his actions. George tried to think, tried to find the right path to take, but his mind refused to offer him any clear steps to take. He was lost without any chance of finding his way. He didn’t know how long he was standing there before he heard a loud scream. He took off running towards the source, instinct guiding him.

“Martha?” George asked, throwing her bedroom door open. The young girl was kneeling on the ground with flower petals spread out across her bedroom floor. Most of the petals were dried up, but some of them were already decomposing right before his very eyes.

“My flowers! They’re dying!” she cried, holding some of the pedals to her chest, “I don’t want them to die!” George reached down and picked up one of the flowers. Right before his eyes, even has he held it between his finger and thumb, a ink darkness spread from the stem to the veins and into the petal. The petals curled in anguish as their bright happy color faded to a dull, dead color.
“George!” Philip screamed, running into the room, “Something’s wrong with Aaron! My flowers are wilting!” Philip’s own crown was slowly falling apart as well, the petals drying out in his hands and the stems coming undone.

“What does that have to do with Aaron?” George wondered, not understanding what was going on. Flowers wilted. That’s just what happened.

“They flowers are magic! Aaron said they would last forever as long as he feels the same way! And all of our flowers meant happiness!”

“Last forever....” George echoed, his eyes widening as he thought about his own crown sitting in his office. It had been days and still it was as bright as when Aaron brought it to him. Love. They stood for love.

“I’ll be right back.” he promised the children before taking off towards his office. He opened the door to find the others standing in a room full of dying rose pedals.

What had he done?

Chapter End Notes

George is an idiot. Not even gonna lie. He's making so many mistakes, but you know, hindsight is 20/20. I know you all will have MAJOR things to say about this! So hit me up!
The Prince IX

Chapter by captain_trash

Chapter Notes

Are you ready for this?

I know that it's a few days early, but I couldn't wait any longer! I want to see what you all think!

Also, since enough people mentioned it, here is a link with all the translations and TWO maps of the kingdoms. I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Why are you still awake?” Yuma asked as she walked into the kitchen. Aaron jolted, shutting his book and jumping up from his chair as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn’t.

“Sorry, I was just going to bed,” Aaron lied, making his way towards the door. He had no intention of going to bed. He couldn’t stand the idea of sleeping next to George, not after everything that he said earlier. He hid in the kitchen because he thought no one would ever think to look there. That way he could eventually relocate to the library for the night instead, but he would need to set an alarm to make sure he was awake before anyone found him in the morning.

“I didn’t say you had to leave,” Yuma protested, grabbing his arm and preventing him from rushing out the door. “Are you having trouble sleeping again?” Aaron wanted to lie, wanted to tell her everything was fine and run before she could ask any more questions, but he couldn’t lie to Yuma. He didn’t want to.

“I can’t close my eyes,” Aaron muttered, “and I don’t want to go to bed while he’s there.”

“Oh, Aaron,” Yuma whispered, pulling on his arm until he moved close enough for her to wrap arms around him. Aaron hid his face in the crook of Yuma’s neck as he let some of the tension leave his shoulders. Only some. It wasn’t fair for him to give it all up to Yuma. She didn’t deserve having to carry all his pain. “You don’t have to stay in here all by yourself.”

“I don’t have anywhere else to really go,” Aaron admitted.

“Of course you do. You can stay with me.”

“I don’t want to ca-”

“Hush, child. Hush. You’re not trouble or a burden. I could use the company, and you need a place to sleep until George learns how to apologize,” Yuma assured him. She pulled away, took his hand and started to lead him out of the kitchen without another word. Aaron thought about protesting, of ripping his hand away and making an escape down the hall to hide in a random room, but he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to be alone, not after everything. Yuma’s grip on his hand was tight, but not painful. Aaron was grateful to have her taking control. His own mind was a mess. George's words echoed over and over again until Aaron was nearly brought to tears once more. He was tired of crying, tired of being in pain, but he couldn’t stop his emotions from torturing him.
“Here we are,” Yuma declared, opening the door to a smaller bedroom. There was a bed in the corner next to a small dresser and a door leading to a closet. A handmade rug covered the floor and a few candles were lit, giving the room a homely glow. Aaron noticed a stack of books on the dresser next to a bottle of perfume and several picture frames.

“Let’s me get ready for bed and then I’ll make a place for you,” Yuma explained. She forced him to sit down on the bed before she vanished into the closet. Not even ten seconds later she returned with her hair in a single braid down her back and her night dress on. Aaron smiled, impressed by her use of magic. He would have to ask her about that trick at another time. It could come in handy one day.

“Do you have an extra pillow?” Aaron asked, standing up from the bed and glancing around the room for a good place to sleep.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Yuma replied, “and it’s not going to happen. You don’t have to sleep on the floor like a criminal, Aaron.”

“I’m not kicking you out of your bed,” Aaron protested.

“You don’t have to.”

With a wave of her hand, another bed identical to hers appeared in the room. It made the space quite small, but it didn’t change the welcoming feeling it gave Aaron. Yuma even pulled back the blankets and gestured for Aaron to climb in. He hesitated for a moment, glancing at the door. What if Yuma got in trouble for helping him? What if George’s suspicious expanded to include her? The last thing Aaron wanted was to create problems for the older woman.

“Aaron, no matter what happens, I will always take care of you,” Yuma promised. The words wrapped around Aaron’s heart in a way that was both comforting and painful. His eyes filled with fresh tears.

“That’s not your job,” he whispered, shaking his head. Yuma closed the distance between them and took his hands, squeezing them tightly as she stared at his face. Aaron ducked his head to hide his eyes. He didn’t want her to see him cry.

“Of course it’s not my job, but it’s what I want to do. You deserve to be taken care of. To be loved. Let me help you. Let me ease your pain and make you feel better.”

“I’m not worth it.” Aaron replied, pleading for Yuma to understand the truth. He wasn’t worth such love and compassion. George made it abundantly clear earlier when he threw such things away in favor of suspicion and anger.

“Yes, you are,” Yuma argued, “I have never meant a person more worthy of love and care than you.” Aaron’s shoulders sank further in defeat. He could feel the fight leaving him as Yuma’s words echoed in his mind. He didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know what to do.

“Yuma...”

“Come, let’s get you in bed and I’ll help you get some sleep,” Yuma offered, guiding Aaron to the bed and pulling back the covers so he could easily climb in. Once he was settled, Yuma took the time to tuck the blankets around his body and neck, making sure he was as warm and comfortable as possible. It wouldn’t help. Sleep still would not come. Not when he was plagued by his own nightmares and George’s, but it was a nice feeling. Yuma set her hand on his head and suddenly a warm feeling spreaded through his mind. The storm calmed. The darkness chased away by a new, bright light. His thoughts became clear. His mind was at peace for the first time in days. Sleep started
to quickly take whole and Aaron found it hard to keep his eyes open.

“Good night, darling,” a voice softly said.

“Good night, mom,” Aaron tried to reply, but he wasn’t sure the words came out right. He fell into an easy sleep filled with nothing but warmth and light. Before he knew it, he was waking up in the morning as Yuma climbed out her own bed and started getting ready for the day. He watched her move around the room, disappearing into the closet and coming out a moment later in a bright colored dress. She was always so colorful and warm, always a light in his life. Aaron pushed back the covers and climbed out of bed. As soon as his feet touched the floor, his rumbled clothes transformed into a new, navy colored suit. Aaron looked at Yuma in shock, but she only smiled as she fixed up her long, white hair into a complicated bun.

“Thank you,” Aaron said, running his hands over the suit.

“Simple things,” Yuma replied.

“Sometimes, it’s the simple things in life that are the best.”

“That’s a good saying to live by.”

“I didn’t say it. Ind-“ Aaron quickly cut himself off, remembering that no one was meant to know how he communicated with Indigo. He shrank back in fear, sure that Yuma noticed his slip up.

“Do you want to help us make breakfast?” Yuma wondered as she sprayed her neck with perfume. Aaron relaxed as his mistake seemed to go unnoticed by her, or she at least paid no mind to it. Either way, he was grateful. He snapped his focus back to her question and thought it over for a moment. He was still learning how to cook, but he did enjoy the time he spent in the kitchen with Yuma, Lena, and the other servants. It would also allow him to stay away from George and the others. The last thing he wanted was to sit through breakfast knowing that everyone else knew what he didn’t all while sitting under George’s disparaging gaze.

“I would like that very much,” Aaron confessed, following Yuma from the room and down the hall towards the kitchen.

“Did you sleep well?” Yuma asked along the way.

“I did. What did you do?” Aaron was genuinely curious about how Yuma was able to clear such toxic thoughts from his mind and fill it with such a powerful clarity. He hadn’t slept so well in days.

“Nothing much, but I’m glad to see that it helped,” Yuma told him, a secret smile appearing on her face as she took his hand. Aaron gently squeezed her fingers, praying that she knew how much she meant to him. He would never be able to thank her enough. Never. They got to work as soon as they walked into the kitchen, Yuma giving orders and Lena helping Aaron with his tasks.

The time went quickly and before long, Aaron was sitting down with the servants to eat instead of joining the others in the dining room. He didn’t feel out of place, rather he felt at home among the teasing jokes and kind gestures. He would be lying if he said he didn’t miss George. Didn’t miss Bellamy or Theo or the children, but it was nice to be away from the stress the others brought him lately.

When the meal was done, Aaron slipped away to the library to grab a book. He planned to collect Indigo from the stables and take a walk to get out of the house and far away from everyone for a while. He didn’t normally leave Indigo in the stables overnight, but after what happened with George he had decided to leave her with Nessie until he was calmer about it. He made it to the library and
was able to grab his book, but when he turned around George was standing in the doorway. The warmth he felt from the meal with the servants was swept away by the cold grip of fear before his mind kicked into overdrive. Aaron suddenly had flashbacks to the previous night, causing him to take a step back and hold the book in front of him like it actually offered any sort of protection.

“You weren’t at breakfast,” George stated, placing his hands behind his back. Aaron looked at the door frame over George’s shoulder, unable to meet his eyes.

“I...uh, you see..I.” Aaron swallowed down the icy fear lodged in his throat, letting out a barely audible breath before once again attempting to reply. “I ate with Yuma and the others,” He finally answered, “sir.” It felt right to add the title. George was no longer just his husband. He was the General of the Frihet army, and he made it very clear last night that they were on opposite sides. Perhaps showing more respect would help mend their relationship. An odd look appeared on George’s face, but it vanished too soon for Aaron to understand what it meant.

“Now what are you doing?”

“Taking a book and going on a walk.”

“With who?” George asked, the subtle tone of concern in his voice going unnoticed by Aaron.

“No one. I was going to go-”

“Take Bellamy or Theo with you.”

Aaron tensed further at the sudden command. He wanted some peace from the others. Had George not gathered that much from his absence earlier? He instantly opened his mouth to argue. “But-”

“It’s not open for discussion,” George cut him off, stepping through the door.

“You don’t trust me to be alone?” Aaron asked. George paused to look back at him.

“I said it’s not open for discussion.”

Aaron watched him walk away and felt another part of his heart crack. Why didn’t George trust him? What had he done wrong? How did they go from being so happy and in love to so far apart? Aaron sighed, holding the book against his chest as he tried to summon enough courage to move his feet. He wanted to hide away for the rest of the day, avoid anyone and ensure that he didn’t cause any more problems, but he also wanted to go for a walk and continue about his day as if George’s words didn’t send a dagger through his heart. Finally, Aaron got his feet moving and was able to leave the library. On his way to the stables he spotted Lena and asked her to find Bellamy or Theodosia. He didn’t want either of them to join him, but he feared George’s anger.

If he was lucky, neither would be available.

When he opened the door to the stables Indigo immediately wrapped herself around his shoulders and poked her beak into his cheek over and over. Aaron smiled, unable to help himself as he held Indigo close. It was good to have her back in his arms. He always missed her when she was away, but he knew that it was important for them to have some space once in awhile.

Something happened. Something bad. Why didn’t you come get me right away? Why didn’t you let m-

Look into my mind and you’ll find all the answers, Aaron replied. He didn’t always let her into his thoughts, not wanting her to dig too deep into his past without him knowing, but it was easier to just
let her see his memories than try to explain what happened. Nessie peeked out of her stall and stared at Aaron until he moved close enough to pet her head.

**How fucking dare he!** She hissed angrily.

*Indigo-

**Don’t even try to defend him! He had no right to accuse you! No right to even think that you would do such things! After everything you’ve done, everything you’ve given up, he has no right to even thi-

*Please stop,* Aaron begged, shutting his eyes for a moment, *I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to-

*So sad,* A new voice echoed through his head and cut through the conversation like an arrow whizzing through the air. Aaron froze, looking around the stables in confusion. **Very sad.**

*Hello?* Aaron spoke after a moment of mental silence.

*Hello!* The voice perked up as if it was happy that Aaron noticed it.

*Who?*

*Me.*

Aaron turned to look at Nessie, his eyes widening in shock as the griffin used her beak to rub his cheek and neck. It couldn’t be, could it? Nessie was only a griffin and Aaron didn’t know how to talk to normal creatures. It had to be his imagination.

*Nessie?*

*That is me.*

*I can....I can hear you....*

*Yes.*

*And you can hear me?*

*Yes.*

**Impressive,** Indigo commented. Aaron ignored her as he stared at the griffin. He didn’t know how he was doing it, didn’t know what had changed, but he could hear Nessie just as well as Indigo. He never thought he would be able to extend his abilities, never thought he could do more, yet here he was. His joy was short lived. He had no one to share this with. No one to talk to. He wish he could run and tell someone, wished he didn’t have to hide out of fear.

*Sad,* Nessie echoed.

*Yes, very sad,* Aaron couldn’t help but agree. **But I’ll be okay.**

**Are you sure about that?**

*No.*

*With time?* Nessie suggested.
I don’t really have time, Aaron replied, and even if I did, I’m not sure I’ll ever get passed this.

Why?

Because...

Because George is a fool.

Because... Because a lot of people are counting on me to do a good job, and I can’t let them down.

Sounds hard.

Aaron, this is not your fault. None of this is your fault. George made his choice. He was the one who-

“Aaron?” Bellamy called, pushing open the stable door and walking in with Theodosia by his side. Aaron wished he could run to them and throw his arms around their shoulders. Wished seeing them brought the same comfort as before, but instead he felt a great distance between them. He didn’t know how much they knew about what was going on or the fight between George and himself so instead he just kept close to Indigo and Nessie.

“Good morning,” Aaron greeted them, “I’m sorry to bother you, but Geo-the General said that one of you needs to accompany me on a walk.”

“A walk?” Theodosia repeated.

“Yes. To the lake so I can read.”

“Why can’t you read in the library instead?” she wondered, taking a step toward Aaron. Indigo hissed, stretching out and snapping her beak. Theodosia jumped back, prompting Bellamy to step in front of her with a scowl on his face. Aaron noticed that his hand went to the knife he kept at his waist. He felt a sharp flash of worry for the dragon flare in his chest as he moved to prevent any harm from being done.

“Sorry, she’s just a little testy from being left alone,” Aaron explained, pulling the dragon away.

Stop it.

They’re just as bad as him!

Please just stop. You’re not helping.

Indigo finally settled down, hiding her face inside Aaron’s jacket instead of staring Theodosia down like she was a mouse to be eaten. Aaron offered his friends an apologetic look, but Bellamy’s scowl didn’t fade.

“If you don’t want to come with me, then I’ll stay in here and read to Nessie and the others,” Aaron offered as a compromise.

“You can’t stay in here,” Bellamy protested, “You can’t be ar-” Theodosia placed a hand on his shoulder, making him trail off. Aaron stared at them both and felt his heart twist in anger.

“I can’t go for a walk by myself. I can’t be in the stables. What can I do?” he snapped with a loud sigh.
“You can stop being a child about this,” Bellamy growled.

“Bells,” Theodosia warned, trying to pull him away, but Bellamy refused to move back.

“A child? How am I being a child?”

Bellamy opened his mouth to reply; however, Theodosia whispered something in his ear that forced him to calm down. Just more secrets that Aaron wasn’t allowed to know. More things he was being left out of. He looked away, meeting Nessie’s knowing stare.

Angry?

Yes....

Then be angry.

Be angry? Aaron echoed, letting the words bounce around his mind for a moment before he decided to take Nessie’s advice.

“I’m going for a walk,” he declared, “either one of you can come with me, or you can tell the General that I at least tried and you made up your own minds about it.”

“Aaron-” Theodosia tried to argue.

“I am going on a walk,” Aaron said again, “That's what I’ve decided.”

“Let him have his way,” Bellamy sneered, “It’s just easier.” Aaron didn’t bother replying to his words as he made his way to the stable door. Theodosia and Bellamy fell in step behind him, following him on his way to the lake. They didn’t talk, or at least they didn’t talk to Aaron. He could hear them whispering to one another, but they didn’t try to start a conversation with him and Aaron decided it was best to give them both space. Once he made it to the lake he found a spot by the water and sat down to start reading. Theodosia and Bellamy wandered around together, still talking in low voices.

You’re mad at them too, Indigo stated.

I don’t know how to feel. I was upset last night, but now I’m just tired. Aaron confessed, Clearly I did something to make Bellamy mad.

You still think space will help this go away?

I don’t know. Maybe? Honestly, I’m making it up as I go along.

George didn’t even mention what happened? Did he try to apologize?

No. Just acted like he did months ago. As if we were strangers. I wish he would yell instead. At least then he would be showing some emotion, and I wouldn’t feel as if I’ve lost him completely.

The two of them sat in silence for a moment, Aaron staring at the words on the page without actually seeing them. He didn’t know what to do. He knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to yell and scream, throwing things until people were forced to pay attention to him, but that’s wasn’t allowed. It was never allowed. He had to figure out if George wanted him to pretend that nothing happened or if he wanted Aaron to apologize. It wouldn’t be the first time, nor the last, that Aaron apologized for something he didn’t do. He needed to try something soon before things got any worse.
Was sleeping with Yuma nice?

It was, Aaron replied, happy about the subject change. It was a good distraction from the storm started to brew in his head. Yuma’s too kind and sweet, but I’m grateful that she was there for me. I should get her a gift, something to show her how much she means to me.

Perfume?

That’s a great idea! She’ll love that!

“Are you going to read or just stare at your book?” Bellamy asked, his voice shattering the peace between Aaron and Indigo.

“Bells!” Theo warned. Aaron ignored the question, going back to his reading for a while before he looked up at the lake. He watched the waves for a few moments before he set the book aside and walked closer to the water’s edge. He knelt down, dipping his fingers beneath the surface to feel the cool water. He wondered if it would freeze during the winter. Would the ice be thick enough to skate on?

“Don’t get too close,” Theodosia told him. Aaron rolled his eyes, pulling his hand back and returning to his reading spot with a slight scoff. What now? Afraid he’d poison the lake somehow? He sighed under his breath and tried to stomp down the annoyance rising within.

“Are you done yet?” Bellamy wondered, an edge to his tone.

“No,” Aaron shortly answered as he picked up his book again and returned to his story. So much for quelling his annoyance. Bellamy grumbled under his breath, prompting Aaron to lower the book and turn to him with a tired look.

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Bellamy huffed, not even bothering to try and make the lie in his reply convincing.

“Bells, what is going on?” Aaron begged, “I can’t help if I don’t know what’s happening.”

“Nothing is wrong,” Bellamy insisted. The edge in his tone was beginning to sharpen, but Aaron paid no mind to it. He wanted the truth.

“Then why are you so up-”

“Nothing is wrong, and even if something was, you don’t need to know about it!” Bellamy suddenly yelled, giving Aaron such a fiery look that Aaron couldn’t help but shrink back.

“Bells-” Theodosia tried to cut in. Tried to get the other man to calm down before things escalated any further.

“Don’t! Just don’t!”

“Bellamy-”

“No! I’ve had enough! He doesn’t need to know everything about me or my life!”

“I never said I did,” Aaron protested, drawing Bellamy’s withering glare away from Theodosia towards him.

“Yet you act like it! I didn’t tell you about my relationship and you acted as if that was a capital
offense! Now you’re throwing a fit because I didn’t tell you what went on with Tyst,” Bellamy shouted. His voice was getting louder, raspier, with his anger.

“That’s not why I’m upset,” Aaron confessed. It was part of the reason, but not the only one.

“You have no reason to be upset! George had every right not to tell you what was going on! He made the right choice, he made the choice I told him to make because the gods know that you are too loyal to your family for your own good.”

“I-”

“If your Uncle told you to jump you wouldn’t even think about it! You are blind to what he’s done! Blind to the power he has over you!”

“But-”

“So of course we kept it from you, because gods know you would have ran to your Uncle as soon as possible!”

“That’s not true!”

“It is true!”

“I would never betray George or-”

“You would and you know it!”

“How could you say that!?” Aaron cried out, climbing to his feet. Indigo stretched out along his arms to try and look as threatening as possible. “How can you look me in the eye and say that I would betray anyone here? Betray the man I love? Betray my friends? You have known me for years, Bellamy. How can you..No- How dare you say that.”

“I dare because it’s true! Because you are just like them! You don’t care who you hurt or how you get what you want as long as you get it!” Bellamy roared. “You always have, and I know for damn sure you always will.”

“Bellamy!” Theodosia screamed, “You need to stop!” Her pleading did little to stop anything. Bellamy’s words felt like a knife cutting through Aaron’s stomach. He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. He wasn’t...He would never betray George. Never run to his Uncle if it meant George or Bellamy or the others would get hurt. He wasn’t...He wasn't like his family members, was he? Hundreds of marigold started to grow around him as his mind went numb.

“No! He needs to hear this! You’re selfish, Aaron! Just as selfish as Sally! Just as blind and mean as she always was! You hate when you don’t get your way and you treat everyone as if they’re meant to serve you and only you! I didn’t tell you about my relationship because I know you wouldn’t approve no matter what you try to say. I agreed with George not to tell you about the problems with Tyst because I didn’t trust you. It was for the best-”

“Enough!” Aaron demanded, surprising everyone with the sudden bellowing order. He just wanted Bellamy to stop, needed him to. He didn’t want to hear any more. His heart couldn’t take it. The sneer that had delivered the words melted as the numbness in his mind spread to his body, turning the sharp pain in his chest to a deep, hollow ache.

“I’m not done!”
“Yes, you are,” Aaron replied, lowering his voice and giving Bellamy a blank look, “We’re done here. I’m returning to the house.”

“Aaron, he didn’t-” Theodosia tried to repair the damage, but it was too late. She couldn’t take Bellamy’s words back for him, couldn’t change what just happened, and couldn’t take away Aaron’s pain.

“Do you have anything to add? Anything you want me to know?” Aaron offered.

“It’s not...It wasn’t about you. It was just what was best for the kingdoms,” Theodosia explained. Aaron nodded his head, walking passed both of them and making his way towards the house. More marigold sprouted from the ground as he walked. Aaron regarded them with the same barren look he had given the two now behind him. Pain and grief. Aaron remembered seeing them around his parents’ gravestones.

*Let me at them,* Indigo begged, *I’ll make them pay for this.*

*No.*

*But-*

*No. I’ll need you to do something for me that’s much more important.*

*What do you need?*

*We need to send some letters as soon as possible.*

“Aaron?!” George called, throwing open their bedroom door, “why is there a royal carriage outside?”

“Because I’m going to the property King Lafayette gifted us,” Aaron answered as he continued to pack a bag for the trip. Three days ago he sent Lafayette a letter asking him for transportation to the coast, mentioning how he would be traveling by himself and needed some guards for protection. The King delivered what he asked and Aaron would be leaving today. This way, he could give George and the others all the spaced they needed. It was the best decision for all of them. It hurt Aaron to leave. He hated being alone and it didn’t make him feel better, but now George would be able to work freely, and the others wouldn’t feel as if they had to walk on eggshells while moving through the house.

The past three days had been full of awkward silences and harsh whispers. There were quite a few times when Aaron had come upon the others, John with Eliza, or even Alexander and Theo, whispering as they walked through the halls. Their soft conversations would always be cut short as soon as they noticed Aaron, sparking anger in his heart. More secrets he didn’t know. More things he wasn’t allowed to question. Aaron never said a word, never even greeted them as he walked by. He avoided Bellamy and George as best as he could, using spells to warn him if one of them was closeby. Part of him wanted to talk to George, wanted to sort it out, but the man had made it clear that there would be no conversation. When they did run into each other, George barely said more than three words before dismissing Aaron.

“Why didn’t I know about this?” George demanded. Aaron had to resist the urge to roll his eyes.

“You were busy,” Aaron replied, placing the bag over his shoulder, “I didn’t want to distract you from your work, and I didn’t think it was anything you needed to be concerned about.”
“You’re doing this to spite me. This is your revenge for me not telling you about Tyst.” George flinched as Aaron let out an aggravated sigh.

Revenge, revenge, revenge. All anyone seemed to think fueled his actions was revenge. Bellamy accused him of acting like a spoiled, petulant child because Aaron was mad he kept secrets from him, and now George was preaching a similar speech. It was beginning to become enough. Finally, Aaron found his voice. “I’m doing this because I don’t know what else to do. I’ve tried waiting to see what would happen. I’ve tried to talk to you about it. I’ve tried everything I could think of, but now I’m tired and I don’t know what else I should do besides give you space and hope that some distance helps us figure this out.”

“Aaron, this is—”

“It’s not up for discussion.” Aaron cut him off, repeating the same words that George had used against him earlier in the week. “The carriage is here and I’m going,” George froze, his eyes widening in shock. Aaron took the opportunity to slip around him and make his way down the hall. He paused in the kitchen, kissing Yuma’s cheek and taking the packed lunch she made him. He told her about his plan right away, knowing that Yuma would understand his need to get away.

“Be safe,” Yuma begged, “And remember that I will always be here for you. Always.”

“Thank you. Take good care of Indigo for me.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to take her with you?”

“Not this time. Besides, Nessie would be upset if I take her new friend away.”

A fond look glittered in her eyes at his words. “Make sure you write to me as often as you can,” Yuma begged.

“I will. I promise I will,” Aaron assured her before kissing her cheek again. He passed her a letter, whispering for her to give it to George as soon as he was gone, and quickly made his way out the back door. If he stayed any longer he would be moved to tears and he didn’t want anyone to see him cry. He didn’t want them to know how much this hurt. It was the best choice. He just had to keep telling himself that. The Royal guards Lafayette sent quickly snapped to attention as soon as Aaron stepped outside. Aaron waved them out of their formal position to let them relax. One of them stepped forward to take Aaron’s bag as the captain stepped forward.

“Captain Maria Reynolds, at your service, your majesty,” the woman said as she gave him a deep bow. Her hair was curly, pulled back in a perfect ponytail. Her uniform was a bright red color with black stitching along the hems. Aaron noticed the shining sword on her belt and the proud look on her face. She was perfect. Simply perfect.

“Thank you,” he said as he passed the bag over to the other guard, “Are we ready to leave, Captain?”

“Yes, your majesty. Ready when you are.”

“Perfect. I would like to get halfway by t—”

“Aaron?” Theodosia declared, rushing out the back door with Bellamy quick on her heels.

“Give me a moment, Captain and then we will leave,” Aaron quietly said.

“Yes, your majesty,” she replied, stepping back to check on the carriage. Aaron turned back towards
the house as Theodosia and Bellamy stopped a few feet away.

“George said you’re leaving,” Bellamy said in shock, “Why didn’t you tell us? We’re not even packed.”

“Because neither of you are coming with me.” Aaron replied, voice guarded and dull. Nothing, not one emotion, would escape him this time.

“What!?” Bellamy exclaimed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Of course we’re going,” Theodosia added, “We’re your-” Before another word could pass her lips, Aaron reached into his suit pocket and pulled out two matching letters with his Uncle’s seal in one fluid, almost practiced, movement. He held them out with a shake of his head.

“As of today, you are both relieved of your positions as my personal guard and maid. You will be replaced by my Uncle’s men by the time I return; however, I’ve arranged for you to remain here instead of returning home.”

“Aaron,” Bellamy whispered in disbelief. Aaron didn’t reply, nodding to the letters instead. Theodosia took hers first. She ripped the seal and slowly read over King Timothy’s words.

“You can’t-” she muttered, tears forming in her eyes, “Aaron, you can’t!”

“I am afraid it is already done. This is what’s best for both of you,” Aaron said, no real emotion in his face. He was too tired to pretend that everything was alright. It was just easier to pack everything away. “Take the letter, Bellamy, or you’re going to make me late.” Bellamy finally took it, but he didn’t open it. He just stared at Aaron before reaching out towards him. Aaron simply turned his back toward Bellamy and took a step closer toward the carriage. Captain Maria quickly returned to place herself between the two.

“We need to leave now if we want to make it halfway on time,” she reminded him, giving Bellamy a warning look. Bellamy glared back and took a step towards her as if he was daring the Captain to start a fight. Why couldn’t he just make this easier? Why did he have to ru- Aaron cut off such a thought. It wasn’t Bellamy’s fault. It was Aaron’s. He should have left quicker. Or arranged to leave at night. Then he could have avoided this.

“Let’s go,” Aaron agreed, stepping backwards towards the carriage.

“Why are you doing this?” Bellamy begged.

“Consider this my first selfless actions,” Aaron replied, watching as realization dawned on Bellamy’s face, “After all, I have been terribly selfish as of late. It is about time I make up for it. Now you don’t have to deal with me. You can live your lives the way you want.”

“Aaron that’s not- This isn’t what I wanted,” Bellamy muttered.

“Being betrayed wasn’t what I wanted either.” A cold laugh tore itself from Aaron’s throat before he could reign it in. “Oh wait, I forgot, that was me overreacting and being childish. How silly of me.”

“Aaron,” Theodosia protested. Aaron spared her a glance, and, for a brief moment, he could feel her heart shattering along with his. Still, there was no turning back now. There was no running into their arms and staying only to wait for everything to fall apart around him. He needed to fix this and changing his mind now would solve nothing.

“Goodbye, Theodosia. Goodbye, Bellamy. Enjoy yourselves.”
Without another word, Aaron made his way to the carriage and climbed in. Captain Maria took her place at the front and they were off. He didn’t bother looking out the window. There was nothing he needed to see. Nothing worth looking back on.

Chapter End Notes

Are you mad at me?

Thank you so much to SadSeaChild for making this chapter even more heartbreaking! They are an amazing co-author who just blows me away!
It took George too long to recover from Aaron’s words. Too long for him to realize he didn’t want the Prince to leave. Too long for him to get his feet moving. Yet, now he was standing there on the front yard as he watched the carriage roll away. Part of him knew that he could mount Nessie and chase after Aaron, demand he stay or even drag him back, but that wouldn’t solve anything. Aaron chose to go. Aaron wanted to leave, and George clearly wasn’t a good enough reason for him to stay.

“George,” Theodosia choked out, taking a step towards him. He turned to Bellamy and Theodosia, surprised to see them both still standing there. He had expected them to be with Aaron. “I-We-” Theo tried to explain, but she broke down in loud sobs instead. George reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. He wasn’t sure what to say. Wasn’t sure why she was in such pain. Bellamy was still staring at the disappearing carriage, his jaw set in a straight line. Eliza, Alexander, and John soon joined them out, each as shocked as George.

“He’s really gone,” John stated in disbelief. Eliza moved to Theodosia’s side, taking the letter from her hands and reading over it.

“We’ve been dismissed,” Bellamy said, spitting out the words as if they left a bad taste in his mouth.

“What?!” John and Alexander exclaimed in unison.

“Aaron would never do that,” George agreed. Aaron loved Bellamy and Theodosia dearly. He would never fire them. Never send his friends away. Not unless….Not unless something was truly wrong.

“It’s true,” Eliza declared as Theodosia hid her face against Eliza’s shoulder. She gently placed her hand on the back of Theodosia’s head to comfort her before offering the letter to George, who carefully took it as if the letter would bite him. “They’ve been relieved of their position effective today.”

“Why would he-”

“It’s my fault,” Bellamy told them, cutting George off, “I told him he was selfish.”

“What? When?” George demanded, a headache starting behind his eyes. He hadn’t heard about this. No one told him, and heavens know that Aaron didn’t mention anything happening between them. Bellamy lowered his eyes. Theodosia lifted her head to give her friend a look of pure sorrow.

“Three days ago,” Bellamy replied, tearing his hand out of Alexander’s to run his fingers through his hair as he started to pace back and forth. Tears gathered in his eyes as words spilled from his lips. “I didn’t mean it! It just all came out. I was angry with his sister and the King, and I blamed him for all
of it. I shouldn’t have yelled at him. I shouldn’t have...I should have apologized. Tried to explain. It’s my fault he left.”

“I don’t think the fault is yours alone,” Alexander confessed, looking equally ashamed, “We all did our part.” For a moment, they all looked at each other and George felt a heavy guilt settle over them. George looked at them one at a time before glancing towards the direction Aaron’s carriage had gone. Suddenly, he couldn't take it any longer. He couldn't let this happen. Not like this.

“This can’t be it,” he muttered, “It can’t be.” George headed towards the stables, throwing open the door and rushing into Nessie’s stall. He had to go stop Aaron. Had to do something. He heard a loud hiss right before he felt pain shoot through his arm. He pulled his hand back in shock, cradling it against his chest as Indigo uncurled herself and stretched towards him in a threatening manner. She was hanging from the rafters over Nessie’s stall as if she was guarding the griffin. Her wings were flared to make herself appear bigger, and her claws were digging into the wood as if she were eager to replace the wood with him. Of course the dragon would be just as angry with him as Aaron was. He had to figure out how to get passed her before he was too late.

“Come on now,” he cooed, “just let me through.” Indigo replied with a louder hiss as her eyes narrowed. George slowly reached up to push her out of the way, but the dragon snapped her beak at him in warning. George pulled his hand back. The last thing he wanted was to lose a finger.

“Fine. If I can’t get passed you then I’ll bring Nessie to me,” he snapped, opening the stall door. Nessie looked at him, but she didn’t move from her spot in the corner. “Come on, girl. We need to go.” The griffin didn’t move, didn’t show any signs of having heard his words. Indigo snapped her beak again. Nessie echoed the sound.

“Not you too,” George whined in dismay, “Let’s go! I can’t get to Aaron if you don-” He shut up, hope blossoming in his chest as Nessie started to move. George let out a sigh of relief; however, it was short lived. To his surprise, Nessie grabbed the stall door with her beak and slammed it shut before returning to her corner. She let out a defiant snort as Indigo delivered the closest thing to a mocking sneer a beaked animal could do.

“What is going on with you!?” George snapped louder, clearly exasperated. He reached for the stall again.

“It’s no use,” John declared, walking into the stables and making his way over to George, “I tried to saddle up our fastest horses in the other barns but none of them will move, or let me touch them without biting my clothes. It’s as if the creatures are protesting.”

“How did you-”

“Have they ever done this before?” George wondered as he gave Nessie a pleading look. She simply turned up her beak at him in response.

John’s shoulders fell in defeat. “Not that I’m aware of, but without their help there is no way that we’ll get to Aaron in time.”

“How did you-”

“You had that look on your face. The look you get when you’re about to try and find a solution to a major problem,” John explained.

“Aaron is not a problem,” George muttered.

“Then maybe we shouldn’t have made him feel like one.”

George had to look away, unable to meet John’s eyes as terrible guilt swelled inside him. George had
let his job, his previous beliefs, and his pride get in the way of his marriage. He made so many mistakes, mistakes that would haunt him forever. Aaron might never come back. Might never forgive him for what he’s done. George had been a fool and a heathen. This was his fault more than anyone else’s. He couldn’t just sit here and do nothing, but he wasn’t sure what other choice he had.

“It’s my fault Bellamy yelled at him,” John muttered. George glanced over at his student in confusion. John was staring at the wall with a far away look in his eyes. “I begged Bellamy to tell us more about the King, about what happened in the castle. I don’t know why I wanted to know so badly, but Bellamy told us about the Princess and Aaron and everything he grew up with. It made me so angry, to hear about how he had been treated. Mad that Aaron never did anything to stop it. I blamed—” John took a deep breath before he could continue, “—blamed Aaron just as much as his Uncle and Sister. I told Bellamy that it was his fault too. That Aaron should have done something to help him, yet he never did. I put the idea that Aaron is selfish in his head. It was my words that Bellamy echoed to Aaron. I tore them apart. I caused this.”

“John—”

“It was my idea to keep us a secret. Alexander didn’t care who knew, but I made Bellamy promise not to tell Aaron. I didn’t want the prince to know right away. I knew, I know how much Bellamy loves Aaron. I know that he he loves the prince more than anything in the world, but I couldn’t get it out of my head that Bellamy deserved better. Bellamy would die for Aaron, but I wasn’t sure Aaron would do the same. I was jealous and angry. I let that control me, let me guide me down a dark path. I worked hard to keep them apart and in the process I hurt both of them. I don’t deserve—”

“John,” George cut him off by covering John’s mouth with his hand, “You’ve made a mistake, but that does not mean you don’t deserve a chance to fix it.” John pushed his hand away while shaking his head.

“I’m not sure Bellamy will ever forgive me.” John whispered, the despair in his voice practically shattering George’s heart.

“If you don’t try, then you will never know.”

“Even if Bellamy does forgive me, Aaron never will,” John argued, using his shirt sleeve to wipe at his eyes. “I just...I can’t—I feel like such a monster—” George wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulder and pulled him to lean against George’s side.

“You’re not a monster,” George whispered as he rubbed John’s side. He didn’t comment on the boy’s soft sobs, nor on the wet patch that grew on his jacket. “A monster wouldn’t feel guilty. Wouldn’t look back on their actions and realize how wrong they were. The fact that you feel this way means you are not a monster, and there is still time to fix this.”

“I don’t know where to start,” John confessed, trying his best to hide a loud sniff as he slowly calmed down.

“Start with Bellamy,” George suggested, “He needs you right now. Needs you to be there for him.”

“I don’t think he’ll wants me around after he finds out this was my fault.”

“You won’t know until you try. So go and try.” George urged, gently ushering John toward the exit.

“But—”

“John, running away from this will not help you. Nor will it help Bellamy. Or Alexander. You need to go explain yourself or things will never change,” George insisted. He knew he should take his
own advice, but his husband was too far away to change anything now. John stared at George for a moment, his eyes red and nose running. He sniffed again before nodding his head.

“Alright,” John agreed, working hard to wipe off his face off.

“And John?”

“Yes?”

“Bellamy will always love Aaron. Always. Just like Eliza will always love you. So will I. But our love will never change the love between Alexander, Bellamy, and yourself,” George explained, grabbing John’s shoulder and pulling him in for a quick hug. “Bellamy loves you and that’s what’s important. Remember that. Always.” He pulled away and helped finish cleaning off John’s face with his own sleeve before guiding the boy out of the stables. His own advice echoed in his head. If only he had thought of it a few days earlier. Then Aaron wouldn’t be speeding farther away by the second.

“I’m starting to realize that,” John muttered, looking sheepish as they stepped outside.

“It will take time,” George admitted, “but Bellamy is worth it.”

“He is.” John sighed. The love in his eyes seemed to outshine the tears.

“Go on now. Don’t come back until you’ve settled it.”

“Thank you, George. Truly. I can’t—” John tried to say, but George wouldn’t hear of it. He didn’t want to hear John say that he couldn’t thank him enough. It reminded him too much of Aaron. Too much of when they were happy and together.

“Then don’t,” George begged. John stared at him for a moment, before nodding his head and making his way back into the house. George glanced towards the horizon, praying that Aaron would be safe. Telling John how to fix his relationship was one thing, but George was helpless when it came to his own. After a long moment, George got his legs moving and walked back into the house. The others had sat down for breakfast; however, George announced he would have his meal in his office. Theodosia tried to protest, but George refused to hear them. He needed to be alone, needed to think by himself and try to figure out his own solution.

George opened the door to his office to find Yuma already waiting for him. Her arms were crossed over her chest and she was tapping her foot, meaning she must have been in here for quite some time. George thought about ordering her to leave, thought about refusing to talk to her, but a larger part of him wanted to run into Yuma’s arms the way he used to as a child. She was always able to make the bad things go away. She chased away nightmares, soothed wounds, and made him want to be brave. Now, he was scared to face her, but also grateful that she had taken care of Aaron when he himself failed.

“Yuma,” he whispered as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, “I know you’re mad at me—”

“I’m not mad,” Yuma cut him off, “I’ve never been mad at you, you know that, but I cannot even begin to explain how deeply disappointed I am in you, young man.” By the gods, he would rather Yuma being angry. That he could handle. That he would be able to fix, but disappointment? That hurt twice as much. He failed his husband. Failed his students. And failed his oldest caretaker. If only his parents could see him now. George couldn’t help but curl in on himself in shame.

“I—” George tried to explain, but he couldn’t get the words out.
“George,” Yuma said, her voice like iron. George stared at her helplessly, watching as the woman opened her arms. That was all it took for George to move towards her, fall to his knees and lean his head against her. Yuma’s arms wrapped around his shoulders and held him tight against her as she rubbed his back. George shuddered as he felt his resolve crack. “Let go. Let go of your pain, your confusion. Let go of your control. Let me help you carry your burden.”

“I can’t,” George choked out. He’s an adult. He didn’t need to share his burden, didn’t need to lean on anyone anymore. Didn’t need help. But gods did he want it. He was right on the edge, just about to lose his control. To slip off the handle.

“I was there for your parents, your mother and your father. I’ll always be here for you,” Yuma promised, “But if you would rather be alone, then I can-”

“No!” George protested. Yuma went quiet. Suddenly, his office felt too small while the world outside grew bigger and bigger. George didn’t know what to do. He needed to be Frihet’s General. Needed to carry his family’s legacy. Needed to be a teacher to John. And Alexander. And Eliza. And Philip. And Martha. But he also needed, by the gods, he needed to be a husband to Aaron. It was all too much. He wished Aaron was here. Wished he could fall at his husband’s feet and explain his reasoning so they could fix this mess he made. George didn’t noticed he was crying until Yuma started to wipe away the tears.

“That’s a lot of weight to carry by yourself,” Yuma softly told him. He must have been talking out loud, spilling his fears to the woman.

“It’s my job,” George weakly argued.

“It is,” Yuma agreed, licking her thumb before using it to wipe off his cheek, “but nowhere is it written that you must do it all alone. Your mother was never alone. Nor your father. They had each other. And when that wasn’t enough, they had me. Or their friends.”

“I don’t even know where to start,” George confessed, feeling tears swell up again, “I ruined everything, and I have no idea how to fix it.”

“Yes, you do.”

“But…”

“Don’t lie to me, or to yourself. You know what you need to do. You know where to start,” Yuma firmly told him. Aaron. George needed to start with Aaron. He didn’t mess up as the General, if anything, he excelled. The problems with Tyst had been handled for now, and Lafayette had yet to give him any more bad news. His students were okay, or they would be. John needed to talk to Bellamy, but that was not something George could fix himself. Aaron was the only thing, no the most important thing. The first thing that came to George’s thoughts.

“But how? He’s gone. He left.”

“He’s not truly gone,” Yuma replied, “He only left because he was scared. Because he didn’t know what else to do.”

“He ran away,” George couldn’t help but grumble. That’s what it looked like to him. Aaron ran away from his problems instead of facing them.

“From you,” Yuma protested, “He ran away from you.”

“He…” George trailed off, his argument dying on his tongue. George knew she was right. Knew that
it was his fault Aaron was gone, but hearing it outloud had such a greater effect on him. If only he had talked to Aaron, explained his reasoning instead of yelling. If only he had gone to Aaron the next morning and apologized instead of keeping his distancing. If only he had...George could come up with if statements all day long, but that wouldn’t change what he’d done or what had happened.

“Where do I start?” he asked Yuma instead, looking to her for guidance.

“You get him to come home so you can talk face to face.”

“How?”

“With a letter.”

“A letter?”

“How else are you going to let him know that he should come home?” Yuma asked as she slowly moved away and stepped towards George’s desk. She pulled out a piece of parchment before grabbing one of George's best quills, “If you write a letter, you can send it by raven and Aaron could be back by tomorrow afternoon.”

“I don’t know where’s he’s stopping-” Yuma held up an envelope with a knowing look on her face. George went quiet. That was a good enough answer for him. He dutifully got up off his knees and moved to sit behind his desk. He took the quill from Yuma as he stared at the parchment. And stared. And stared.

“I don’t know where to start,” he muttered, looking back at Yuma.

“‘Dear Aaron’ has a nice ring to it,” Yuma suggested.

“Dear isn’t the right word.”

“George, do not overthink this. Aaron doesn’t need you to spill your heart out in one letter. He only needs to know that you want him to come home.”

“Okay,” George agreed, “Okay.” George took a deep breath and tightened his grip. He could do this. He could- No. That was a lie. He still couldn’t write a single word. He could feel what he wanted to tell Aaron in his heart, but he couldn’t translate it into words.

“I’ve stuff I need to do, but I’ll come check on you in an hour?” Yuma offered. George nodded his head. Maybe working alone would help him. He could think out loud and he wouldn’t have to worry about who heard.

“I would say take your time....”

“An hour,” George echoed, “That’s all it will take.”

“Good luck, George,” Yuma told him, kissing his head, “We both know you love him more than you can say. All you have to do is show him an ounce of that love and he’ll be back before you know it.”

“I hope so,” George whispered, “I really do.”

He watched Yuma walk out of the room before turning back to his letter. He could to this. It was just one letter. A short letter to bring his husband home. It couldn’t be that hard. He just had to get his
thoughts in order and then he would fly through it.

George ripped his fortieth letter into tiny pieces before throwing it over his shoulders. He slammed his head on his desk, letting out a soft groan. Nearly forty five minutes later and George wasn’t any closer to being done. It was impossible. Truly impossible. Every letter either sounded too desperate or too harsh. Too formal or too casual. It was never right. Never good enough. He needed Aaron to understand, needed his husband to know how badly he wanted him to come home, yet every letter he wrote didn’t convey it the right way. George lifted his head, letting out a sigh as he grabbed a clean piece to start again. He had to keep trying. Had to figure this out. He dipped his quill, shut his eyes and thought about what he would say if Aaron was standing right in front of him.

Aaron,

I’m sorry for everything. I was

Please forgive me. I didn’t

Nothing in the world matters more to me than

Please come home. I love you.

Signed,

George

George tilted his head back and pressed his palms against his eyes as he let out a loud sigh. Hopeless. This was hopeless. Aaron was never going to come home. Never. If George couldn’t even write a letter, then maybe it was better that Aaron left. His husband deserved better than this. George was a fool.

“This is good,” Yuma said. George uncovered his eyes to see the woman holding his last attempt in her hand.

“Don’t patronize me,” he grumbled, reaching for the paper, but Yuma held it beyond his reach.

“I’m not. This is good.”

George scoffed. “It’s five words! That’s not enough!”

“It’s not about how many words,” Yuma told him, “It’s about the meaning behind them.”

“I can do better,” George said. Yuma glanced a the pile of torn and balled up letters at the end of George’s desk with a critical look. George waved his hand and set all the pieces into the fire to hide his failure.

“I’m sending this one,” Yuma decided, heading for the door.

“You are not!” George argued, jumping out of his seat to chase after her.

“I am!”

“I can do better!”

“Do you want him to come back or not?!!”

“Yes!”
“Then listen to me!”

George froze, going quiet as he stared at Yuma. The old woman smoothed back her hair and took a moment to compose herself. George used that time to prepare himself for a lecture, one he was sure he deserved.

“This will be enough,” Yuma told him, “I know it will be. All Aaron needs to know is that you want him to come back. He only left because he believed that’s what you wanted. Space. For him to be out of the way.”

George felt his heart clench painfully with guilt. “I never wanted that.” He replied softly.

“Actions speak much louder than words, George. That boy stood outside your office so many times, waiting for you to notice him. Hoping that you would open the door and let him in, but you didn’t. You shut him out. You all did. I found him in the kitchen trying to hide so he could sleep in the living room because he was too scared to face you. Too scared to go to his own friends. He doesn’t need something grand. That is the last thing on the list right now. What he really needs is something small. Something that proves that he’s not the enemy. Not a mistake.”

“I never should have called him that,” George whispered.

“But you did.”

“I know. I was just dumb and foolish and blind.”

“Perhaps. People make mistakes, but now is not about what you’ve done. It’s about how Aaron feels and how you need to mend what you broke. He needs to trust you. To fix that you need to be honest. Do you mean the words you wrote?”

“Yes. Yes, I mean every single wor-”

“Then it will be enough. He’ll come home, and the first thing you need to do is talk to him and apologize. Don’t explain. He doesn’t need to hear your excuse. He needs to hear that you feel bad. That you regret it.”

“I do.”

“Good. Now, I’m going to go send this and you’re going to go make sure that we have Aaron’s favorite food and such ready for when he comes home,” Yuma ordered as she stepped towards the door.

“Yuma,” George quickly said before she could leave. He had to say one more thing, had to make sure he told her.

“Yes?”

“Thank you. Thank you for taking care of him when I didn’t. For being there when he needed someone.”

“I didn’t do it for you. I did it because what I saw in him was the same thing I saw in you when you were young.”

“What’s that?”

"People expected him to carry the weight of the world and be thankful for something so light."
George tried to focus on the book he was reading, tried to understand the words on page, but his eyes wouldn’t stop looking over at Aaron’s side of the bed. It was still neatly made, untouched since their fight, since Aaron stopped coming to bed. The first night had been the worst. George stayed awake throughout the night, part of him hoping Aaron would still come to bed, still come to him. He drifted in and out of sleep, forcing himself awake. He wanted to be awake for Aaron, wanted to be ready for him, but Aaron never came. After the second night, George grabbed a book from the library to distract him from Aaron’s absence. He only read a few pages, his mind always elsewhere.

George couldn’t help but wonder how different things would be if Aaron had come that night. Would his husband have stayed? Would they have talked about their problems, George’s problems, sooner? The bed felt like a ghost now. Watching him. Judging him. Reminding him of his failure. What if Aaron never came back? What if this was what became of their marriage? George grew up knowing about couples like this, couples who couldn’t stand each other anymore. Who stayed in separate bedrooms and only saw each other when they needed to. That wasn’t what George wanted. He loved Aaron. Loved him more than anything else in the world. He knew he messed up, destroyed the trust between them, but he refused to give up on them. He would fix this. Even if it meant chasing after Aaron so he could apologize. This couldn’t be the end.

A soft knock tore George’s attention away from the bed. He glanced at the door in confusion, abandoning his book on the side table as he climbed out of bed. A second knock, even softer then the first, prompted him to move towards the door and open it enough to see Eliza standing on the other side. The young woman looked exhausted, her hair falling out of her ponytail and dark circles under her eyes. George opened the door to let her in. Eliza quietly stepped into the room, glancing at the bed right away with a sad look.

“I just finished putting Theodosia to bed,” Eliza said, her voice soft as she turned to look at George, “She’s not doing well. I couldn’t help but wonder how you were holding up also.”

“You didn’t have to come check up on me,” George assured her.

“I did,” Eliza protested. Her hands were in front of her, fingers laced together tightly as she stood there. George stepped forward and took her hands in his. “How are you, George?”

“I’m fine. You should be with Theo. She’s the one who nee-”

“She’s sleeping,” Eliza cut him off, “and I think you need me more. I know you talked to John, I know you helped him, but who is helping you?”

“I don’t need any help,” George told her, thinking about the letter he gave Yuma. The older woman had already helped him. He didn’t need one of his students, the people he was meant to take care of, worrying about him. That wasn’t how it was supposed to go. “I’m doing fine.”

“I doubt that,” Eliza declared, a knowing look on her face. By the gods she had grown into a strong woman. She could even rival Angelica now. “but I’ll let you get away with that lie this time.”

“How did you become such a mother hen?” George teased, changing the subject to her in an attempt to draw her attention elsewhere.

“Someone had to be one with Alexander and John getting hurt all the time. And Lafayette was never calm enough to handle them.”
“He wasn’t. He always panicked at the smallest things. Do you remember the time John fell from the apple tree?”

Eliza smiled brightly, clearly remembering what he was referring to. “Lafayette ran all the way home to tell you what happened.”

“He made it sound as if John was dying!”

“You were out the door just as we all came back and John was perfectly fine.”

“You can’t imagine how relieved I was. If you hadn’t have healed him right away he would have had a much harder time.”

“What would they have ever done without me?”

“I don’t know, but I’m glad they never had to find out. The four of you were a good group,” George said, pulling Eliza into a tight hug, “Smart and brave. Though you all gave me enough gray hairs to last a lifetime.”

“You never had hair!”

“That’s the point.”

“We only turned out so well because we had the right teacher,” Eliza told him, tightening her hold on George. He smiled at her words, feeling pride swell up in his chest. They went on countless adventures together. Some of his best memories were of the four of them getting into trouble then helping each other get out of it. George was so proud of who they had all become. A king. A healer. A potion master. A creature tamer. They each found themselves and he was happy for all of them.

“I’m proud of you,” he whispered. He had to tell her. Had to make sure she knew. He didn’t say it enough. Didn’t let them know how much he loved them.

“I know. And I’m proud of you too.”

“That’s not how it wo-”

“I proud that you agreed to be my teacher. Proud that you made this home a safe place for all of us. I proud that you keep taking on new students, keep trying to pass on what you know. You’ve done so many wonderful things, George, and I’m proud to call you my mentor.”

“Eliza...” George trailed off, unsure how to reply.

“And I’m proud that you married Aaron. Proud that you worked so hard to create a good, lasting relationship with him,” she added, stepping back to look up at him with a bright, kind smile. George looked away as the shame rose up inside him. He created a relationship only to destroy it in a moment of anger. He glanced at the bed, at Aaron’s neatly made blankets, and felt sick to his stomach.

“Then I failed you,” he muttered, “because I’ve ruined my marriage. I’ve ruined everything.”

“You didn’t ruin it. You made a mistake.”

“A mistake that might nev-”

“Stop it,” Eliza ordered, poking her finger into his chest, “Stop doubting yourself.”
“Eliza-”

“Enough.” She poked him again, harder this time. George reached up to rub at his chest. “Just like I told Theodosia, things will get better. And I have faith in you no matter what.”

George stared at her for a moment, her words echoing in his mind. She was proud of him. It felt good to hear someone say that, especially at a time like this when he felt like a failure. Good to hear that Eliza didn’t seem him any differently, didn’t see him as he saw himself. The fact that she still believed in him, still had faith meant so much.

“Thank you,” was all he could say in return. He knew he had a lot of work to do to fix what he ruined, but Eliza’s words fueled his ambition to make things better.

“You’re welcome,” Eliza replied, “You will always be my hero, George, not because you’re perfect or because of your heroic deeds, but because you always try so hard to make things right. You taught me to never give up. Never let anything hold me back. Don’t let your mistakes hold you back either.”

“I won’t.”

“And don’t give up.”

“I’m not.”

“Now go to bed.”

“Since when are you in charge?”

“I’m the mother hen, remember? And sometimes, even you need to be taken care of,” Eliza reminded him, poking his chest one last time. George grabbed her wrist and pulled her into a bone crushing hug, laughing as Eliza playfully struggled.

“You’re crushing me!”

“I’m just hugging you.”

“I can’t breathe!”

“If you can talk, you can breathe.”

“George!”

He let her go, kissing her head and sending her towards the door.

“Good night, Eliza.”

“Good night, George. It will all be better in the morning.”

He smiled, remembering when he used to tell her that. It was one of his favorite sayings. After bad dreams, after tough lessons, he always told the children that the morning would be better. Everything was better in the morning. Hearing Eliza say it to him brought the same calm feeling. She would make an amazing mother one day, or an even better mentor.

“Thank you,” he told her one last time, his voice quiet and soft.

“Always,” Eliza answered, giving him one last smile before she disappeared out the door. George
stood there for a moment, letting Eliza’s words bounce around in his head until he couldn’t think of anything else. Then he returned to the bed, blew out the candles, and shut his eyes. In the morning, things would be different. In the morning, it would all be a little bit better.

George hated waking up alone, hated turning over to an empty bed next to him. He had grown so used to seeing Aaron lying there that now it felt like a piece of his heart was missing. He reached out and placed his hand on Aaron’s pillow, shutting his eyes as he prayed to every god he could think of. Yuma sent the letter, but they never received a reply. George wasn’t sure if his words had been enough to make Aaron turn around. He hoped they were. Prayed that Aaron would return and give him another chance.

George forced himself out of bed and got dressed for the day, reminding himself that there were other people that still needed him. He should check on Bellamy, John and Alexander. Should make sure that Philip and Martha were okay with everything that was going on. Should speak with Eliza and Theodosia to see how they were holding up. The list could go on and on, yet the person George truly wanted would not be on his list. His heart ached, but he had to ignore it, had to focus on what he could control.

He left his bedroom and headed for the dining room, finding his students already sitting around the table. Philip jumped out of his seat and threw himself against George’s legs. Without thinking, George picked the boy up and held him close to his chest as he sat down in his chair. Holding the boy so tightly helped ease some of the pain in George’s chest. Martha migrated from her chair to also sit in George’s lap, not even fighting with Philip this time as they settled down to eat.

Bellamy was sitting between John and Alexander, their chairs pushed together with little room in between. George was happening to see the three of them talking and eating off each other’s plates. It looked like they worked everything out, which gave George hope for his own marriage. Eliza and Theodosia were sharing a chair, sitting as close together as possible as they ate off the same plate. It seemed like no one wanted to be left alone today.

“When is Aaron coming back?” Martha softly asked as she stole food from George’s plate. George kissed her head before answering.

“Soon. Very soon.”

“How soon?”

“Hopefully today.”

“Today?” Bellamy spoke up in shock.

“As I said, hopefully. I sent him a letter asking him to come home, but I’m not sure he’ll turn back quite yet.”

“I hope he does,” Philip said.

“We all do,” Theodosia told him, “We just want him to come home.”

“He will soon,” George promised, praying that he was right about it. They talked softly about other things; the cooling weather, the upcoming holidays, plans for a bigger stable, normal things that took their minds off the empty chair next to George.

“If we built a bigger building-”
“Eliza!” Everyone froze as Lena screamed and came running into the room, “Come quickly! We need your help!” Eliza was instantly ready as she jumped out of her seat and rushed towards the servant girl without uttering a single word or question.

“Theo, take the children to their rooms,” George ordered as he set Philip and Martha on the floor. Theodosia grabbed their hands, dragging them out of the room as George ran after Eliza and Lena. One of the servants might have gotten injured in the stables or out on the grounds. Or someone could have fallen ill. The possibilities were truly endless, but the last thing George expected was to see three King’s guards laying on the floor of his kitchen. Eliza knelt down by the first, checking her pulse before waving her hands over the guard’s chest and shoulders.

“What is going on?” George demanded, watching as Lena and Yuma used clothes to wipe blood off the other two guards.

“An ambush,” a voice declared. In the doorway was Captain Maria. Her armor was covered in blood and there was a large gash on her leg. “There were too many of them and we were overwhelmed.” George looked around the room, warning bells going off in his head.

“Where’s Aaron?”

The room was quiet. Much too quiet for far too long, and every second without an answer only added to his anger and fear.

“Where’s my husband?!” George demanded.

“Gone,” Maria answered, her gaze falling to the floor.

George’s world seemed to be knocked off its axis by that single word. The fear he felt grew until it became a cold vice that quickly took hold of his heart and stole the air from his lungs. Only one breath remained. Enough air for him to blankly repeat after Maria. “Gone?”

Her face twisted up with a pained expression before she forced herself to lock eyes with George. He watched as she took in a shaky breath before replying in an equally unstable tone.

“They took him.”

Chapter End Notes

Were you prepared?

So much is going to happen. If this chapter hurt you, just wait. It's gonna get way worse before it gets better.
I told myself that I was gonna wait until Saturday to post this, but I COULDN'T. I just couldn't. I need to see how you all react and I can't wait any longer! So have this chapter a day early and enjoy!

Aaron opened his eyes, looking around in confusion as he slowly sat up. He did his best to ignore the ache in his body that throbbed all the way down to his bones at the movement. Right now, the most important thing was figuring out where he was. The forest around him looked half dead, the trees bare of any leaves or flowers. Many of them were cracked, half falling over, or covered with thick vines. Above him, the sky was filled with grey and black clouds. A thick layer of fog made it hard for Aaron to see more then ten feet away. He climbed to his feet, rubbing his eyes as he took it all in. He wasn’t sure how he got here, didn’t remembering walking or anything, but he had to find his way out. Had to find his way home.

Home. Where was home? Was it back in Tyst with his uncle and sister? In a giant castle that felt more like a prison cell where people sneered and watched and whispered? Was it where pain was woven into his daily life? A nightmare dressed up as a dream that Aaron had been happy to run away from. Was that what he was searching for?

Or was home in Frihet with George? With Bellamy and Theodosia and Alexander and Eliza? John and Martha and Philip and Yuma? In a small house that felt like a real home, full of life and laughter and people Aaron loved? Was it where lies intertwined with the truth so often that Aaron didn’t know which was which? Was it were all Aaron’s dreamed has come true before shattering into millions of pieces? Aaron didn’t know. He didn’t know where he truly belonged anymore, but he did know that he needed to get out of this forest. There was something wrong, something making his stomach twist in fear. He wasn’t safe here. There was danger lurking just around the corner. Aaron picked a direction and started walking, wrapping his arms around his waist as a chill settled in his bones.

“Aaron?!” George suddenly called. Aaron spun around, swearing that the sound came from right over his shoulder, but no one was there when he looked. Shaking his head, Aaron picked up the pace. He needed to get out of his forest. Now. As he walked, the fog only got thicker until Aaron couldn’t see anything within arm distance.

“Aaron!” His uncle snapped, sounding just as angry as always. Aaron jumped at the sound, turning to address his uncle, but again, no one was standing there. His imagination was running away from him. He needed to get himself under control before he got even more lost. He tried to call for his magic, tried to cast a light spell or a location spell, but neither worked. His magic didn’t come, didn’t reply as normal. Instead, Aaron only felt the chill in his bones evolve into an overwhelming numbness.

“Aaron!” Another voice called. He didn’t even bother to look. He knew no one was there. Aaron covered his heads and let out a frustrated noise.

“Stop it. Just stop it,” he begged, “Get yourself together. You need to—”
“Aaron!” There the voice was again, only this time slightly closer than before.

“Aaron!” Closer again. Aaron couldn’t do this. It was too much to handle, too much to ignore.

“Aaron!”

“Stop!” Aaron shouted, hoping, praying that his own voice would drown out the others calling his name-

“Aaron!” A heavy hand landed on Aaron’s shoulder, startling him out of his panic. He looked up to meet George's soft eyes. Relief flooded his very bones. As angry as he was with his husband, he was still happy to see him.

“George,” Aaron choked out, grabbing onto George's arm as tightly as possible, “Where—what’s going on?”

“It’s okay,” George promised him, “Just follow me.”

“How did we get here?” Aaron asked as George pulled back and started walking away. He nearly disappeared in the fog after a few seconds. Aaron rushed to catch up with him, reaching out to try and grab George’s hand but the man was moving too quickly.

“Slow down!” Aaron begged. The numbness that surrounded his bones began to heat up and burn with every sped up step he took.

“Follow me,” George repeated. He was going too fast! Aaron had to run to keep up and even that wasn’t enough. George only got father and farther away.

“George! George wait!”

“Follow me.”

“I can’t keep up! George!”

George didn’t stop, didn’t slow down and soon he vanished into the fog without a trace. Aaron kept running, kept trying to catch up, but nothing he did closed the distance between them. Aaron paused for a moment spinning in circles to try and catch a hint of his husband, a hint of color that would lead him back to George, but there was nothing there. George was gone. Lost in the dark forest. Aaron was alone again. All alone. The fog got thicker. The trees became dense. The sky grew darker. The world was closing in and Aaron had no escape route. Nowhere to run.

“George?! George please come back! George! Please come back!” Aaron screamed, feeling his heart move up up into his throat as panic took over. He shut his eyes to hold back the tears and tried desperately to take in a breath that didn’t end in a choking gasp, but he couldn’t control the fear. “George! Please don’t leave me!” He pleaded one more time, his cries fading into the fog.
Aaron eyes snapped opened and his lungs filled with air before contracting in a harsh cough. He tried to sit up, his need to find George overriding all his senses, but he couldn’t do anything besides raise his head to look around the small bedroom. His wrists and ankles were still tightly tied to the bedposts. The bedroom was still dark and empty besides the small, narrow bed that Aaron was laying on. Without a window, Aaron had no idea how much time had passed since his kidnappers first brought him here. They checked on him repeatedly, but he never saw any light or details through the doorway. Nothing that told him where he was or how many kidnappers there were. They all wore masks that covered their eyes and noses. Aaron spent more of his time sleeping or plotting his escape, but when he was awake it was as if he was living a nightmare. He kept his eyes on the ceiling, refusing to look over at the dark blood stains on the wood floor next to the bed. He didn’t want to think about how it got there, didn’t want to remember how it was his fault.

Aaron tried to keep his mind at ease as he stared at the dark ceiling, but it didn’t take long before his memories started to creep around the edges. Aaron looked up at the rope around his left wrist and tried to summon his magic. He had lost count of how many times he tried to escape, but he refused to give up. He refused to lie here and wait for his demise. He was going to get out of here. Get out and get home. Aaron shut his eyes, begging the warmth to spread to his fingers. Nothing happened. Aaron squeezed his eyes closed tighter, focusing all his energy into calling his magic forward. Still nothing. It was as if his abilities were being blocked by something.

Aaron hide his face against his arm, hating himself more and more after each failed attempt. He was too weak. Too frail to escape. He was never going to get out of here, never going to go home. Not at this rate. He didn’t know if anyone was looking for him, didn’t even know if anyone knew he was missing. The last thing he remembered before he was taking was the screams of the King’s guards. How many people suffered because of Aaron’s rash decision to leave George’s home? This was all his fault. Maybe he deserved this. After everything, maybe this was punishment for making all those mistakes.

The ache, which only faded when Aaron was asleep, returned with a vengeance. Aaron begged it to go away, begged it to leave him alone, but it was a hopeless effort. The ache started at his neck and moved down his body slowly until every single bone inside him felt uncomfortably tight. He didn’t know how to describe the feeling, didn’t know how to make sense of it. It felt as if he was too big for his skin, his muscles pushing against it as if his insides wanted to tear through. However, at the same time it felt as if a force was pushing against him. As if he was underwater with pressure on every side. Aaron tried to shift around, tried to ease the tension somehow, but nothing worked. It grew worse and worse until it was almost painful. From his fingers to his toes, his whole body was protesting. Every breath he took was agony. Every movement. Every thought made his head spin. Every emotion only made the ache grow stronger. Aaron wanted to scream, wanted to cry, wanted all just to stop.

The door to the room opened and two of his kidnappers walked in. One was wearing a red mask, the other green. Aaron shut his eyes as they got closer, trying not to imagine what they had in store for him. He wondered how much longer he would last, how much more pain he could endure before he lost his will to fight, his will to live. It felt as if weeks had gone by. Aaron could only handle so much, could only believe for so long before his hope would die. Deep in his soul, in a place he didn’t want to admit, he feared that this room would be the sight of his last breath.

“Be quick about it,” one of them demanded. The voice was distorted, sounding like a dark spirit rather than a human. It sent shivers down Aaron’s spine as fear wrapped around his heart. A hand pressed hard against his forehead, but it brought him no comfort. It wasn’t like when Yuma or George touched him. It didn’t chase away the agony.
Suddenly, as quick as a whip, a sharp pain shot through Aaron’s forehead into the back of his mind. Aaron let out a scream, trying to twist away from the kidnapper’s touch, but they had a firm hold on his head and he couldn't get away. The pain grew and grew until Aaron felt his mind was splitting open. His lungs froze. He couldn’t breathe. His vision went white. His heart skipped a beat. He knew this feeling. He didn’t want to live through it again. Didn’t want to face the darkness a second time. He tried to beg them to stop, tried to speak, but his mouth wouldn’t move.

_Crack!_

The door to the room broke off its hinges and flew across the room. The hand on Aaron’s forehead vanished as screams filled the room. Aaron gasped for air as the pain retreated. He could hear people yelling, could hear a fight happening, but his vision had yet to return to normal. He tried to blink away the white spots, yet it was a slow process. By the time his vision finally cleared, the two people in masks were dead on the floor and Eliza was by the side of his bed.

“Eliza?” Aaron asked softly, blinking a few extra times just in case what he was seeing was a trick of the light. Eliza offered him a weak smile, her hair messy and sticking to her face as she worked on the ropes wrapped around his wrists.

“You’re safe now,” she assured him as she freed his first wrist, “You’re safe.”

“Are you real?”

The question slipped passed Aaron’s lips before he could think better of it. Eliza froze, staring at him with wide eyes for a few seconds. A sad look appeared on her face. She reached out and placed a hand on his cheek, a cool sensation passing through his body. The cuts and scrapes around his wrists and ankles from where he pulled on the rope started to slowly heal. As did the bruises on his neck and cheek from hands wrapping around his throat and a harsh slap. He felt better on the outside, yet the deep agony in his bones didn’t ease. He whimpered softly.

“I’m very real,” Eliza promised, “So very fucking real. I’m sorry it took us so long, but we’re here now and we’re going to take you home. We’re going to make it all okay. I swear it.”

“How long?” Aaron wondered as she went back to the ropes. She got the second knot loose before quickly moving down to his ankles.

“Four days,” she whispered as if it pained her.

“Days?”

“Give or take a few hours. Maria wasn’t able to give us a clear time of–”

“It’s only been days?” Aaron tried to clarify again.

“Yes?”

“I thought,” Aaron muttered to himself, confusion setting in as his ankles were both freed.

“It felt longer?” Eliza offered. She helped him sit up, making him go slow with her arm wrapped around his shoulders. Aaron sank against her. She was warm, solid, and she smelled like flowers. He shut his eyes as he took a moment to simple breathe her in.

“It felt like weeks,” he confessed. His muscles were stiff and his joints cracked as he bend his knees and elbows. He flexed his fingers, wiggled his toes, and rolled his shoulders to work the feeling back into them. As soon as his bare feet touched the floor, Aaron pulled them back up and let out a pained
sound. The blood! His feet touched it! Aaron gagged, nearly getting sick as memories raced through his mind. He couldn’t stop the images. Couldn’t stop the pain that rose up inside him. Pain. Agony. Blood. So much blood. It was all his fault! His fault! Pain! Agony! Make it stop! Just make it stop!

“Aaron! Aaron, calm down! Just calm down! Breathe!” Eliza begged, but Aaron could hardly hear her over the voices in his own mind.

“Eliza,” another voice called, “what’s going on!?”

“I don’t know! He won’t stop screaming! Aaron please! Please, tell me what’s wrong!”

Screaming? Was he screaming? Aaron went still as the memories suddenly faded. Ice spread through his veins, making him numb from the inside out. He was numb and alone, the voices gone. He glanced at Eliza, guilt twisting inside him at the look of confusion, fear, and worry on the woman’s face. Aaron looked away, noticing Alexander standing in the doorway with a bloody sword in his hand. Aaron watched as the red liquid slide down the metal. He shook his head and moved back towards the wall. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t. He didn’t deserve to leave. Didn’t deserve to be recuse. Aaron pulled his knees up to his chest and hide his face as the agony started to spill into his heart and soul. He shivered violently as the cold spread deep inside him.

“Let’s go,” Alexander ordered, “We need to–”

“I can’t,” Aaron cut him off, “I can’t leave. I can’t go. I can’t. He won’t let me. He won’t. He didn’t get to and now I can’t–”

“Aaron. Aaron, slow down. What are you talking about?” Eliza asked, grabbing his shoulder. Aaron screamed at the touch. It spread so much pain through his body. Eliza jumped away at the noise. The guilt thickened. He was scaring her. He wasn’t trying to, but he couldn’t make it stp. Couldn’t get himself under control. He ducked his head again, hating himself more with each passing minute.

“George!” Alexander called. Aaron’s head shot up. George was here? George came? Hope tried to break the ice, but Aaron’s memories crushed it. The ice refused to be moved. He could almost hear the soft tinkling as it hardened over him. Aaron lowered his head again, giving up as the ice grew and grew. “We have a probel–”

“Move, move,” a softer voice ordered, cutting Alexander off.

“Hey!” Alexander protested, “George told you to stay–”

“Quiet boy.”

Gentle hands touched Aaron’s shoulders. He flinched, a scream ready in his throat, but this touch didn’t cause any pain. Instead, it chased away the agony. It heated the ice, forcing it to melt. Aaron gasped in shock and relief, a sob escaping his throat. He lifted his head to meet Yuma’s eyes.

“Yuma,” he cried, words spilling out of his mouth as he tried to get the older woman to understand, “It hurts. It hurts. Please, make it stop. Make it go away. I tried, but I can’t make it. I can’t make it stop and it hurts so bad.”

“I know, dear boy, I know.” She cooed comfortingly.

“I can’t leave. I can’t. He won’t let me. He won’t–”

“He’s talking nonsense,” Eliza said, “I already healed him and no one is her–”
“Quiet,” Yuma snapped at her, “Go wait with the others.” Eliza glanced at Aaron, her face suddenly unreadable, but she obeyed. She grabbed Alexander and dragged him out of the room behind her. Yuma moved her hands up from Aaron’s shoulders to rest them around his head, her thumbs pressed against his forehead. More of the agony faded and Aaron felt his mind clear for the first time in days.

“I’m scared,” he confessed, tears streaming down his face.

“I know,” Yuma replied, “but you are stronger than this, Aaron. You know you are. You can do this. You can leave. He can’t stop you. He can’t get you anymore.”

“I don’t feel strong.”

“Let me help you. Let me ease your pain.”

“Please,” Aaron begged. That’s all he wanted. He just wanted it to stop. Just wanted his mind to be quiet and let him rest. Wanted the nightmares to go away. Wanted to feel safe again. Wanted to feel like himself. A warm feeling, a familiar feeling, pressed into his forehead. Aaron’s eyes suddenly got heavy. He couldn’t keep them opened anymore. The warmth spread and spread, chasing away all the pain and agony in Aaron’s bones. He felt light. Felt happier. Felt more like himself, even if a touch of agony remained around the edges.

“Yuma,” he whispered, trying hard to stay awake. He wanted to tell her. Wanted to tell someone what happened.

“I know, Aaron,” Yuma told him yet again, “I already know. It’s not your fault. It was never your fault.” Aaron gave up trying and let himself sink into the warmth. It felt like a lover’s embrace and reminded him of George. Of when they were happy. Aaron never wanted to wake up from it. Never.

Aaron woke up to familiar voices talking around him. He opened his eyes just enough to see that he was laying on a large bed under at least five blankets. Thick curtains surrounded the bed, cutting the rest of the room off from his view, but keeping him also cut off from the people walking around.

“Don’t you think that’s enough blankets?” Eliza asked, her shadow stepping in front of another to block it from his bed.

“He’s still shivering. Maybe we should move the bed closer to the fire,” George suggested. His voice sounded odd. Strained in a way Aaron had never heard before.

“You need to calm down,” Yuma told him, her voice leaving little room for arguing. Aaron glanced over to see a smaller shadow closer to his bed. He smiled to himself, able to tell that Yuma had her arms crossed.

“Do not tell me to calm down,” George snapped. Aaron almost jumped at the harsh edge to his voice. “That is the last thing I need to hear right now. They hurt him. They–”

“George, right now, the best thing you can do for him is calm down and give him some space,” Eliza tried to advise, holding up her hands to block George more.

“But–”

“Calm,” Yuma demanded.

“I am calm.”
“Put down the blankets. He has enough,” Eliza ordered.

“He’s still–” George tried to protest.

“He’s fine.” The women told him together. There was a long silence. Aaron waited along with them.

“Alright,” George gave in, his shadow moving away from the curtains. Aaron heard shuffling, and quickly closed his eyes until the room went quiet again. He didn’t want them to know he was awake, didn’t want to have to face them yet. He wasn’t cold, at least he didn’t feel as if he was, but his body was shivering enough to be noticeable even to him. His hands and arms shaking as if he was freezing under all the blankets. He didn’t understand what was wrong, didn’t know how to make it stop. When he was sure the coast was clear, he opened his eyes and studied the bed. It was much bigger than the one George and him shared at home. Softer as well. The color of the curtains and the top blanket were dark blue. Aaron noticed Lafayette’s symbol on the corners. They must be in the castle. Aaron didn’t remember the trip here, didn’t remember being carried to the bed, but he was grateful to be out of that dark room.

A door opened. Aaron snapped his eyes closed. A chair slid across the room. Someone sighed as they sat down. The room returned to it’s quiet state for only a moment before a soft voice, barely above a whisper, broke the silence.

“Please wake up,” George begged, “Please.”

Aaron slowly opened his eyes once more, noticing George's shadow sitting next to his bed. Aaron couldn’t stop the small grin that appeared on his lips. Part of him was so happy to hear George’s voice, so happy to see that the man still cared about him. The other part, the part that was still angry, still bitter, was no match for the loving side. Aaron was nowhere near ready to speak to his husband yet, knowing that the anger would win out then, but right now he was simply happy to have his husband close.

“George, you need to get some sleep,” someone declared. It took Aaron a moment to place the voice. The appearance of Lafayette’s shadow, his crown a clear shape against the curtains, provided Aaron the answer he needed.

“Did you find the kidnappers?” George asked.

“Not yet, but we’re still–”

“I can’t sleep until they’re locked away,” George cut him off, “I can’t leave him alone until I know he’s safe.”

“He is safe. This castle has hundreds of guards. No one can hurt him here.”

“Guards didn’t stop them the last time!” George yelled, standing from his seat so quickly the chair fell backwards with a loud bang. Aaron jumped at the sharp noise, praying neither of them noticed him moving. “I will not let the same thing happen! I will not make the same mistake!” Silence covered the room as George and Lafayette stared at each other.

“You have to stop blaming yourself for what they did,” Lafayette pleaded, holding up his hands in surrender as he stepped closer and closer to George. He grabbed the General’s hands, holding them to his chest.

“If I hadn’t....” George trailed off, his voice cracking. Was he crying? Aaron had never seen nor heard the General cry before. George bowed his head before letting Lafayette pull him close. “If I had...”
“George—”

“This is my fault. And he’ll never forgive me.”

“You don’t know that,” Lafayette assured him, “In time—”

“Please, Lafayette, please. I know you are trying to help, but I rather not talk about it right now. I need to focus on keeping him safe. Nothing else matters. Nothing. Our marriage....whatever’s going to happen to it, is not important right now. His safety is my only concern.”

“Alright. But at least come visit Philip and Martha? They’ve been asking for you and I can’t keep making excuses.”

“Alright,” George agreed, “but only for an hour. And I want twenty guards—”

“I’ll put fifty at every door and secret entrance into this room. No one will get in or out without my permission,” Lafayette promised, stepping back so George could lift his head.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, come along.”

Aaron watched as their shadows faded away. He heard a door open, then closed and he was left alone once more. His heart ached for George, for his husband. He couldn’t help it. He still loved George as much as he did before. His mind screamed that they should, that George was a liar and a brute, but Aaron’s heart refused to listen. Maybe, as Lafayette said, in time Aaron would grew to trust him again. Maybe in time they would be okay. Right now...Right now Aaron just wanted to stay in this bed and pray that Lafayette’s people found his kidnappers soon. He would feel safer then. Feel more at ease. George shouldn’t blame himself. It wasn’t his fault. He wasn’t the one who hurt Aaron, wasn’t the one who locked him up. Aaron would have to make sure to tell him such. Suddenly, the door reopened and a shadow slowly approached the bed. Aaron shut his eyes, turning his face away just as the curtains were pulled back.

“I know you’re awake,” Lafayette said, “but don’t worry. I don’t plan on telling anyone unless you want me to.” Aaron slowly opened his eyes and turned to face the King. Lafayette offered him a tired, but soft smile, peeling the curtains further back before taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

“It’s good to see you, though I wish it was under better circumstances.”

“I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble,” Aaron replied, swallows down the pain that threatened to overtake his voice. Lafayette stared at him for a moment before reaching towards the side table where a large pitcher was sitting next to a pair of glasses. He picked up the pitcher and poured a bright purple liquid into one of the glasses. He helped Aaron sit up against the pillows before handing him the glass.

“For the pain,” Lafayette explained. Aaron opened his mouth to lie, to say that he wasn’t in pain, but Lafayette only gave him a knowing look. “Yuma made it.” Aaron drank. The liquid created a warm feeling as it slide down his throat. It tasted like sugar and chocolate. A sweetness that lasted on his tongue. The warmth spread through his chest, stretching throughout his body, though it stopped halfway as if it didn’t have the strength to reach his toes and fingers.

“She said to drink this until the...” Lafayette paused for a moment, “Until the ache in your bones goes away. She wouldn’t tell me what that meant, but does it help?”

“It does,” Aaron assured him, handing the glass back. Lafayette placed it on the table then reached
out to set the back of his hand against Aaron’s forehead.

“You look better than when they first brought you in. You’re still a little ashy, but the drink does seem to be helping.”

“Again, I’m sorry for—”

“Don’t. Please don’t,” Lafayette begged, his hand falling away to grab on of Aaron’s instead, “You don’t have to be sorry. Nothing. If anything, I should be the one apologizing to you. I sent those guards and they failed you. I was supposed to protect you and I didn’t. You could have been killed! I would never have been able to live with myself if—”

“It’s not your fault,” Aaron cut him off, squeezing his hand tightly, “Your guards did the best they could do. There were too many of them, but your guards still tried their best to protect me. I don’t blame them. I don’t blame you. I don’t blame George.”

“I wish you would.” Aaron’s eyes widened at the King’s words. Who would ever wish for that? Wish to carry such a heavy blame on their shoulders?

“Why?”

“Because I fear if you don’t blame us then you will blame yourself,” Lafayette confessed, “And it is not your fault. None of this is your fault.” His words echoed someone else’s, though Aaron couldn’t remember who.

“I—” He paused, thinking about that day. That moment in time when the world was thrown into chaos. It was his idea to leave the house. His idea to ask Lafayette for guards instead of taking Bellamy and Theodosia. His idea to run away to the sea to get away from George. His idea that put him on that road at that time with those guards. Wasn’t it his fault? Wasn’t it his doing that lead them all to this moment?

“It’s not my fault either. It’s the kidnappers.” A relieved look crossed Lafayette's face before a smile took over.

“You’re right. And we’re working hard to catch them. We will find them and I will make sure they pay.” Lafayette swore, a dangerous glint flashing across his eyes before disappearing.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me until we’ve caught them,” Lafayette told him, standing up from the bed, “I should leave you to sleep. Yuma said you need all the rest you can get until the ache goes away.”

“Can I ask you a question before you go?” Aaron wondered, his mind turning to his marriage and the conversation he overheard before. He had to know, had to make sure. His mind would let him rest unless he at least tried.

“Of course,” Lafayette agreed with a grin.

“Is...how...Is George okay?” It took him a moment to settle on the wording, and even what he came up with wasn’t the best, but it would have to work. He watched as the grin vanished from the King’s face. Lafayette looked conflicted and unsure. Fear and concern rose up in Aaron’s heart. Was something wrong with George? Sound he couldn’t hear in the man’s voice but Lafayette could see?

“You heard us?”
Aaron nodded.

“John and Bellamy told me what happened,” Lafayette confessed, the same dangerous glint appear on his face, “About what George did, what they all did. If you want, I can have George barred from your room until fur–”

“No no!” Aaron protested, “That’s the last thing I want. I just...I’m not ready to talk to him yet, but I need to know if he’s okay.”

“Depends on how you define okay.”

“Lafayette, please.”

“George is...He’s worried. It’s nearly impossible to get him to sleep or eat if it means making him leave this room. He’s been sleeping in a chair for the past couple days, and he only eats what Yuma brings him. But I think....I think he’s okay overall because you’re here. All he wants to do is be around you and make sure you’re safe,” Lafayette explained.

“Thank you for taking care of him,” Aaron told him softly.

“You’re welcome. Aaron, I’m not saying you have to forgive him, I don’t know if I even would be able to, but it’s so clear that George loves you. I hope you know that.”

“I do. As you said, in time. In time things will be okay. I just need that. Time.”

“Whatever you need, I’ll be happy to help,” Lafayette offered.

“Thank you. If you ever need to get away from Hercules, just let me know,” Aaron replied. The King laughed, nodding his head.

“That would have been useful during the first couple years of our marriage. Hercules and I used to fight all the time.”

“You did?”

“Oh gods yes. After the first six months we were at each other’s throats over everything! Didn’t he tell you about the time that I didn’t wear his suit to a party?”

“No?”

“You’d have thought I spit on him with how he reacted!”

“Sit down and tell me everything,” Aaron begged. Lafayette obeyed, taking Aaron’s hand and starting the story from the beginning. Aaron relaxed back against the pillows as he listened. It was nice to hear that he wasn’t alone in this. That Lafayette and Hercules had gone through similar issues. Things weren’t always perfect, but they worked out in the end. Aaron just had to keep hope that the same thing would happen with George and himself. Hope and time. That’s what he needed.

Aaron woke up with a scream trapped in his throat. Tears were already streaming down his cheeks, yet he couldn’t remember what caused them. The room was dark around him, too dark. A sob escaped his throat as he looked around in fear. What if his kidnappers got into the castle? What if his kidnappers got into the castle? What if they got passed all the guards? What if they hurt George? Or Lafayette? Or the children on their way to get to him? There was a shadow to his right. A familiar shadow just on the other side of the curtain. Aaron knew what he wanted, knew what he needed, but he paused for a moment. Forced
himself to stop and think. What if he— Aaron’s heart took over before his mind could even get a chance to finish it’s thought. This was not the time to second guess himself. This was the time to take what he needed.

“George?” he called, “George?” The shadow jumped, jolting awake, before standing up to pull back the curtain. Aaron nearly cried with joy at seeing George’s face. Those eyes. Gods he still loved the man so much.


“Will you sleep with me?” Aaron begged, ignoring George questions. George looked unsure for a moment, glancing at the pitcher next to the bed then at the door. The ache in Aaron’s bones was still there, but it was nothing compared to the dark memories replaying in his head. “Please?”

“Okay,” George finally agreed. He folded back the blankets and slid in next to Aaron, still keeping his distance in the oversize bed. A shiver, from cold and fear, ran through Aaron’s body. The distance didn’t help. He needed George closer. Needed to be held. Aaron worked his way across the bed, carefully grabbing George’s arm and placing it around his waist. It helped, though he still needed more.

“Aaron—”

“Don’t talk,” Aaron cut him off. He didn’t want to talk yet. Didn’t know what to say. But George made him feel safe. Made the memories fade away. “Please don’t talk. Just hold me. Don’t let them get me.”

“I won’t. I promise I won’t,” George replied, pulling Aaron against his chest and tightening his hold. Aaron shut his eyes, a sob of relief breaking through. This was what he needed. A soft kiss, barely there, landed on his head. A warm feeling chased away the cold inside him, making him feel lighter for a moment.

“You’re safe,” George whispered, rubbing Aaron's back before pulling the blankets up around them better. “I won’t let them hurt you again. Never again. You are safe here, Aaron. You’re safe.”

“Thank you,” Aaron muttered.

“Go to sleep,” George softly ordered, “I’ll be here in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Aaron echoed, shutting his eyes. The dark memories had faded, replaced with thoughts of George. Their beach adventure. That time in the orchard. Riding Nessie. A food fight. Dancing down the halls towards their bedroom. Happiness. Joy. Even when memories of the fight tried bubbled to the surface, Aaron’s happiness chased them away with tender moments. Reading in the library. Holding hands during a walk. Saying I love you under the stars. Aaron smiled against George’s chest, the tears no longer from fear.

“I love you,” George whispered, still rubbing his back. Aaron thought about replying, thought about repeating the same sentiment, but his eyes were heavy and his mind was already drifting away towards new dreams. Just before he went under, right before sleep overtook him complete he heard George say something else. He wasn’t sure he heard correctly, but the words carved themselves into Aaron’s thoughts.

“Please don’t leave me again.”
George was relieved when he woke up to find Aaron still asleep in his arms. He had a good feeling that when the Prince awoke he would pull away from George’s embrace completely. Aaron had every right to do so, and George would give him as much space as he desired, but George was grateful that he got the chance to hold his husband just a little longer. He missed Aaron more than he would ever admit. Missed seeing his face. Missed being able to touch him and hear his voice. Missed everything. It had felt like a piece of him was missing. In the days it took them to find Aaron, George felt himself going mad with worry and concern. He needed to find Aaron, needed to bring his husband home. Needed to see Aaron safe and happy again. But it had taken too long. Three days. Three long days of searching. Of hoping. Of worry and fighting. Three days of unknown torture for Aaron.

The Prince was still in pain, still suffering from whatever those people did to him. George wished they had caught them just so he could make them suffer in the same way, just so he could get his revenge on what they did to his husband. The drink Yuma made helped his body, but it couldn’t prevent the nightmares from coming to him during the night. George tried his best to keep watch over Aaron while he slept, hoping that his presence would somehow keep the dark thoughts at bay; however, last night had been different. The nightmares had never woken Aaron before this. Never sent him into such a panic— but last night had his heart shattering as he witnessed Aaron waking up with fear brimming in his eyes and spilling over with tears. George let his husband down again by falling asleep. Perhaps if he had been awake, if he had been keeping up his nightly watch then Aaron would have stayed asleep.

Aaron’s suffering created an agony inside of George’s heart. It was his fault that Aaron had been taken. No matter what Lafayette or the others tried to tell him, he knew deep in his heart that it had been his actions, his words, that put Aaron on that road that day. If Aaron had been at home, none of this would have happened. If George hadn’t pushed him away, hadn’t betrayed him, then Aaron would never had had a reason for leaving in the first place. George would never forgive himself. Never. Even if Aaron did one day, far in the future, George would never let himself forget what he had caused, never let himself believe that it wasn’t his doing.

George pulled Aaron closer, running his hand down his husband back before hiding his face in Aaron’s neck. He was powerless when it came to Aaron’s pain. He didn’t know how to help. Didn’t know what to do. It only made him feel worse. All he could do was watch his husband suffer and hate himself more with each passing day. He was useless, a failure when it came to keeping his promise. Aaron deserved better. Deserved to be happy. Deserved to feel safe and be trusted. George would give so much to go back in time and stop himself from being such a fool. Anything for a chance to take away Aaron’s pain. To make him happy once again. He had to start doing something right.

Aaron made a soft noise, prompting George to pull back quickly and hold his breath as the Prince started to shift around. Aaron turned on his back, his eyes still closed as he reached up to rub at them. George watched silently, his arm still wrapped around the man’s waist. Should he pull it back? Would Aaron take offense to that? Was he making the Prince uncomfortable by leaving it there? Aaron lowered his hand as his eyes opened, his gaze shifting over to George. Unable to help himself, George offered his husband a soft smile. The corner of Aaron’s mouth curled up, and though the smile was so small, it gave George hope.
“Good morning,” Aaron muttered, his voice groggy as he yawned.

“Morning,” George replied, “Did you sleep well?”

“I did. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

A moment of silence passed between them. George bit his lip, unsure what to say next. Aaron had said last night not to talk, but he didn’t know if that applied to the morning as well. He stared at Aaron for a few more seconds, deciding to take a chance.

“Should I leave?” George offered. He didn’t want to leave, didn’t want to pull away yet, but the last thing he wanted was to make Aaron feel as if he had to talk or be around him.

“What?” Aaron looked confused by the question.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“Not yet,” Aaron answered, moving closer and pressing his head against George’s chest. It was such a familiar thing that George couldn’t help by smile. He squeezed Aaron for a moment, resting his head against the Prince’s before looking around the room. He stayed quiet, letting Aaron have a slow, calm morning. He wouldn’t push. Wouldn’t demand anything. He would go at Aaron’s pace and follow the Prince’s lead. Time passed, yet neither of them moved. At least not until Aaron’s stomach made a loud noise. George chuckled, unable to help himself. Aaron pulled away with a faint smile and embarrassed look.

“I think it might be time for–”

Knock, knock

George cursed whoever was at the door as Aaron’s smile faded. He watched as the Prince’s mind went someplace else, his eyes drifting away as he curled in on himself. George rubbed his back, trying his best to help the younger man, yet his touch did little to ease Aaron’s far away expression.

Knock, knock. Knock, knock

George let out a sigh as he climbed out of the bed, making sure to lay the blankets over Aaron to keep him warm and fixing the curtains to hide him completely, before George walked over to open the door. Bellamy and Theodosia were on the other side, dressed and ready for the day. Theodosia looked nervous, glancing over her shoulder and shifting from foot to foot. Bellamy on the other had looked both annoyed and scared. His jaw was set in a clear line, but his body was ready to run at the drop of a needle. Without a word, George opened the door to let them both in, shutting it firmly behind them.

“Good morning,” he gently greeted them, setting a hand on Bellamy’s shoulder. The boy leaned into it slightly and squared his shoulders.

“Morning,” Theodosia parroted back. She looked at the bed, then at Bellamy with an unreadable expression. Bellamy met her eyes before nodding his head.

“Is Aaron awake?” Bellamy asked, staring at George hopefully. George glanced at the curtains, wondering if Aaron was in the mood to talk to his friends or if it was best to send them on their way.

“I don’t know if–”
“I’m awake,” Aaron called as the curtains were pulled back to show him sitting up against the pillows. “Is something wrong?” Bellamy and Theo shared a look. Aaron watched them, his face unreadable before a deep scowl set in. “What’s wrong?”

“Your sister—” Bellamy started.

“—she’s here,” Theodosia added. George watched Aaron as they delivered the news. As hard as the Prince tried to hide it, George saw the fear that rose up in his eyes.

“When did she get here? Why didn’t anyone tell me she was coming?” Aaron demanded, peeling back the blankets. The clothes he was wearing were too big on him, making him look skinny and sick. George couldn’t stop himself from moving closer to the bed just in case Aaron needed him. Just in case he was still too weak. Aaron slid out of the bed, looking at Bellamy and Theo for answers.

“We didn’t know she was coming. She just arrived out of nowhere, and she’s coming up right now,” Bellamy explained, “Lafayette is stalling her, but—”

“—we don’t know how long he can distract her. We need to get you ready before she arrives.”

George watched as Aaron stared at them for a second before moving towards the windows. He looked out at the garden, wrapping his arms around himself and ignoring the others as they got to work. Theodosia started making the bed and cleaning up the room while Bellamy pulled one of Aaron’s older suits out of the wardrobe. George left them to their tasks as he slowly made his way over to Aaron. He stood by his husband’s side, watching out the window as the garderss and other servants worked to prepare the grounds for the coming winter.

“What do you need?” George asked.

“I need—” Aaron started before suddenly pausing. He turned his head down to stare at his feet, shaking his head as if he was upset that he couldn’t figure out what to say. George stayed quiet, giving Aaron as much time as he needed to get his thoughts in order. This was not the time to rush him, not the time to pry. “I know that our relationship is strained and there are things we need to discuss, but I need...we don’t have time to talk about that right now. I need you to pretend that everything is perfect. I need you to act happy and make my sister believe that nothing ever happened.”

“Aaron—”

“My sister can’t know that we fought. She can’t see anything wrong between us,” Aaron continued. George noticed the hint of panic in his tone, the way his words were close to begging as if he wasn’t sure George would agree to his idea. “I know it’ll be hard, but I’ll try to make it easier on you. As long as you stand close to me and smile she shouldn’t think anything is wrong. Please, George, I need you to do this. I need my sister to think that we have a perfect marriage. I’ll do whatever you want if you—”

“I’ll do it,” George cut him off, unable to take it anymore.

“You will?” Aaron echoed, turning to look at George in surprise.

“I will. Nothing happened between us, and your sister will see nothing besides a perfect marriage with two very happy people,” George promised. It would be hard, hard for George to pull Aaron close, to show him love and see him happy only to know that it was fake. That their marriage was strained. Cracking around the edges. Pretending wouldn’t be the hard part. It was the afterwards that would hurt him more.
“Thank you,” Aaron whispered, a small look of hope on his face before he turned back towards the room. Theodosia was still cleaning up while Bellamy stared at them silently, like a guard should. “I never told my sister why I relieved you of your positions. We need to agree on a story to tell her, something that doesn’t involve any disagreement or fighting.” Theodosia paused to glanced at Aaron before Bellamy gave her a look. She nodded her head, brushing off her dress as she straightened her back.

“You relieved me to allow me to have a better relationship with Eliza,” Theodosia told him, no hesitation or doubt in her voice, “It was a hard choose for both of us, but I couldn’t be your maid and pursue such a major relationship at the same time.”

“And you relieved me in order to give me the chance to focus my attention on learning about creatures with John as my teacher. I tried to talk you out of it, told you I could still be your guard at the same time, but you told me I couldn’t give up on my dream,” Bellamy added, giving Aaron a small grin. Aaron stared at his friends, looking between them over and over again before he gave them both a firm nod.

“That will work,” he agreed, “hopefully.” George reached out slowly to wrap his arm around Aaron’s waist.

“Don’t leave me alone with her,” Aaron begged as he sank against George, “not matter what she says, don’t leave me alone with my sister.”

“We won’t,” George assured him, “We’ll take care of you.” He moved his hand from Aaron’s waist up to his back, whispering a spell. Aaron’s oversized clothes were replaced with a blue suit. The style matched George's own, but the color was slightly brighter, more youthful. Aaron jumped in shock, looking from his new clothes to George with wide eyes. “You can’t wear one of you old, black suits. That would raise too many questions, but if you wear a new suit that matches mine no one will look twice.”

“It’s not the suit,” Aaron said, slowly running his hand over the coat, “I just wasn’t aware that you knew such a spell.”

“I didn’t. Yuma taught it to me a few days ago, just after we found you,” George confessed, “It was easier to change your clothes this way, and I begged her to let me help. She taught me the spell, I practice, and now I’m pretty good at it, though I still don’t think John has forgiven me yet for practicing on him.” Bellamy snorted, catching Aaron’s attention.

“John’s not going to let it go for a long, long time,” Bellamy claimed, a teasing smile on his face. Aaron gave him a confused look, glancing at George for help.

“Let’s just say,” Theodosia spoke up, placing a hand on her hip as a knowing smirk appeared, “you’re lucky that you got pants. John scarred some poor maids for life.”

“I only forgot once,” George claimed. A hint of a grin started on Aaron’s face

“I don’t know who taught you to count but–” Bellamy started to say.

“Don’t be mean,” Aaron ordered, no malice behind his words as his grin increased in size. The others grew to match and for a moment, it was as if nothing bad had ever happened. George watched the three of them, thinking back to when they first arrived at the house. When they were inseparable and life had been easier. Maybe it wouldn’t be that hard to go back to the way things were. Maybe they would be okay.
KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Just like that, the moment was gone. Aaron jumped at the loud knocks, his eyes snapping to the door as fear chased away his smile. George tried to remember everything he knew about Princess Sally, both from other people had told him and from Aaron, but his memories gave him very little to work with. Aaron’s reaction spoke volumes. It was clear that there was tension between the Prince and his sister, tension that Aaron had never mentioned, but now they would all have to face it together.

Bellamy moved to stand at Aaron’s side as Theodosia slowly approached the door. An idea suddenly popped into George’s head.

“Aaron,” he whispered, wrapping his arm around the Prince’s waist.

“What?”

“Kiss me.”

“Wh–”

“So then your sister sees and will thi–”

“Oh!”

Aaron grabbed George by his coat and pulled him down into a soft kiss. It was awkward at first, similar to the kisses they shared at their wedding, but slowly it got easier. They remembered how it felt, how to move just right and within seconds the kiss started to make George’s knees weak. He hadn’t realized how much he missed this until now. It had been weeks since they shared a kiss, since George felt like this. His chest eased just enough to give him hope. He didn’t want to pull away. Never wanted the feeling to end. Someone loudly cleared their throat, but it still took a few seconds before Aaron pulled away.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” Princess Sally said, still standing by the door. Theodosia had moved behind the Princess, her head bowed and hands folded in front of her with an unpleasant frown on her face. Bellamy offered the Princess a formal bow, though Sally didn’t react as her eyes scanned first George, then Aaron.

“Princess Sally,” George replied, “what a surprise! We didn’t know you were coming. If you had warned us, we would’ve been more prepared for your arrival.”

“It was my intention to surprise my brother at your seaside home. You could imagine my shock and concern when I heard that he had been rerouted here so suddenly. Change of plans?” she asked, her eyes narrowing as she moved closer.

“Sister,” Aaron said, his voice soft as if he was trying to soothe a wild animal, “it’s good to see you.” Sally paused mid step, tilting her head and staring at Aaron for a long, silent moment.

“It’s good to see you as well, little brother.”

“We didn’t mean to cause you distress. It’s my fault that Aaron had to change his plans,” George explained. Aaron gave him a hard look, but George kept his focus on the Princess, “Aaron and I were going to spend a week or two by the sea, and Aaron went ahead in order to plan a surprise, but I forgot that Lafayette’s birthday is quickly approaching. I called him back in order to get his help planning a celebration for the King.”

“I was unaware that it’s your job to plan the King’s birthday celebration,” Sally replied. George tried not to frown at her words, wondering if the Princess was even capable of saying a kind word of it.
every statement she made was meant to cut deep.

“This year is a very special year,” George told her firmly, pulling Aaron closer for emphasis, “and this will be Aaron’s first royal party as my husband. Presenting him to the King’s court will be a major event for everyone. We need time to plan every small detail to ensure that the court members see how truly special he is.”

“Perhaps you should keep better track of your schedule,” Princess Sally suggested, “to avoid any future misunderstandings.”

“I’ll take that into advisement.”

“How long are you staying?” Aaron innocently wondered, “Should we add your name to the guest list?”

“It’s probably best to assume I’m coming. Unless Uncle calls me away, I plan to stay as long as possible,” Sally replied with a wide smile. Aaron’s shoulders tensed further at the news. Even George had trouble keeping his expression welcoming. He wanted to focus on Aaron and their marriage, not spend his days dancing around the Princess and her watchful gaze.

“That’s great,” George declared, “We’ll have to make sure we set aside some time to show you around the castle, but right now we need to get going. I have a surprise waiting for Aaron that can’t wait any longer, and then we have meetings for the celebration preparations. I’m sure you understand, your highness, as you have to be busy yourself back home.”

“Of course I understand. We’ll see each other soon. Very soon,” Sally promised, her eyes shifted towards Aaron. She stared at the Prince in a way that didn’t sit right with George. She knew something he didn’t. Knew something that could be used against Aaron in a terrifying way. George stepped forward, placing himself between the Princess and his husband.

“Until then,” he dismissed her, keeping his tone as light as possible. Sally bowed her head just enough before moving towards the door.

She stopped just before reaching the entrance. “Oh, by the way, General, did you ever read that book I gave you?” She asked. To anyone who didn’t know any better, her tone would have sounded innocent, but George knew better. Snakes hid better under flowers, after all.

Still, George cursed her for bringing it up. He never told Aaron about her gift, never mentioned the book that he had hidden in his desk. He only looked it a few times, turning up his nose each time and refusing to open the cover, but he kept it all the same. He had been sure that Aaron would bring it up, sure it was an insult meant by the whole family; however, that was before he knew Aaron, before he saw who the Prince truly was.

“I haven’t had a reason to,” George answered, a meaningful smile appearing as he thought about his words, “We have no need for a book like that, but still, thank you for the gift. It was nice to know that it was there in case we did have any issues. I don’t believe it’s a shame that I haven’t had to put it to use.” Sally’s mouth turned down for a moment, just a per second, but it was enough for George. His response was not what she expected, not what she wanted. She wouldn’t get anything else out of him. Not today. Not ever.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Sally said, her words lacking any feeling behind them, “Enjoy your surprise, little brother.”

“I’ll see you soon, sister,” Aaron assured her. The Princess left without another word and the whole
room relaxed.

“What was she talking about?” Aaron asked, turning to face George with a quizzical look. George shook his head. He knew he should tell Aaron, but he wanted to wait just a little bit longer.

“I’ll tell you after the surprise.”

“You actually have a surprise for me?”

“It’s a small one, but yes. Unless you want to wait. I was planning on waiting until you felt better, so if you want to go back to bed, that is perfectly alright with me. It can always wait until you are—”

“I want to go,” Aaron cut him off, placing a hand on George’s shoulder, “Getting up and moving about might be what I need to do.”

“Are you—”

“Don’t,” Aaron begged, a pained look crossing his face. George swallowed his words.

“Bellamy, do you want to join us?” he asked, turning his attention away from the memories that flash through his mind. The phrase had been a joke between them, George repeating it over and over throughout the day to check on Aaron’s wellbeing. It was a way to reassure himself that he wasn’t controlling every move Aaron made, and keep tabs on his husband. Then it turned into a small joke between them, Aaron smile every time he asked. Now it was habit that would be hard for him to break.

“Of course,” Bellamy answered.

“Theodosia,” Aaron spoke up, “Tell Eliza and the others about my sister’s arrival. Make sure they know to watch their backs and see if you can find out the real reason she came to visit.”

“I will try my best,” Theodosia replied. She gave him a perfect curtsy before opening the door for them. Bellamy took up his position behind them as they make their way towards the door.

“Do you really think there’s another reason your sister came here?” George softly asked, nodding to the guards by the door as they stepped out of the room. Aaron shrugged a shoulder as they walked down the hallway. George used a hand on Aaron’s lower back to guide him through the maze of halls and doors until they were able to get outside. The Prince didn’t answer his question, though that didn’t surprise George.

“This way,” he explained, pushing open the stable doors, “Bellamy, wait outside for us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is this where the sur–Indigo!” Aaron exclaimed, catching the dragon in his arms and holding her close. The creature tightly wrapped herself around Aaron, letting out a series of chirps and whimpers as she pressed her beak against Aaron’s cheek. George smiled as he watch their heartfelt reunion, enjoying the relaxed look that appeared on the Prince’s face as he ran his hands over the dragon’s scales.

“I didn’t think she would be here,” Aaron confessed, laughing as Indigo licked at his cheek and poked his neck with her beak, “I thought she would be back home.”

“She helped us find you,” George informed his husband before stepping towards the door, “I refused to send her back home, and she’s been patiently waiting to see you again. I’ll leave you two to
reconnect.”

“Leave?” Aaron asked, his eyes snapping towards George.

“I’ll just be outside,” George clarified. As much as he wanted to stay, he needed to give Aaron space. If he crowded the Prince, then he might push him away without meaning too. They were still in a delicate position. “A moment away if you need me. I’ll be able to hear if you call for me. You should spend some quality time with Indigo without me to distract you, or her.

“Oh...” Aaron made a soft noise before looking back at the creature in his arms. “Alright. I won’t be long.”

“Take as long as you need to,” George sternly offered, “Nessie is around here somewhere as well and she’s also been looking forward to seeing you. I can wait as long as you need me to.” Aaron glanced around the stables curiously, giving George an opportunity to move out the door.

“George,” Aaron called him back.

“Yes?” George answered, poking his head back through the doorway. Aaron was still looking away. Indigo looked over his shoulder, staring at George the whole time. At least the dragon stopped trying to bite him during their search for Aaron. She had been the only thing able to find Aaron, picking up his scent and leading them straight to where they were keeping the Prince locked up. George had so much respect for the small creature. If anyone could help ease Aaron’s pain, both emotionally and physically, it would be Indigo.

“Thank you. For everything,” Aaron whispered, moving further into the stables without looking back. George bit back his feelings, the ‘I love you’ that sat at the tip of his tongue. Now was not the right now.

“You’re welcome, Aaron. I’ll be here if you need anything.” He nodded before bowing back out of the doorway.

Over the next three days, they were able to create a solid, daily routine that left no room for Princess Sally to get Aaron alone. George had taken up residence in Aaron’s bedroom; however, he checked with Aaron about what he should do and how close he should get. He refused to climb into the bed unless the Prince agreed and he left as soon as the Prince said to, heading off to the bathroom first or returning to his old chair. There was a silent agreement between them not to talk about what happened nor to bring up the good times they had shared together, which meant they didn’t talk at all. The only words that passed between there started with a question from George, and ended with Aaron’s reply. George spent the rest of his time trying to be as quiet as possible. They may be sleeping in the same bed, George arms wrapped around Aaron’s waist to keep him safe at night, but there was a distance between them. A distance that made George’s heart ache with longing.

In the morning, after they dressed for the day, Aaron and George joined Lafayette and Hercules for breakfast in the formal dining room. The King and his husband had been made aware of the plan to keep Aaron away from his sister, and they both took the task extremely serious. Hercules offered to take Aaron on any number of outings if he ever needed to get out of the castle, and Lafayette assured Aaron that his guards would take him wherever he wanted in order to keep him away from his sister. Thankfully, Sally never joined them for the morning meal, instead having breakfast delivered to her
private guest room. Aaron informed them all that this was in no way odd behaviour for the Princess. Apparently, it was unusual back in Tyst for them to eat meal together unless their Uncle arranged it. This was news to George, forcing him to realize just how little he knew about Aaron’s relationship with his family. It was his own fault. He didn’t ask the right questions, never tried to dive deeper into Aaron’s past.

After breakfast, Aaron and George joined Hercules in planning Lafayette’s birthday party for an hour or so. George had been worried that Aaron would find the meetings boring, or that he would feel as if it wasn't his place to provide his opinions as they picked out decorations color, music, and menu items, however, the Prince surprised George by throwing himself into each and every meeting. He asked Hercules countless questions about Lafayette, from what he thought of the man when they first met to how he would describe the King to someone who had never heard him before. Aaron then used this information to create a solid party theme around Lafayette's personality rather than his age. The idea was unique, much different than anything George or Hercules had ever encountered before, and they were instantly supportive of the plan Aaron laid out. George was glad to see that Aaron and Hercules were still close.

Their quiet conversations after each meeting eased some of the worries George had about Aaron's sudden recovery. Aaron still looked tired at times, his eyes still too dull and his smile strained. George couldn't help but fear that the Prince, being the kind, selfless person he was, was faking his good health in order to ease everyone else's concerns. It wasn't his intentions to imply that Aaron was a liar, but he knew that Aaron would gladly falsify his own condition if it meant that Theo and Bellamy didn't have to worry. He would fake a smile as long as it meant Hercules didn't look so nervous around him. Lie to Lafayette's face to get the King to stop stressing about his every move. It was just who Aaron was as a person, which made George worry that he was missing something. He had taken to watching his husband when Aaron wasn’t looking, checking to see if any of his movements flattered or if he started to look unwell. He didn't want to push the Prince too quickly, didn't want his husband sent back to bed because George had aggravated his condition.

Thankfully, by the grace of the gods, Aaron never missed a step. He appeared to be growing stronger with each passing day. His skin finding it's color slowly over the course of the first day and his agility returning by the end of the second. By the morning of the third day, it was hard to even tell that Aaron had gone missing. His eyes never became as bright as before, but that could be more from George's presence then the events of his kidnapping. Just as George predicted, it was a challenge for him to pretend in public only to pull back when they were alone. He wanted to hold Aaron close. Wanted to hold his hand or kiss his forehead. Wanted to hear Aaron's voice at night, listen to his fears, help him find his happiness, but he couldn’t and it was slowly breaking him down.

After the meetings, George did what he did best. He ran away, leaving Aaron with Eliza or Alexander or Hercules as he focused his attention on his own important task. The idea had come to him while he was waiting for Aaron outside the stables. It was a rash idea, one that George didn’t truly believe would work, but he had to try. He questioned himself throughout the day, giving up on everything only to then force himself to get back to work. He had to give this marriage his best effort. Aaron was worth every moment, even second of work. While his students watched over his husband and kept him safe, George worked on preparing the surprise of a lifetime. He returned to Aaron’s side for dinner, where the Princess would join them around the table and their act was put to the test.

It wasn’t hard for George to act as if he loved Aaron with all his heart. His feelings for the Prince had never faded, never ceased, and now it was easy for him to give his husband his full attention as they ate; however, it was during this time that George realized just how good of an actor Aaron was. He placed his chair as close to George as possible, holding George’s hand as the food was served, leaning against George’s shoulder while making a soft comment about the food or George’s outfit, and even stealing food off George’s plate with a coy smile. Every single action was perfectly
executed, and someone would have to look closely to see the way Aaron’s smile was strained or his movements unsure. Part of George’s heart fluttered at the Prince’s actions, enjoying the attention and the warm feeling it gave him; yet another part hated that it was all an act.

Princess Sally watched them like a hawk, her lips pressed together in a stern line as her eyes followed each move Aaron made. George prayed that it was good enough, that the Princess would see what Aaron desperately wanted her to see. Countless questions flooded George’s mind throughout the meal. Was it too perfect? Should George be doing more? Did it look as fake as it felt? Could anyone see the way George tensed? The way Aaron hesitated? The split second where the love in their eyes looked painful? The last thing George wanted to do was fail Aaron again. One more time might be enough to destroy their marriage completely.

After the meal was done and they escaped Princess Sally’s presence, George would follow his husband back to their bedroom where Aaron would read a book or stare of the window while George made himself as small as a mouse. It was after dinner on the third day, when George decided it was time to finally put his plan into action. On their way back to their bedroom, he cleared his throat to get Aaron’s attention. It would be best to ask him in the hallway before they were alone, before he had to close himself off to Aaron for the night.

“I was wondering,” George stared, keeping his tone light, “if you would allow me to surprise you tomorrow night.”

“Another surprise?” Aaron asked.

“Just another small one. But it’s perfectly alright if you don’t want to. I don’t want to force it on you, which is why I’m asking before hand.”

“You never did tell me what my sister was talking about with that book,” Aaron suddenly reminded him. George had realized that after they went to bed that day. Aaron had been so distracted with the creatures that George forgot about telling him, then he hadn’t had the heart to bring it up again. However, he noticed how Aaron had changed the subject without answering George’s question. The rejection stung, but George refused to let it show. If Aaron didn’t want a surprise, then George wouldn’t force the issue.

“She was talking about her wedding gift,” George explained as they turned the corner. Their room was just around the next corner. He didn’t have much time left. “She gave me a book about marriages, but I never found a need for it.”

“A book about marriages?” Aaron echoed.

“Yes.”

“What was the title?”

“Let me think,” George lied. He knew the title. Had it memorized. The gift had been a backhanded insult from the moment Sally gave it to him, but he never brought it up. He didn’t want to admit it even now, not when their marriage was already so strained. Didn’t want to increase the distance between them. “I believe it was ‘How to Make a Marriage Work’ or something like that.”

“She didn’t,” the Prince whispered, freezing in the middle of the hallway. George took an extra step before turning back to look at him.

“What?”

“Tell me the title of the book again.”
“Aaron are you–”

“Tell me!” Aaron snapped. George’s heart jumped at the harsh tone, though his face didn’t give it away.

“How to Make a Marriage Work,” George dutifully answered.

“Did you read it?”

“No. As I told your sister, I never even opened it. I never felt the need to.” George replied firmly, hoping Aaron found the truth in his words.

“Never read it,” Aaron ordered. George stared at him in confusion. “When we return home, I want you to burn that book right away.”

“I don’t understand,” George confessed, “It’s just a book.”

“It’s not just any book,” Aaron harshly replied, walking passed George towards their bedroom. George quickly fell in step behind him, keeping his distance from the Prince. “It’s the same book I read growing up. The same book that my uncle gave to me in order to prepare me for marriage. It’s a horrible book filled with terrible advice.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I’ll have it burned as soon as we–as soon as I get back,” George promised. In an instant, everything from the last few days went up in smoke. It was if nothing changed. The distance only grew bigger, leaving Aaron miles out of George’s reach. He didn’t know if Aaron would be returning with him, didn’t know if Aaron even planned to come home, but he would still burn the book anyway. If it would make Aaron happy, he would burn all his books. They arrived at their bedroom in silence, their guards taking their positions on either side of the door.

“About the surprise,” George muttered as he closed the door behind them, keeping his eyes on the bed as Aaron moved around the room, “forget I asked. Now is not the right time to distract you with silly surprises. Besides, Hercules would like to take you on a ride and I would hate to cut into that time.”

Aaron didn’t reply, didn’t show any sign that he even heard George as he vanished into the bathroom. George watched the door closed before letting out a loud sigh. Who was he kidding? No amount of surprise would change anything. He wanted to explain. Wanted to apologize. Wanted to fall on his knees and beg Aaron to forgive him, but he wasn’t sure the Prince would want any of that. Honestly, he didn’t know what the Prince wanted at all. The only thing he did know is that Aaron couldn’t stand him anymore. He would offer Aaron a divorce, off him an escape; however, judging by the fact that they had to act as if their marriage was perfect, George had a good feeling Aaron wouldn’t be able to go through with a separation. George made his way over to the chair by the bed, sinking into it and burying his head in his hands. It was hopeless. He was a fool. This was all his fault and he didn’t know how to fix it. He was running out of ideas, running out of energy.

“Hercules and I aren’t going riding until the day after tomorrow,” Aaron said from the doorway, “so tomorrow would be a good time for your surprise.” George lifted his head, forcing himself not to look over his shoulder.

“As long as you’re alright with it,” George echoed his earlier words, “I don’t want to bother you with meaningless things.”

“I’m alright with it. Just give me a time and I’ll be there.”

“Tomorrow. Before dinner.”
"Before dinner."

Chapter End Notes

And now you all know where I got the name for this story from! Only too 20 chapters before I was FINALLY able to add that detail.

They're making some progress. Some. Slowly but surely. But what could Sally be up to?
“Do you know anything about a surprise George has planned for me tonight?” Aaron asked Eliza as they walked towards the castle’s library. George had disappeared after their meeting as usual, leaving Aaron with Eliza this time. Yesterday, he had spent the day with John and Alexander in the stables, listening to the two men apologize for their behavior. Bellamy stood by Aaron’s side, having already made his apology privately. It was hard to listen to John’s reasoning, but it was even harder to watch the man break down in tears as he cursed himself for what he had done. Aaron easily found the will to forgive him, pulling John into a hug. Alexander and Bellamy joined in, and Aaron’s heart felt lighter.

They spent the rest of the time taking care of the creatures while Bellamy told Aaron about how they ended up together. It felt good to laugh, to smile, and to see his friend so happy. As much as Bellamy’s words had hurt him, as deep as John’s and Alexander’s actions had cut, he could see how badly they wanted to fix it. How far they were willing to go to repair the damage they caused. Aaron wanted to give them that chance, wanted things to go back to normal.

“George hasn’t mentioned anything to me. Why?” Eliza wondered as she opened the door to the library for him. Theodosia and Eliza had been the first to apologize, sitting Aaron down three days ago to explain the reasons behind their actions. They asked, no begged Aaron to tell them how he felt about everything. Their conversation had been long and full of tears, but it felt good to tell them how their actions hurt him. Felt validating to hear them acknowledge that they hurt him, to watch them try and understand his point of view as much as possible then ask how they could make it up to him. At the same time, Aaron listened to Theodosia’s reasonings, how she got caught up in her fear and anger. How she let that blind her. Hearing her confession made John’s easier to handle. Anger and fear could easily control one’s actions, and it was clear that everyone looked back with regret and sadness. Afterwards, after all the tears and hugs and long talks, it was easier for Aaron to be around them again. Still tense at times, but easier overall.

“Only curious. I asked the others, but no one knew anything about it either. I guess I assumed George would tell someone about his plan,” Aaron explained. He had been hoping that someone would be able to clue him in on what to expect. It was still difficult to be around George, hard to trust him, but also hard to stay angry when George was trying so much. Aaron wanted to trust him. Wanted to believe him, but there was still too much pain there. Still too much that needed to be said. Aaron wasn’t sure he was ready for that conversation yet. Wasn’t sure he would ever be ready, but he knew that it still loomed on the horizon as menacing as it was inevitable.

“If it’s a surprise, then why do you want to know about it so badly?” Eliza asked, returning to the same table they had used before. The books from their previous trip were still laid out, allowing them to start right where they left off. Eliza, with the help of Alexander and Theodosia, was trying to
create a new healing potion. They were still researching information on ingredients to ensure that the potion had the healing qualities that Eliza desired. She hadn’t told Aaron why the project was so important, but he was still happy to help.

“I don’t want to know any of the details,” Aaron lied as he took his seat, “I just want to know why George is doing this.”

“I can tell you that,” Eliza offered, pulling one of the largest books towards her. Aaron waited for her to continue, but the woman merely started reading.

“Tell me. Please.”

“He wants to fix things between you. Maybe fix isn’t the right word. He wants to open the door to the future, wants to try and make up for what he did.”

“A surprise won’t do that,” Aaron grumbled. As badly as Aaron wanted things to go back to normal, a single surprise wouldn’t magically turn back time. Wouldn’t take his pain away, wouldn’t change the way he felt when he saw the looks George kept giving him. That longing look in the General’s eyes never faded and it sent chills through Aaron’s heart. He wasn’t ready for that. His straining heart was not prepared to be ripped open once more to reveal and deal with the emotions it guarded. It was one thing to pretend for his sister, but it was another to actually face what happened between them.

“Can I ask you something?” Eliza questioned casually, not even bothering to remove her eyes from the book’s text.

Aaron’s thoughts paused as he regarded Eliza curiously. “Of course.”

This time she did look up. Her unwavering gaze meeting his. “Why won’t you give him a chance?”

“I—” That was not what Aaron expected her to ask and he wasn’t sure how to reply.

“You sat down with Theo and me,” Eliza pointed out, “Listened to the boys’ confession, but you haven’t talked to George about what happened. And you’re spending so much time with him. You’ve had countless opportunities.”

“Now isn’t the right time,” Aaron tried to justified, though the reason sounded weak even to his own ears.

“When is the right time?”

“Isn’t that up to me to decide?” Aaron snapped, anger boiling up inside him. He didn’t want to just forgive George, didn’t want to overlook what he did. Didn’t want their relationship to echo that of Aaron’s uncle and himself. He didn’t want to feel trapped. Didn’t want to be forced to forgive George. He wanted time. Wanted to fully understand what he was feeling. Sometimes, he believed that George had made the right decision by keeping secrets, but other times he was just as angry as when he first discovered his husband’s lies. He needed to figure himself out before they could move forward. “I don’t think I should have to talk to him until I’m ready to do so”

“Then you should tell him that you don’t want his surprise,” Eliza softly advised.

“What?” Aaron’s asked, his anger fading into confusion at such a suggestion. Eliza gave him a sad, tired look.

“George has been planning this for days, Aaron. Every single detail has a purpose, but if you’re not
ready to talk to him, not ready to be alone with him in that way, then you need to tell him before you let him make a fool of himself.”

“Maybe he deserves to make a fool of himself,” Aaron grumbled darkly, pulling his own book closer so he could start reading. He didn’t mean what he said, didn’t want George to feel foolish or be embarrassed, but he wasn’t sure what to do. He felt as if he was running in circles, getting close to finding a solution only to turn the other way at the last second and ending up back where he started.

“And what good would that do?” another voice joined in. Aaron looked up as Yuma entered the library with a tray. On the tray was a familiar glass pitcher. The deep ache had faded over the last few days, but Aaron continued to drink Yuma’s potion, hoping that would take care of the feeling completely. He could still feel it there, especially at night, though George’s presence did keep it from overwhelming him like before.

“It would make me feel better,” he argued as Yuma set the tray down and poured Aaron a serving of the potion.

“You want George to hurt like you did?” Yuma asked, “You want him to feel the same pain and know what it was like for you?” Aaron couldn’t respond, fearful as to what Yuma would say if he admitted that part of him did want that. Wanted George to suffer. Wanted him to understand why Aaron was so upset. But that was only a small part of his heart. What he truly wanted was to move passed all of this. He just wished they could to that without having to talk about it, without having to face all the pain that haunted him at night. The pain that also haunted George. At least Aaron thought it did. “Then what?”

“What?”

“After you’re both hurt, then what will do you?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron confessed. It felt as if they had gone back to when they first met, back when things were awkward and neither of them knew what to say or do around the other. Yet now Aaron knew how things could be different. He knew what it felt like to feel loved and cherished. To be wanted. And he knew what it felt like to see George happy and smiling all the time. He wanted those feelings back, wanted to see that again. However, he had no idea how to get there. Was their marriage destroyed beyond repair? Was this the end of them?

“George has-” Yuma said.

“Yuma,” Eliza cut the woman off, “you shouldn’t.”

“Maybe I should. It could get the ball rolling.”

“That’s not up to you.”

“Like hell it isn’t! I can’t stand here any longer and watch these two desto-”

“What has George done?” Aaron begged her, fearful for a moment that George had done something crazy, something dangerous. He had seen a look in the General’s eyes over the passed few days. It was a desperate look, and desperate people often made mistakes. Yuma, looked at him for a long moment before turning to Eliza. Eliza shook her head and that seemed to be enough to change Yuma’s mind.

“I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Maybe I need to know.”
“George would want to-” Eliza tried to tell him, but Yuma spoke over her.

“George has decided to buy another house. For you.”

“Yuma!” Eliza cried.

“I couldn’t help it!”

“A house for me?” Aaron echoed. It took him a moment before the pieces fell together and he was able to make sense of the words. “He doesn’t want us to live together?” Such an idea left a sour taste in the back of his throat. As upset as he was with George, he still wanted to be close to the man. He enjoyed sharing a bed. Liked being able to look over and see George there. Why would he want another house? Why would he want to push Aaron away?

“He thinks you don’t want to live with him,” Yuma replied, “so he plans on giving you your own home. The others will get a choose on where they want to live.”

“The others?”

“Theo and Bellamy. He even spoke to John and Alexander about if they would wanted to move as well.”

“But then he’ll be alone,” Aaron pointed out in dismay. That was the last thing he wanted for George. He thought back to last night. He came out of the bathroom to find George sitting in his chair with his head in his hands. The man’s pain had been clear, written all over his body and face as they finally retired for the night. George was already suffering. Already in pain. Maybe now was the right time.

“He’s only doing what he thinks is best,” Eliza argued.

“He’s being just as short sighted as before. I don’t want my own house. I want…” Aaron trailed off.

“There lies the problem,” Yuma declared, “You don’t know what you want.” He wanted to move on, but didn’t know how. Everything was so confusing. He didn’t know where to even start.

“I know that I don’t want a house,” he repeated.

“At least that’s something.”

“Let’s focus on the research,” Eliza suggested, “that will take your mind off it.”

“Yes, let’s hurry with this potion. The sooner we get it done, the easier things will be and it’s about time we gave G- good relief to those who are suffering.” Yuma agreed, barely batting an eye at her small mistake. Still, it was enough to raise concern in Aaron’s chest. He couldn’t recall a time when Yuma slipped up.

“Yuma, are you oka-”

“I am perfectly fine.” Yuma replied. Her tone left no room for arguments otherwise. Aaron shut his mouth and looked back to the table.

Without another word, they returned to their work.
Just before dinner, Aaron decided to stop by his bedroom to retrieve the book he had been reading before bed. He was nearly finished with it, only a few pages left, and he was hoping to find a good place outside to read after George’s surprise. The days were growing colder, but today was more pleasant than the previous ones. Aaron wanted to take full advantage of the fair weather before it was gone for good. He found the book on the side table where he had left it, but when he turned around, his sister was standing in the doorway.

“Sally,” Aaron couldn’t stop the gasp from escaping him. Eliza had offered to come with him to his bedroom, but he had told her to go ahead to dinner so she could spend some time with Theodosia. There were guards outside, but they hadn’t been told about his sister. Now he was alone, which was the last thing he wanted. He could only hope that their act, George and his, had been good enough to convince her.

“Sorry, did I scare you?” Sally asked, though she didn’t seem the least bit sorry as she walked towards him. Each step felt like another nail in the coffin. Aaron wished he could run, wished he could hide to avoid his sister’s judgment. He didn’t need this. Didn’t want to hear what she thought of him, but he had nowhere to go. He couldn’t get away

“You didn’t,” Aaron lied, “What are you doing here?”

“Checking up on you,” Sally answered, “Can’t your older sister come see if you’re okay?” For a moment, Sally’s voice reminded him of when they were children. It was such a long time ago, back when they were both young and attached at the hips. Aaron followed Sally everywhere, wanting so badly to be just like her. Sally was his hero, his family. She took care of him, and in return Aaron tried to do everything in his power to make Sally smile. But then something changed. Something shifted and Sally left Aaron behind. No, she pushed him away.

Suddenly, she didn’t want him to follow her. Running away when he tried, or even shoving him to the ground when he was able to finally catch up with her. She no longer cared for his jokes or little tricks, calling them childish and scoffing at his best attempts. She told their Uncle about Aaron’s every move, betraying his trust time and time again until Aaron felt he needed to watch his back whenever she was around. The distance grew and grew and grew endlessly until now Aaron didn’t feel as if he really had a sister. He still loved her, still yearned for the relationship they used to have; however, he doubted that they would ever be able to go back to how things used to be. Too much time had passed. Too many sorrows between them.

“It is nice to see you again,” Aaron admitted. At least she was doing well and their Uncle’s anger didn’t appear to have refocused to her. For a second, he could close his eyes and remember when his sister had brought him comfort. When there had been so much love between them. “How is everything at-?”

“Do you really think you can fool me?” Sally snapped. Aaron’s fond memories went up in flames at his sister’s harsh tone and Aaron’s hope was scorched along with them.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, trying to keep his voice level as he watched her move around the room.

“I’ll give you this, I almost believed it. Your little act was impressive, and I actually thought you were doing well for a moment, but then I saw that look in the General’s eyes and just knew you had disappointed him. Just like you disappointed our Uncle and me on countless occasions. Honestly, I wanted to believe that even you couldn’t mess this up, but somehow you have,” Sally criticized, each word like an arrow piercing Aaron’s skin. He thought they had been doing a good job. Thought no
one would be able to see the truth. He had underestimated his sister, and now he would surely pay for it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he tried to protest, hopeful that he could come with some excuse, something to explain what was going on before Sally had a chance to tell their Uncle, before Aaron’s worth could come crashing down around him.

“Don’t lie to me,” Sally snapped, “I can see it in your eyes. You were always a terrible liar and your husband gave you away. The way he looks at you, longing for you, wanting more than you’ll give him. I can’t believe Uncle trusted you with this. If you can’t even keep one man happy, how could you ever hope to be a good King?”

“I-”

“What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“Liar!” Sally growled, stalking towards him, “You did something and now you’re ruining everything. You always ruin everything! I wish the Gods would st-”

“I didn’t do anything!” Aaron yelled, planting his feet on the ground. Maybe his marriage wasn’t perfect, but this wasn’t his fault. Even if it was, Sally had no right to make such comments. He didn’t ruin anything. He never did, yet everyone around him always blamed him for things he had no control over. He was sick of it. Tired of being everyone’s scarp goat. “This does not concern you! This is my marriage, my relationship. I don’t need you-”

SLAP!

Aaron heard the noise before he registered the pain. It spread over his cheek, his skin going red hot from the string. He raised his hand to touch his cheek, feeling the heat as he stared at his sister in shock. He shouldn’t be surprised. This wasn’t the first time this happened, but Aaron had thought that he escaped this pain when he married George.

“Don’t you dare say that you don’t need me. This isn’t just about you, this is about our kingdom, our family. If you mess this-”

“Princess Sally,” George’s voice boomed, echoing off the walls, “what are you doing in our bedroom?” Sally quickly stepped away from him, turning to George with a polite smile. Aaron lowered his hand, turning away to hide his red face. He didn’t want George to see him like this, didn’t want the General to know how weak he was.

“I was speaking with my brother privately-”

“In our bedroom?” George cut her off, placing the emphasis in a way that reminded Sally that the room belonged to him just as much as it belonged to Aaron. “Please, take your leave and do not ever come in here again. I let it go the first time as you had just arrived, but next time this happens I will be less forgiving. There are things in this room, my things, that I do not wish to be made public. In addition, this is Aaron’s private space and you have no right to invade it without permission from both of us.”

Aaron watched out of the corner of his eyes as Sally’s lip twist, her smile cracking around the edges at George's words. She wanted to say something, wanted to cut George with her own harsh words, but she couldn’t do that here. This wasn’t their home and it wasn’t her place to speak out against the General. Without a word, she stalked passed George, vanishing into the hallway. George's scowl
followed her the whole time, but once the door closed, his look faded into one of concern and fear as he turned back towards Aaron. He rushed towards Aaron’s side, looking him over but never touching.

“Aaron, I’m so sorry,” he exclaimed, “I came as quickly as I could. Was I too late? Did she hurt you? Do you need me to get Yuma? I can have Lafayette throw her out if you-”

“You came as quickly as you could?” Aaron echoed. George closed his mouth, looking embarrassed for a moment as he shifted away. Aaron watched his shoulders tense for a moment before slumping. Something flashed in his eyes, something that made Aaron’s heart twist. He wanted to run into George’s arms, cry into the man’s chest and let him chase away all of Aaron’s pain, but something held him back.

“As soon as I realized that no one was with you, I came to find you,” George muttered, taking another step back.

“I told Eliza to go on ahead,” Aaron informed him. He didn’t want her to be blamed for this. Didn’t want George to get angry with her for listening to Aaron instead of fighting with him about coming along.

“I’m aware of that, but I should have told the guards not to let your sister in. I’ll go tell them now,” George replied, turning towards the door. The flash reappeared, staying long enough for Aaron to recognise it. Guilt. That’s what Aaron kept seeing. George’s eyes were filled to the brim with it. The type of guilt that weighs on a person’s soul making it hard for them to even think of anything else. He starred as George walked, noticing something odd about the movement. Something he couldn’t place his finger on until the very last second.

“Are you alright?” Aaron asked,

“Of course,” George answered over his shoulder before opening the door. Aaron kept watching him, wondering if what he saw was a one time occurrence; however, when George moved towards the window, Aaron noticed it again. The General was favoring his left leg over his right. The limp was hard to see, easy overlooked, but Aaron saw it. George had never moved like that before, never showed any signs of having issues. The issue had to be new, had to have happened recently. Aaron needed to know.

“Did something happen to your leg?”

“What?”

“Your leg. You’re limping.”

“It’s nothing.” George assured him, moving away from the window towards their wardrobe. Each step was slower and Aaron noticed that George’s jaw was pressed in a straight line. He was in pain. Pain that he was trying to hide.

“You’re lying,” Aaron stated.

“Are you ready to go?” George asked, pulling two matching cloaks out and draping them over his arm. He ran his hand over them with a fond smile, a spark of excitement behind his eyes before it faded away. George clearly didn’t want to talk about it what was wrong. Didn’t want to face it, but Aaron refused to let him get away with keeping secrets. Not this time.

“I’m not going unless you tell me what happened,” Aaron declared, crossing his arms over his chest. It was a low card to play, one that he knew would work. Part of Aaron protested such low tactics,
reminding him of Eliza’s plea and Yuma’s harsh reminder. This surprise meant something to George, meant more than Aaron first imagined. It was wrong to use it against the General, but Aaron couldn’t take the word back. George loudly sighed, shaking his head as he walked towards Aaron. He didn’t look angry, or upset by his demands. His face was simply blank. Void.

“It’s really nothing. Eliza already fixed it and Yuma has given me something to help. It’s just...acting up today more than usual. I was careless yesterday and I’m paying for it.”

“What happened?”

“It’s a small wound. Nothing to worry about.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Aaron pointed out. He refused to let George get out of this without answering his questions.

“I was hit with an ax. Like I said, it’s nothing to worry about,” George vaguely answered. Aaron narrowed his eyes. Hit with an ax didn’t tell him much. A battle ax could easily take someone’s leg off, and even a normal ax could cut down to the bone. Why wouldn’t George tell him the full story? Why was he keeping it all a secret?

“An ax or a battle ax?”

There was a long moment of silence where Aaron stared at George and the General looked anywhere besides at Aaron.

“The latter,” George finally confessed, his voice barely above a whisper.

“That’s not a small wound!” Aaron cried. “Ho-” He cut himself off. Aaron knew how. There was only one battle that occurred, one moment when George could have gotten injured and it was when he came to save Aaron. George got hurt saving him. It was his fault. Concern flooded Aaron’s body. Why had no one told him? He knew that he was recovering himself, but still, this was something he should have known sooner. This was his husband. He should have been told. “Was anyone else injured?”

“Just some flesh wounds. A cut on John’s shoulder. A few on Alexander’s sides. Bruised knuckles for Bellamy and a small bruise on Theodosia’s neck, but Yuma and Eliza patched them all up and there should be no lasting effects.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Aaron asked, his voice cracking as he lowered himself to sit on the edge of the bed. George glanced at the door, shrugging one of his shoulders while holding the cloaks against his chest. Aaron’s concern turned into anger at George’s indifference. Why couldn’t George just tell him the truth? Why did he have to keep secrets? Was it so hard to let Aaron into his life?

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?” Aaron snapped, “It’s clearly still affecting you! You’re limping! Who knows how long you’ll be affected by this! I should have known!”

“There are more important things for me to worry about right now.”

“What could be more important than your own health?!?”

“You,” George softly answered, leaving no room for argument. Aaron’s anger stuttered to a halt and he paused, unable to think of how to respond to that. Of all the answers he had been expecting, that had not been on his list, but it made sense as he thought about it more. George had been spending
most of his time with Aaron even before he was off bedrest, and George had just started to take time for himself, but even that was mostly spent planning Lafayette’s celebration or handling other affairs for the Kingdom or organizing this surprise, which was for Aaron.

“Perhaps it’s best if we save the surprise for another day,” George suddenly suggested, his voice so soft that Aaron almost missed it. Aaron’s anger vanished, replaced with concern and regret. That hadn’t been his intention. He didn’t meant to make George doubt himself, but from the look of things, it appeared that George no longer had the same excitement as earlier. Aaron took a moment to look at his husband, truly look at him, and all he saw was guilt and sadness in the man’s eyes. One by one, each kind gesture George had shown made themselves known. Without the haze of Aaron’s own doubts clouding them, smudging the love behind them into desperation, Aaron began to see his husband and his actions clearly for the first time in days. The General’s face had aged over the last two weeks. Lines from frowning were evident around his mouth more than ever before. Heavy dark circles under his eyes made him look unhealthy and weak. This wasn’t the man Aaron remembered, the man who surfed and had food fights. Who chased after children and taught Aaron how to use magic. Who laughed and teased. Who held Aaron tight as they dance around his office. This man was a shadow of Aaron’s memories, lost in his own sadness, unable to find his way out. The limping was also a cause for concern. George said it was only acting up today, but Aaron wasn’t sure that was true.

“We don’t have to reschedule it,” Aaron said. This surprise wouldn’t fix everything, but Aaron realized they needed it. They needed something to help them both heal from what happened between them. This could be the first step. They had to take that chance. Had to try. Aaron wanted to try. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing George forever. Couldn’t stand thinking that this was how the rest of their lives would be spent.

“It’s probably best if we do,” George muttered, glancing at the wardrobe then at the cloaks over his arm as if he was thinking about returning them, “With everything going on, now is not the time-”

“Now is the best time,” Aaron cut him off, pushing himself off the bed and taking one of the cloaks before George could protest. He wrapped it around his shoulders, stepping toward the door to get his point across.

“Aaron, you shouldn’t feel as if you have to do this.”

“I don’t.”

“But-

“George, I don’t feel like I have to,” Aaron repeated, “I want to do this. I want to see what you have planned.” He prayed that the surprise wasn’t just the house. He didn't want that. Didn't want to be away from George. Not again. George still looked unsure, but he wrapped the cloak around his shoulders and offered Aaron his hand. Aaron easily took it, giving George his best smile as he pulled him towards the door. Once they were in the hallway, George took over leading as they walked. Their journey was silent, neither of them saving a word. Aaron didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to ease George’s uneasiness. It didn’t help that his own mind was a jumbled mess, struggling to make sense of this new development. Part of him wanted to run into George’s arms, yet another part still wanted to hold onto the anger.

George led Aaron out into the gardens, a place that Aaron had yet to explore because of the cooling weather. Some of the plants and trees were wrapped up in blankets to protect them from the harsher weather that was just around the corner, but the flowers and other annual plants had been left untouched. The sun was just starting to set over the horizon, it’s pinkish glow giving Aaron enough light to make out all the different colors. He liked that the garden featured so many different plants.
He would have to try and come in the spring to see all of them bloom. Multiple stone paths cut between the plants, but one of them featured glowing white stones. George led Aaron towards the path, letting go of his hand soon after. Aaron missed his touch, missed the warm feeling of George's hand in his eyes, but he didn’t make a move to reconnect then. At least not yet. The white stones soon changed to a pale pink color, similar to that of the sunset. They continued to follow them, neither saying a word until the stones became a deep red color and the path opened up to a small, grassy clearing. Aaron gasped at the sight.

Laid out in the grass was a large blanket with countless pillows piled around in a circle to create a nest. A low table proudly displaying a feast had been placed in the center and lights, which Aaron at first believed to be candles, floated above the comfy seating arrangement. Aaron looked closer to see that each light was actually a glowing butterfly. They fluttered in circles, their lights shining bright against the approaching darkness. Such a spell would have taken a lot of time and energy to create. The whole thing was magical in a way Aaron couldn’t describe. He had seen countless things throughout his life, but something about this made Aaron’s heart beat faster than ever before. Made his head spin. Made him want to fall into the pillows and never leave.

“Do you like it?” George softly asked.

“It’s-It’s-” Aaron didn’t know what word to use. Nothing in his head said enough about how much he loved such a display. He squeezed George’s hand instead, and pulled the man towards the pillows. He looked up at the butterflies as they passed them, laughing when some of them landed on his shoulders and head before flying away. George stayed quiet, never saying a word even after they sat down among the pillows. The table was high enough to allow Aaron to slide his legs underneath and lean back against the pillows, but still low enough that they could eat off it. Aaron glanced up, realizing that there were no plants, no trees blocking their view of the sky. As the pink color of the sunset faded into black, Aaron could see the stars begin to shine.

“This is amazing,” he whispered, unable to stop the smile from appearing on his face.

“I’m glad you like it,” George replied, pouring them each a glass of wine. He handed one to Aaron, who took a sip. Aaron noticed that George left his own glass on the table. He also noted the amount of space between them. George was keeping his distance, staring off towards the trees with an unreadable look on his face.

“This is quite a surprise,” Aaron said, attempting to make small talk.

“It’s not much,” George protested. Aaron frowned at his words. How could George downplay his careful planning and setup like that? It was clear to him that George spent a lot of time and effort to making this all look good. The wine was bursting with flavor. The food smelled amazing. This was not something George simple threw together at the last second. Aaron’s mind went back to what Eliza said. How every detail had a purpose.

“George,” Aaron reached over and took his hand, prompting George to look over at him finally. He gave his husband a soft smile. “I love it. This is beyond anything I could have imagined. I don’t even know how to put it into words. It’s breathtaking. Magical. None of those words fit how this makes me feel.”

“I know it doesn’t,” George paused, shaking his head. Aaron’s smile faded as George pulled his hand out from underneath Aaron’s. “I know this doesn’t change anything, but I wanted you to know just how much.”

“Don’t,” Aaron ordered without thinking. His mouth moving before his mind could catch up. George closed his mouth so quickly that Aaron swore he teeth clicked together. The guilt returned to
his eyes. He shifted every farther away, closing in on himself in a way that made Aaron’s heart ache. That wasn’t what he meant. Wasn’t the reaction he expected. He scrambled to fix things, spitting out words as quickly as possible. “Wait, I simply mean th-”

“You’re right,” George cut him off, looking back towards the trees as if he couldn’t stand the idea of facing Aaron, “You’re right. Now is not the tim-”

“No, no that’s not what I meant,” Aaron argued, “I meant that this does change things. Don’t sell yourself short, George. This...this...I want this to mean something. I want it to mean that things are going to be okay. That we’re going to be okay.” George’s eyes returned to him, staring deep into Aaron’s soul.

“I don’t want to push you,” George explained, his voice full of regret and worry, “I don’t want you to think, to believe, that you have to set aside your feelings. You’re right to be angry with me. To be upset with me. To hate-”

“I don’t hate you.”

“You have a right to feel the way you do,” George continued as if Aaron hadn’t said a word, “and I don’t want to pressure you into acting as if nothing happened. Into forgiving me when you’re not ready. I...I honestly don’t know what to do. Or what to say. I keep thinking that if I say I’m sorry, if I try to explain why I did what I did, that will help, but nothing excuses what I did. The choices I made. The way I hurt you. Nothing can make up for the pain I caused.” He went silent again, staring in front of him but not really seeing anything. George was right. He could explain his actions. Could try and help Aaron made sense of it all, but that wouldn’t change the past and it wouldn’t change how Aaron felt, because Aaron didn’t need an explanation. He didn’t need George’s reasons. All he needed was to look at George and know that the General regretted what he did. The part of Aaron, the part that wanted so badly to hold onto his anger, faded into oblivion. He didn’t need it anymore. He was going to break the circle once and for all.

“I’m tired of being angry,” Aaron confessed. “I’m tired with being upset. I don’t want to hold onto the past. I don’t want to keep going around in circles.” He reached over and took George’s hand, shifting closer until their shoulders were pressed together. He looked up towards the sky, noticing that one of his favorite constellations was visible. He always enjoyed the story of the princess and her warrier, two unlikely people who fell in love. Their love was said to have been so powerful, so pure, that when they died of old age holding hands, the gods rearranged the stars so that everyone would be able to remember what it meant to truly love another person. A part of the story, the part Aaron always went back to, appeared in his head. He knew what he needed to do. Knew what to say. He squeezed George’s hand as tightly as possible and took a deep breath.

“I forgive you.”

And by the gods, he meant it.

George didn’t reply, and, for a moment, Aaron was fearful that he hadn’t heard the words, but then Aaron looked over and saw tears streaming down his husband’s cheeks. The man’s shoulders were tensed up to his ears and his body shook as he tried desperately to hold in his sobs. Aaron’s heart twisted, worry and dread filling every part of his body. Had he made a mistake? Was that not what George needed to hear? Did he ruin things?

“George-”

“How?” the General choked out, “how can you forgive me for everything I’ve done to you? I was horrible. A mons-”
“Shhh,” Aaron cooed, reaching out to wipe away some of George’s tears, “You made a mistake, maybe a few, but that doesn’t make you a monster. That doesn’t make you a horrible person. That doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

“But-”

“No. There’s no debate. There’s no argument you can make that will change my mind. I forgive you. I forgive you for everything, not because I feel like I have to, not because I simply want to fix our marriage. I forgive you because I can see that you regret what you did and I’m tired of both of us being in pain. We still have stuff to talk about, but right now, I want you to know that I forgive you,” Aaron explained, using the sleeve of his coat to clean up the rest of George’s face. The tears had yet to stop, George openly sobbing now. Aaron pulled George closer, letting him rest his head on Aaron’s shoulder as he rubbed the man’s back.

“I’m so sorry,” George sobbed, “I’m sorry for everything. I didn’t mean to-”

“I know.”

“I was just trying to do the best I could do-”

“I know you were,” Aaron said again, rocking George back and forth. For once, it felt good to hold someone else. Felt good to comfort George as his sorrow and guilt overwhelmed him. This was how they would move on, by laying all their emotions on the table.

“But I failed. I failed everyone.”

“No, you didn’t. You protected your kingdom. You helped your people. You saved lives and guided Lafayette,” Aaron pointed out, “and I’m proud of you for doing that.”

“But it was at the cost of your happiness,” George replied, his voice cracking on every other word. Aaron gently pushed George away to look into his eyes, holding the man’s chin before pressing their lips together. He shut his eyes, enjoying the feeling of George’s lips against his. George didn’t react at first, didn’t move, but finally he relaxed and kissed Aaron the way he used to. When Aaron pulled away, he kept his hand on George’s chin.

“As long as you are still in my life, as long as everyone I love is safe, I am happy,” Aaron told him firmly, “Yes, what happened hurt me, but that is the past, and you have don’t so much to make up for it. More than anyone else has ever done for me.”

“I’m not done yet,” George declared, “I’m going to keep making it up for you. I’m going to keep-”

“George, you don’t need to do anything else. You don’t need to work yourself into the ground or bend over backwards to make things better. We’ll work on it together.”

“Together,” George echoed softly, wiping the last of his tears away as a relieved look appeared on his face. Aaron kissed his forehead and pulled away with a smile. George met his eyes, returning the smile with a shy grin. There was the man Aaron loved. They stared at one another for a moment before George leaned in to kiss Aaron softly. Aaron melted at the gesture, grabbing onto George’s shoulder.

“I have something else for you,” George whispered against Aaron’s lips as he pulled back.

“I don’t want a house,” Aaron told him right away, deciding it was best to tell George right away then wait for him to make the offer.
“What? How did you know about- Yuma,” George quickly came to his own conclusion, a annoyed look crossing his face before he loudly sighed, “I can explain-”

“I don’t want to be away from you,” Aaron stated. He didn’t want any distance between them. Didn’t want George to be alone. Didn’t want to feel like George was pushing him away.

“It was just an idea I had. I wasn’t sure if you would feel comfortable back home and I thought a temporary property would give you the space you needed to live a happier life.”

“I want to go home. To our home.”

“Then I’ll get rid of that idea, but that’s not what I have for you,” George explained.

“It’s not?”

“It’s not,” George confirmed, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small box. He stared at it for a moment, running his fingers over the corners before turning towards Aaron. “Neither of us can deny that we didn’t choose this marriage. At first, we were doing what we believed was best for our kingdoms and our people, but over the months and weeks we’ve been together I have fallen in love with you. I can’t imagine spending my life with anyone else. You make me happy, Aaron. Make me smile. Make me feel brave. I know I’ve made mistakes, I know that I hurt you, but I want you to know, no I need you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world and I will always love you. And in order to show you just how much you mean to me-”

George popped the box open to show off a shiny, golden ring. Down the middle of the band was a row of bright blue Benitoite gems. Each of the gems reflected the light of the fluttering butterflies, making it look as if there was something dancing inside them. The ring was beautiful and breathtaking, clearly well crafted by how well the gems fit together, but Aaron could only stare at it in confusion. He wasn’t sure what such a thing meant.

“I want to ask you to marry me,” George said.

“But we’re already married,” Aaron pointed out in confusion.

“I know that,” George clarified with a shy smile, “but this is to...is to show you that if I could go back in time and do it all over again, I would choose you every single time. If I could live this life again, I would still want to marriage you.”

“George-”

“You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me Aaron. Up and down, no matter what, I will always be happy that we are married and I want you to know how much you mean to me.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Aaron confessed.

“Yes would be a good place to start,” George weakly suggested. Aaron couldn’t help himself. He started laughing, leaning against George as happiness overtook him.

“Yes. A thousand times yes,” he said, giddy with the idea of having a ring that truly symbolized George's love for him. George took the band out of its box and slowly slid it down Aaron's finger. It was heavy in a way that made Aaron feel safe the way his other ring had never done. This one meant something. It wasn’t a simple band given without meaning behind it. This one had weight, had a story behind it. Held love within it’s gems.

“I love you,” Aaron said, pulling George in for another kiss.
“I love you too,” George echoed against his lips. They settled back against the pillows, George wrapping his arm around Aaron’s shoulders as they looked up at the stars. They didn’t talk about what happened. Didn’t worry about the past. Not yet. Instead, they pointed out their favorite stars and shared stories.

Chapter End Notes

They’re gonna be okay!!!

I was really inspired by "It's Quiet Uptown" for the last scene. When Eliza takes Alexander's hand and Alexander 'shatters.' I wanted George to have a similar reaction. Forgiveness is hard, and George didn't even realize how badly he needed to hear those words. Nor did Aaron realize how big of an impact they would have.

Things are not perfect. Not by a long shot, but they're gonna work on it. Rome wasn't built in a day, and relationships aren't fixed in one either. But first steps.

Also, if you didn't think George has suffered enough, just wait. ;)

“I don’t think it was the fairy godmother, or the glass slipper, or the pumpkin turning into a carriage, that made me love that story so much,” George explained, running his hand down Aaron’s back. He’d lost count of how many times he’d done it, but he refused to stop just yet. He just finished telling Aaron his favorite fairytale that his mother used to tell him before bed. It was an old, childish tale, but it still brought George comfort to recite it. Aaron was resting his head on George’s chest, returning to his favorite spot in order to listen to George’s speak. The morning sun was just coming up over the horizon, yet they had already been up for at least an hour sharing stories and talking about their pasts. It felt good to talk. Good to look back on fond memories. Good to learn new things about each other as the heaviness of their fight faded away.

“I think it was more the Princess’ persistence to find the woman she fell in love with at the ball that captured my attention the most. Even when all the location spells failed, even when everyone in the kingdom was telling her to give up, the Princess kept looking and, in the end, she found Cinderella. That’s the part of the story I liked the most.”

“Ironic,” Aaron softly replied, his voice still groggy from sleep, “I was just going to say that you remind me of the Princess.”

“You were?”

“I was. After all, persistence is your middle name.”

“Haha,” George faked a laugh, kissing Aaron’s head as his husband smirked. George’s heart skipped a beat, filling with joy at the sight. It had been two days since the surprise. Two days since they sat on the ground under the stars and talked about what happened. Since Aaron forgave him. There were times when George expected Aaron to retreat, to declare that his forgiveness had been a lie and that he hated George more than ever. He knew his fears were unfounded, yet he couldn’t stop them from creeping up at times like this. At times when he saw Aaron’s looking so happy and feared he would do something to ruin it again. He didn’t want to admit his fears to Aaron, didn’t want to make the Prince believe that George had no faith in him, but perhaps it was best just to be honest about it sooner rather than later.

“You have that look on your face,” Aaron observe, staring at George with a knowing edge in his eyes.

“What look?”

“That look where you’re overthinking something.”
“I just–” George cut himself off, taking a moment to breathe and collect his thoughts. He didn’t want to speak before thinking about his words. Didn’t want to make that mistake again. Aaron lifted his head off George’s chest, staring into George’s eyes. Aaron’s eyes held no judgement, no walls, nothing preventing George from being honest. If anything, they encouraged George to spill his soul, so that’s what he did. “I can’t help but think this is all just a dream.”

“This?”

“Your forgiveness. How happy we are.” George shrugged his shoulders as if gesturing to the world around them. “Everything.”

“George~”

“I know. I know. I’m overthinking things and I’m letting myself get caught up in the past again, but I can’t help it. What I did was~”

“What you did does not define you,” Aaron cut him off, pushing himself up to press his forehead against George’s. George shut his eyes at their position, feeling safer then he had before. “Say it with me.”

“Aaron~” George softly tried to protest, wrapping his arms around Aaron tightly. He wanted to apologize again. Wanted Aaron to understand how much he regretted what he had done.

“Say it with me or I’ll lick you,” Aaron threatened.

“Lick me~Awh! Aaron!” George exclaimed, reaching up wipe off his cheek. He couldn’t believe the Prince really just licked him! How childish! And cute. His heart was a traitor.

“Say it!” Aaron sternly ordered. He stuck his tongue out, the threat of another lick going unspoken.

“What I did does not define me,” George obeyed, rolling his eyes as he said the words. Saying it wouldn’t change the way he felt, but it was easy to give in, easy to follow Aaron’s command.

“Again.”

“This is ridul~”

“Again.”

“What I did does not define me.”

Aaron grinned warmly, pleased, but not satisfied quite yet. “Again.”

“What I did does not define me.”

George blinked, locking eyes with his husband’s fond gaze.

“Do you believe it?” Aaron asked. George paused, letting the words bounce around in his head for a while. He didn’t quite believe it, wasn’t sure that he would ever be able to, but saying that phrase had made him feel better. He had Aaron to thank for the idea. Aaron who tried so hard to comfort him, to help guide him through this changing period of their lives. It never failed to amaze him how much of an effect Aaron had on him. George didn’t know where he would be without his husband, without
Aaron by his side.

“A little,” George admitted.

“Good,” Aaron declared with a smile, “that’s an improvement. We’ll do this every morning until you completely believe it.”

“We really don’t have to do that,” George protested, hating the idea of forcing Aaron to take care of him so often. Once in a while was alright, that was normal, but he wouldn’t be able to take bringing Aaron down every single day. His goal was to make Aaron happy, fo focus on giving the Prince everything he deserved. Aaron didn’t need to focus all his own attention on George. Didn’t need to burden himself with George's issues or poor self-confidence.

“You’re right, we don’t have to, but we will because that’s what you need.”

“But–”

“No more arguing,” Aaron begged, resting his head back on George’s chest and pull the blankets up over his shoulders, “you still own me another story.”

“Another one? I’ve already told you two,” George pointed out. The first being about the first time he went wave riding with his father, and the second the story from his mother. He didn’t have another story prepared.

“I told you three last night. It’s only fair.”

“Alright, alright. Let me think.” George huffed out a breath in mock annoyance though the smile that bloomed on his face sold him out fairly quickly.

Aaron hummed his approval, shifting into a comfortable position. George tucked the blankets around the Prince to keep him warm against the morning chill, then he placed his hand on the center of Aaron’s back. He could feel the man’s heartbeat this way, it’s steady beat helping George stay focused and calm. He kissed Aaron’s head as he thought about what story to tell him. His childhood supplied him with countless memories, and even his earlier military service gave him a number of tales he could still recite, yet none of them felt right. Instead George decided to go with a more recent story. One that Aaron needed to hear.

“Aaron,” George said softly, pressing his lips together as he tried to figure out how to start his story. It wasn’t really a story. More of a confession. It was something Aaron needed to know, something George didn’t want to keep from him anymore, but George wasn’t sure if it was too soon. Too fresh in their minds. “When you were taken, when I found out you were gone, my world stopped.”

“George–” Aaron started to protest, but he felt quiet when George gave him a pleading look.

“I don’t want to talk about what happened to you. Or to me. Not yet. Not until we’re both ready for that. But I need you to know what went through my head when I found out. How I felt. How my heart stopped. By the gods Aaron, I just– I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. Couldn’t imagine a world without you in it. I can’t begin to explain the utter terror that gripped me every day you were gone. I was truly terrified more than ever before. I thought back to the moment when I first realized I loved you. It was when we were at the seahouse and you were reading a book about the ocean out loud in the library. I couldn’t stop watching you. My mind wouldn’t stop thinking about how well we fit together, how happy you made me. I was worried about telling you. So worried that I even asked Lafayette what love felt like because I thought I was going crazy at first. I didn’t want to lose that feeling, couldn’t lose you. When they said you were gone, missing, I kept thinking how I should
have done more. Should have made sure that you knew how much I loved you. I didn’t do enough, didn’t try hard enough, but I’m going to change that. That I shall promise you here and now. I made mistakes, and I know I’ll make more mistakes, but I need you to know how much you mean to me. I need you to know that I can’t imagine how my life would be without you here with me.”

The look on Aaron’s face could only be described as purely stunned. “George–”

“I know it’s not really a story. I just wanted to say it all before I forgot or got scared.”

“You should never be scared to tell me what how you feel,” Aaron sternly told him, “Never. And...and thank you for telling me. You’re right, I’m not ready to talk about what happened, but I guess....I didn’t know how you took the news and for some reason...for some reason hearing that you were scared makes me feel better.” Aaron frowned. “That doesn’t sound like the right thing to say.”

“No no,” George assured him, “I get it. It proves I care.”

“Yes! By the gods that sounds horrible.”

“It’s not horrible. It’s honest. And sometimes, the truth hurts, but it creates a better foundations for us to stand on.”

“Listening to you being all wise,” Aaron teased. His words lightened the moment without truly breaking away from their serious topic.

“I don’t want anymore lies between us,” George whispered.

“No more lies,” Aaron agreed.

“And I promise you, that from now on, I will try my hardest to make you know how much I love you each and every day.”

“Only if you let me do the same.”

“I–”

“Wait, listen,” Aaron begged, “You always try to put me first. Always. It’s about my happiness. My forgiveness. My joy. Me me me, but this marriage is not just about me. It’s about you too. I want you to be happy with me. I want you to find joy. I want you to feel safe and comfortable. So if you’re going to try to make sure that I’m loved every day, then I’m going to make sure you feel the same.”

George clamped his mouth shut on his rebuttal and slowly nodded. “Okay.” George replied, kissing Aaron's forehead again, “I love you.”

“I love you too. So much.”

“Do you think we need to get up yet?”

“Probably not. I plan to stay here until someone gets us.”

“Good idea.”

George wrapped his arms around Aaron, holding him tight as a comfortable silence fell over them. They still had a lot to talk about, but they were moving forward and that’s what matters. George felt a weight lifting off his shoulders as he stared at his husband. No matter what happened, no matter what the world threw at them, George would never leave Aaron’s side again. Never cause such a
divide between them. He didn’t want to go through that again. Didn’t want to have to go through that pain. Never again.

Aaron shifted in George’s grip and met his gaze with a loving smile. George returned it with a fond grin before the corners of his mouth curled up in a sly smile of his own. He didn’t give Aaron time to become confused at his sudden change in expression. Before the Prince could do anything, George dipped down and licked a stripe across Aaron’s cheek.

“George!!”

At Aaron’s gasp, George erupted with laughter.

“That is not the outfit I picked out for you, Alexander,” George stated as he looked his student up and down. Instead of the red and black outfit, which was form fitting and featured just the right amount of gold, Alexander was wearing a loose green suit. The color was softer than Alexander’s normal clothing, yet it was still marvelous; however, it was not what George had picked out. Not what he planned.

“That’s because I didn’t like the outfit you picked,” Alexander replied with a smirk. George knew that was a lie, not even a clever one. Alexander loved the outfit designs, raving about them just a few days ago. What changed his mind? Why did he have to be such a troublemaker when George didn’t need him to be?

“But I made sure it matched John and Bellamy’s! Hercules even helped,” George protested.

“I know, but we all decided to leave red and black for you.”

“For me?”

“And Aaron,” Alexander added, his smirk transforming into a soft smile. Aaron told George about how John, Bellamy, and Alexander had talked to him. How they apologized and confessed their feelings, their guilt. George was proud of his students, proud that they faced their fears and admitted that they had been wrong. Proud that they went to the Prince themselves and talked over everything instead of brushing it aside. George could see how it’d helped all of them. Aaron talked to John and Alexander more then ever, and Bellamy was back at Aaron’s side just like before. Things were easier. Not perfect. But easier, and over time things would only get better.

“This is about Lafayette, not me or my husband,” George reminded him. Alexander only shrugged, a knowing look on his face as he made his way around George to check on the band setting up in the corner. Now it made sense why Hercules had given George a different outfit instead of his uniform. George sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He knew better than to fight with his students, knew that it was impossible when they were all working against him, but he still wished they had picked a different night for their plan. Tonight was Lafayette’s birthday celebration and the guests were going to start arriving any moment now. The last thing George needed to worry about was his students and whatever plan they had come up with.

The ballroom was set up just as George and Aaron planned. Tables and chairs were set up along the walls for the dinner, each chair with a name attached to it. Organizing the guest had been George’s least favorite part. Long tables covered with food were nearby, covered with Lafayette’s favorite foods and drinks. The band was in the corner next to the dance floor and had been given copies of all
of the King’s favorite songs from throughout his life. George couldn’t wait to see Lafayette’s reaction when they placed the songs from his childhood. Aaron’s idea was perfect and George just knew Lafayette was going to love every little detail.

“General,” Maria called, giving George a low bow when she got closer. She was wearing her uniform, her boots polished and hair pulled back in a sleek, tight ponytail. George remembered when she first came to the castle as a young girl. She was a spitfire, ready to fight anyone if they dared to even look at her the wrong way. She came from a hard background, one that often left people with countless walls, but George saw the strength inside her. He placed Maria in the King’s Guard program, believing she would one day become an amazing general herself. He still believed that could be the case, if Maria wanted it.

“Good evening, Captain. How are you? Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, sir. I came to ask about...I came to–” Maria tried to explain, keeping her eyes on the ground and her hands behind her back. Her posture screamed guilt, which didn’t sit right with George.

“Maria, I don’t blame you,” George told her softly.

She visibly tensed. “You should.”

“Why?”

“I promised I would protect him. I promised that I would....and I didn’t. I let him get hurt. I let my men get hurt. I let you get–”

“I was younger than you are now when I made my first military mistake,” George confessed. Maria lifted his eyes, staring at him in shock. “Let me tell you what I wish I’d known, what I wish someone would have told me. There will always be losses. No matter how hard you try, how meticulous you plan, you will lose. But knowing that should never stop you from trying. Never. You cannot let your fears of losing another soldier, of losing your life, prevent you from protecting your kingdom and your people. You are what stands between the common family and those who want to do them harm. They need us. They need you. I could never blame you, Maria. Never. Just as those families didn’t blame me when I came home and their love ones didn’t. Just as Aaron doesn’t blame you either.”

“George,” Maria whispered, her eyes filling with tears. George stepped towards her, placing a heavy hand on her shoulder. Maria reached up to rub at her eyes. George couldn’t help himself and pulled her closer, squeezing the girl against his chest. She was so young, but not new to loss, yet this was different. George had been in the military for years, but even he couldn’t shake off the guilt that followed him after so many years. He refused to let Maria suffer that too. Refused to keep her an arm length away when what she really needed for to find comfort in a person she looked up to.

“I’m proud of you Maria,” he told her, “Proud that you took up the call to protect the Prince, to protect my husband. No matter what your mind might be telling you, it’s not your fault. The people who kidnapped Aaron, who killed your men, who attacked us. They are who we should blame. Not each other. Not you.”

“Thank you,” Maria whispered. George ignored the way her voice cracked, allowing Maria to act brave as she pulled away from him.

“You’re welcome,” George replied, offering Maria a smile. The Captain returned it with a grin.

“George! Maria! The guests are here!” John called from the doorway, ”Hurry up! Aaron doesn’t want to greet them without you”
"Coming!" George answered, gesturing for Maria to go first, “Let’s go welcome everyone.” He followed her across the room, through the door to the entrance of the castle. Aaron was waiting there. Clearly, Alexander and the others had been planning this for a while. George and Aaron had agreed on their outfits based on the color scheme for the overall event days ago, yet Aaron was wearing something completely new. Something George had never seen before, but it still matched George's outfit. Instead of wearing blue, like they had originally planned, Aaron was wearing a long black shirt that went down to his knees with a red shirt underneath. The red peeked over over his collar, grabbing George’s attention. Aaron’s trousers were the same bright red, and there was a gold belt wrapped around his hips along with a gold cloak. It was the exact opposite of George’s outfit, which featured a red shirt with black trousers; however, they had the same gold cloak.

“You look...,” George muttered, staring openly at his husband. Aaron only smiled and took George’s hand, pulling him closer as the first pair of guests walked in. George swallowed down his words, unsure how he was going to make it through the night with Aaron looking so amazing.

“Duke Benjamin Tallmadge and his husband, Caleb!” the herald declared. George smiled at the names, recognizing the young Duke and his husband as they stepped forward.

“Good evening,” Aaron greeted them, his tone light and polite as they men bowed, “we’re so glad you could make it.”

“As are we,” the Benjamin replied, giving Aaron a bright smile, “It’s nice to see you again. My husband was unable to come to the wedding, so I had to make sure to come tonight so he could finally met you.”

“Nice to meet you for the first time then,” Aaron offered to Caleb.

“Likewise, your highness,” Caleb said, bowing his head.

“No need for titles with me,” Aaron assured them, “I’m simply the General’s husband.”

“That’s a lie,” George spoke up, offering Benjamin his hand. The two shook before George pulled Benjamin in for a side hug, “he’s not simply anything.”

“No, he is not,” Benjamin agreed with a knowing, “He makes you happy, which means he has to be truly something.”

“Ben,” Caleb said in warning, grabbing the Duke’s hand and pulling him away, “they have other people to talk to. You can embarrass the General later.”

“Oh, I plan to,” Benjamin promised, letting his husband drag him away towards the ballroom.

“Lady Dolley Payne and her wife, Abigail,” were announced next. The two women were powerful members of the King’s court, both loved by the people and feared by Frihet’s enemies. Dolly, like always, was wearing one of her stunning head scarfs that covered her hair and matched her dress perfectly. She bypassed Aaron's outspread hand to pull him in for a tight hug, which Abigail quickly joined.

“You look so handsome!”

“I love the color of your suit!”

“I love your headscarf,” Aaron replied, sounding equally as excited to see the women as they were to see him. In all honestly, it was impossible to not be excited to see Dolly or Abigail. They spread calm and joy wherever they went. George watched with a fond look on his face, unable to help the warm
feeling that spread through his chest at Aaron’s laughter.

“You look happy,” Abigail stated as she moved over to George, giving him a bright grin.

“I am,” George muttered, pulling her into a hug, “I really am.”

“Good,” Dolley said, “you deserve it.”

“Don’t we all?”

“True, but you more than anyone else,” Abigail stated, staring at George for a moment before letting Dolley usher her away. More people came through the doors. Dukes. Duchesses. Earls. Counts. Business women. Business men. Countless people, yet George's excitement didn’t dim at all. It didn’t seem like Aaron’s did either judging by the way he greeted every new person with an easy smile. George kept his arm around Aaron’s waist in between guests, wanting his husband as close as possible. Abigail was right. Aaron did look handsome. And adorable. And cute. George couldn’t stand it.

“Lord Thomas Jefferson and Lord James Madison.”

“Aaron!” Philip screamed in joy, running forward to throw his arms around Aaron’s legs as Martha did the same to George, holding on as tightly as possible as her fathers stepped forward. “Did you miss us?” Philip asked as he stared up at Aaron.

“I missed you so much,” Aaron admitted.

“Did you miss me too?” Martha asked, leaving George to grab onto Aaron’s legs alongside Philip.

“Of course I missed you too.”

“We missed you so much! George told us we couldn’t come until you got better, but then daddy said that we had to wait even longer so they could come to the party,” Martha quickly explained, “but now we’re here and then we can all go back home together and we can go on another picnic before the snow comes and then we can go sledding–”

“Martha, I think that's enough,” James said, reaching out to place his hands on Martha’s shoulders and carefully guiding her back with a stern look. Martha pouted, moving to cling to Thomas' leg instead while glaring at her father. George couldn’t help but chuckle. James was much more reserved than his husband, keeping Thomas and Martha in line. “It’s nice to finally meet you after hearing so many stories about you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Aaron replied, offering James his hand, “Martha’s told me about you as well.”

“You’ve clearly captured our daughter's affections,” Thomas added, taking Aaron’s hand next, “I’ve never seen her talk so much about someone without saying a single bad thing about them. She only seems to sing your praise.”

“Now, Thomas, just because Martha still doesn’t like your cooking doesn’t mean that she cares about Aaron more,” George spoke up. Thomas glared at the comment, looking exactly like his daughter, as James chuckled. Thomas had...unique tastes in food that Martha couldn’t stand, yet the man continued to push his wild ideas at every family dinner.

“When are we going home?” Philip spoke up, looking up at Aaron hopefully.
“Soon,” Aaron softly answered, “very soon.”

“That’s good to hear,” James commented, giving George a knowing look. George nodded his head as he gave the man a soft smile. Marriage wasn’t easy for anyone, especially not James and Thomas, and it was easy to see that James had been concerned about their relationship.

“Let’s get to our seats,” Thomas suggested, taking his husband’s arm, “We’ll talk with you more later.”

“Until later,” George assured them. More guests came after, but soon the line thinned out. Aaron took George’s hand and gave him a bright smile as they headed back towards the ballroom to join the crowd. Lafayette and Hercules were set to make their arrival in ten minutes, giving George just enough time to check that everything was in place before quieting the crowd for their grand entrance. Then, George and Hercules would make speeches about the young King before the band started to play. They planned to dance the night away with friends and love ones. A joyous occasion for all of them.

“How’s your leg?” Aaron whispered, preventing George from entering the room.

“It’s alright,” George answered. His hand reached down towards his leg absently, pressing against the scar there. It didn’t hurt today, not like it had a few days ago, but a night full of dancing could easily change that. Eliza’s and Yuma’s potion was still in the works, Alexander needed to gather more supplies before they could finish it. Hopefully, the potion would help ease his pain and create a new potion for others who suffered from similar injuries.

“You’ll let me know if that changes?” Aaron asked.

“I will,” George promised, meaning it more than ever before. He wasn’t going to lie, wasn’t going to keep things anymore. He wanted to lean on his husband, trust Aaron to help him instead of judging his actions. George reached out to cup Aaron’s cheek, pressing a soft kiss against his husband’s lips. “You will be the second person to know.”

“Good,” Aaron agreed, finally allowing George into the ballroom. George slowly looked around the room, his eyes landing on Aaron last.

“I love you,” he said, enjoying the smile that spread over Aaron’s face.

“I love you too,” Aaron echoed as he squeezed George’s hand tightly. George wanted this moment to last forever, wished that he could freeze time so they could have more time to enjoy this just a little bit longer. Time was always moving too quickly, moments disappearing just as quickly as they started. George wanted to hold on longer, wanted Aaron’s happiness to last, wanted to feel this way forever.

Watching Lafayette and Hercules dance, holding each other close as they moved with the music, was a wonderful thing. George was overjoyed to see his student, and his king, so happy. Other couples had joined them on the dancefloor. James and Thomas danced with Martha between them, her feet on top of Thomas’ as they moved. Caleb was trying to talk Benjamin into dancing, but it wasn’t going so well. Thankfully, Mary and Abe came to his aid, all but pushing Benjamin out onto the
floor. So much love and happiness in one place. The worries of the world fading away as they drank and ate among friends and family.

Speaking of which, George caught sight of Sally in the crowd. He had been worried that her presence would cause tension among the nobles, but so far nothing had gone amiss. She kept her distance from Lafayette, and thankfully only said a few words to Aaron before moving on. George didn’t know what happened between them, at least not everything, and he had yet to ask Aaron about it. Sally was a tender spot for the Prince, one that George didn’t want to push on until Aaron was ready. He’d seen the way his husband’s eyes followed his sister, a deep longing behind his blank stare. It was a conversation they would have to have later.

Abigail and Dolley had quickly attached themselves with Aaron, asking him countless questions before grabbing onto Bellamy to see if they could collect more stories about the Prince. It was just their nature to want to know as much as they could about a new person. What was more humorous to George was how John and Alexander were acting. They fluttered around Bellamy protectively, one of them always at his side glaring at the crowd as if they thought someone was going to make a comment. Bellamy appeared to love the attention, teasing them both throughout the night. Eliza and Theodosia, wearing lovely matching dresses of blue and silver, were also a sight to behold. Angelica and Peggy, Eliza’s sisters, had capture the couple for half the night, but now they were making their way around the room. Eliza was less protective, pulling Theodosia along to formally introduce her to everyone; however, Theo was much more shy, staying being Eliza as they greeted everyone. George’s students were happy, truly happy, and it made his heart soar. George made his way through the crowd to Aaron, politely pulling him away from some of the couples and guiding him towards the dance floor.

“How’s your leg?” Aaron asked as he placed his hand on George’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” George swore, pulling Aaron closer and listening to the music before he started to dance.

“No throbbing?”

“No.”

“Sharp pain?”

“No.”

“Aches? Twit-”

“Nothing like that,” George assured him, “Stop worrying so much and dance with me.”

“I am dancing with you,” Aaron grumbled with a pout. George kissed his forehead, squeezing his hips for a moment to help ease Aaron’s nerves. He was grateful for Aaron’s concern, but he didn’t want Aaron to spend the whole night worrying about his injury. Now was a time to celebration and be joyful, not focus on old wounds.

“Well then pretend that you’re having fun,” George suggested. Aaron stared at him for a while as they moved across the floor. A grin slowly appeared on his face as George spun him around.

“Do you remember when we danced in your office?” he wondered. George couldn’t help but smile at the memory.

“Of course. I tried to teach you some old dance moves.”

“And I stepped on your feet so many times.”
“Not as bad as when Indigo tried to hook around both of us—”

“—and she almost choked us!”

“And then we fell!”

“It was a mess,” Aaron confessed between his laughter. George’s cheeks were starting to hurt from all the smiling, but he loved it. Loved that it was getting easier, that the dark clouds no longer hung over them, that everything was falling back into place.

“But it was still fun,” George stated. They had so many fond memories full of laughter and joy. Misadventures that turned into amazing stories. He was looking forward to making more, to trying new things and seeing where the world would take them both. George pulled Aaron closer, spinning them in circles as the music swelled. There were countless other couples around them, but he only had eyes for his husband, only cared about Aaron.

“I was thinking,” Aaron said, his tone catching George off guard. The Prince suddenly looked nervous, hesitant and shy. The contrast from his expression just moments ago caused concern to rise up in George’s chest. Had something happened? Did he do something wrong? He ran back through everything he had said, studying each word to figure out where he had misstepped. Did Aaron need space again? Did someone say something that made Aaron second guess himself?

“Yes?” George finally prompted, unable to take it anymore.

“We should go home soon,” Aaron went on, “as much as I like it here, I miss home. I’m well enough to travel, so I think we should start making plans to go.” Relief flooded George’s heart at the words. Home. A loaded word. When he was young, he used to think that his home was a place, the house he grew up in, but when he joined the army and spent more time away from that house then actually in it, he learned that home had less to do with where you are and more with the people around you. Home to him was Aaron, was Alexander and John and Eliza. Home was Philip and Martha and Yuma. Home was where he was happy. Where his students and husband were safe. Where they were all together, but he understood Aaron’s feelings. He wanted to go back too. Wanted to go back to their house where they had their library and his office. Where they had the orchard, and the stables, and the dining room. Where all their memories took place. He hadn’t realized how badly he missed it until now, how badly he wanted to go back, go home, until Aaron mentioned it.

“Home,” he echoed, nodding his head before kissing Aaron’s cheek, “You’re right. We should go home. Soon. Very soon. I’ll talk with Lafayette first thing in the morning and set everything up.”

“Thank you,” Aaron whispered.

“No, thank you. Thank you for everything, Aaron. I would never be able to do half the things I do without—”

“Look out!” someone screamed. George paused their dance, looking up to see the chandelier shaking above them. He pulled Aaron out of the way just before it fell toward the ground. A beat of surreal silence managed to last as everyone seemed to hold their breaths in disbelief before it was utterly destroyed by the shrill shattering of glass and jewels and a chorus of terrified screaming. The chandelier broke into countless pieces, spraying dancers and some members of the band. George covered Aaron with his body to protect him from the sharp metal and glass flying through the air.

“George, what’s going on?!” Aaron asked.

“I don’t know,” George replied, “but it’ll be okay. I promise. We’ll figure this out.” He looked over,
glad to see that the guards were already on high alert. Alexander and John were helping to keep everyone calm as the guards went through the crowd, looking for whoever could be responsible. His relieve was short lived as a set of guards went flying through the air. They slammed into the wall hard enough to make George flinch. Members of the crowd fled, screaming in a panic as more people were tossed around. This wasn’t an accident. Wasn’t a trick. This was an attack. A well thought out attack. But why? What did they want? What could they be—No, who could they be after?

“Lafayette!’ George exclaimed, “they have to be after the King!”

“He’s over there,” Aaron spoke up, nodding his head towards where Lafayette and Hercules were pressed against the wall. They could almost be easy to overlook, almost.

“We have to—” A force slammed into him, sending him off his feet into a nearby table.

“George!” Aaron screamed. It took George a moment to gain his bearings, his head spinning from the impact. Shouts and shrieks tore through the ballroom, bouncing off the high ceiling. Glass shattered. Wood split. All of it was terribly disorienting, but he needed to get himself together and take charge. Needed to protect the King, protect his people. George pushed himself off the ground and looked around the room. Three people, each wearing a black cloak with a hood that covered their heads were making their way across the dancefloor. Alexander was kneeling next to John, his hands pressed into John’s chest and covered in red. Eliza and Theodosia were helping Bellamy get as many people out of the room as possible while the guards, led by Maria, had formed a tight circle around Lafayette. Aaron, his sweet Aaron, was at Lafayette’s side, looking ready to fight if he needed to. George glanced down at the ring of his finger, thinking back to when he had first used it, how Aaron had shown him what it could do. He had refused to take it off since Aaron went missing, and then he still couldn’t remove it. It made him feel safe. Made him feel as if he could do this.

“By order of the King’s Guard,” Maria declared, “I order you to stand down, or we will be forced to make you.” None of the people replied, but three of the guards went flying off. Maria whispered a spell and attached the rest of them to the floor. George placed his hand over the ring and muttered the spell Aaron had taught him. The ring started to glow, getting brighter and brighter until a long purple sword appeared. George had been expecting the same shield as before, but a sword would work just fine this time.

“Take them down,” Maria ordered. The guards charged, at least four heading for each person. Whoever they were, they were amazing fighters. To everyone’s horror, it didn’t long before all the guards were on the ground and the hooded figures were inching closer to the King. George’s eyes met Maria. They shared a look. There was only two of them and three people, but it would have to be enough. They would have to try their best and pray to the gods that they would be able to do this. George shut his eyes, muttering a speed spell and went for the person closest to him. A sword clashed against his, but the purple sword in George’s hand cut through the metal sword of the cloaked figure. George was just as shocked as his opponent, but it gave him the upper hand. He used a spell the pull the person closer as he swung the sword, easily making contact and bringing them down.

He looked over at Maria, glad to see she was holding her own; however, the third person was quickly making their way towards Lafayette. Hercules stepped in front of the King and easily summoned a rock wall to protect them, but within seconds the rocks were smashed into pieces and the person’s fist connected with Hercules’ face. He went flying, crumbling to the ground a few feet away.

“No!” Lafayette screamed.

“Stop!” George heard someone shout behind them, but he was too focused on Hercules’ too still
form to identify who.

“George lookout!” Maria warned just as a sharp pain shot through George’s thigh, causing him to gasp. His opponent was not done yet. They had risen to their knees just enough to use a long dagger to stab George. The new wound was just inches away from where the axe had cut down to George's bone. Without a second thought, George swung his sword one last time and put his opponent down for good. Then he dropped the sword to pull out the dagger, throwing it aside.

“I said, STOP!” Aaron’s voice roared. George looked over, his eyes widening at the scene. The last cloaked figure was frozen with their hand in the air, a long dagger pointed straight at Aaron. Aaron’s arm was stretched out toward the figure, but more importantly his eyes were a bright, unnatural purple. George gasped, taking a step back without thinking. Regle. Aaron was using Regle! It...It couldn’t be, but– George couldn’t stop staring, he had no control over the betrayal that twisted his heart. Aaron lowered his arm, a look of growing horror crossing his face as he stared at the person still frozen in front of him. He looked away, his eyes met George's for only a second as a broken expression appeared on his face.

George forced his mind to be quiet, forced his fears back into the dark as he made his ways towards Aaron. The Prince flinched back, bumping into Lafayette in the process. George ignored them both as he grabbed the cloaked figure, tearing them down to the ground and using a spell to bind their hands behind their back before doing the same with their legs. They didn’t resist, didn’t move an inch the whole time.

“George,” Aaron choked, his eyes wet with tears as he watched George work. “I can explain. I can. I–”

“You don’t have to,” George offered, standing up to take Aaron’s hand. As confused as he was, he refused to judge Aaron too quickly, refused to go down that path again, “It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be f–”

“He used regle!” someone shouted, causing Aaron to tense like a wild animal ready to bolt at any second.

“Arrest him!”

“Get him away from the King!”

“No!” George protested, holding out his arm to stop anyone from getting closer. He understood the crowd’s fears, understood their reasoning, but he refused to let them hurt Aaron. Refused to let anything bad happen to his husband. Not again. Never again. They would have to go through him first. Lafayette carefully stepped around Aaron to give George a look full of sorrow and regret.

“George, we–” Lafayette paused as if his next words physically pained him to say. “we both know the law,” the King reminded him. His eyes flickered over to Aaron, then at the ground as if looking at Aaron would cause something horrible to happen. Like a simple glance at Aaron would bring destruction. It was horrid to think that Lafayette of all people believed such things. George couldn’t take it.

“He just saved your life,” he growled.

“That doesn’t change the fact that he used regle on another human,” Lafayette argued, his voice like iron. George’s anger faded into concern and fear. He knew what happened to people like Aaron, knew the punishment.
“Lafayette, don’t do this. Please. You can’t.” George found himself pleading as fear, true fear, for Aaron’s life set in.

“By the gods,” someone exclaimed, “he used it on the General!”

“He has the General under his control!”

“Get him away from our King before he does it again!”

“Oh, shut up!” Dolley snapped at the crowd. George glancing over, giving her a thankful look and nodding his head in gratitude. He still wasn’t able to stop the words from sinking into his mind for a moment. He glanced at Aaron, wondering if the Prince really had used his powers on him. No! No. Aaron would never do that. Never. George knew it deep down, and he was willing to bet his whole life on that feeling.

“Guards,” Lafayette called, “Arrest Prince Aaron and take him to the dungeons until we can—”

“No! You can’t take him from me!” Please– Not again.

“George,” Aaron spoke up, placing his hand on George’s arm. His eyes had returned to their normal shade of brown, but there was still so much pain, so much regret in them. It made George’s heart crack at the sight. “It’ll be okay. I’ll be okay.”

“I’m not letting them take you. Not alone.”

“You have to.” Aaron replied, his smile just barely a whisper of the brilliance George knew it could bring. “So then you can come save me.” He spoke softly, and George felt his heart shatter further at the very thought that Aaron was still trying to comfort him even now.

“Aaron,” George tried to protest, wanting nothing more then to stay with his husband, but he didn’t get a chance to say anything else as a group of guards got between them. Maria grabbed George’s wrist, pulling him back as a pair of guards grabbed Aaron’s arms. The Prince let out a gasp of pain. George took a step together them, only stopped by Maria’s on on him.

“Don’t hurt him!” Lafayette sharply ordered, “He’s still a foreign Prince, and until we get to the bottom of this, I want him kept safe.”

“Yes, your majesty,” the guards replied. George watched them take Aaron away, watched as his life came crashing down again.

“What are we going to do?” he muttered to himself.

“First,” Maria spoke up, appearing by his side, “we’re gonna find Yuma. Then, we’re gonna get your husband out of jail.”

“You need to eat something,” Yuma told him for the fifth time. George only pushed the plate away, shaking his head. He couldn’t eat. Couldn’t drink until he came up with a way to get Aaron out of jail. Yuma wasn’t as helpful as he had hoped, but that was his own fault. He didn’t know why he had expected her to be able to wave her hands and solve all his problems. He set himself up for this. Got his hopes up and got them crushed within a few hours, the same way he fixed things with Aaron
only to ruin them all over again. How many times was he going to fail Aaron before the Prince decided that he had enough of George?

“Enough of that,” Yuma ordered. George looked up from his book, confused as to what Yuma was referring to. The table in front of him was covered with books and pamphlets. He had Eliza and Theodosia pull every law resource they could find, searching for something they could use to prove that Aaron was innocent. He prayed that Aaron was okay down in the dungeons. Prayed that the guards had been kind, that Aaron was safe, that he would be able to see him soon. Lafayette refused to let George see him yet, and each passing second was making George go mad.

“Enough of what?”

“Close the book, George. It’s time I tell you something I should have told you a long time ago,” Yuma said. George stared at her in confusion for a moment before slowly closing the book. The old woman sighed heavily and leaned back in her chair as she shook her head. “Should have told you back when you’re parents were still alive. When your mother would be able to help you understand.”

“You didn’t fail Aaron,” Yuma told him sternly, “And even if you did, that boy could never get enough of you.”

“How did you....” George trailed off, confusion building inside him. He stared at the woman in silence as he tried to make sense of what he just said. His earlier thought echoed in his mind, but how could Yuma know about that? Had he said the words out loud? He didn’t think so, but maybe he had. That had to be it. He must have muttered the words under his breath loud enough for Yuma to hear. There was no other way that Yuma would have–

“You didn’t say it out loud,” Yuma assured him, a knowing look appearing on her face as George stared at her. His eyes widened in shock, his mouth falling open as he tried to figure out what to say. It can’t be. It had to be a trick, had to be a prank or something. It was impossible! Yuma couldn’t....his mother would never have allowed it. Never.

“George, I can use regle. I’ve always been able to use it, since I was a little girl. I’m not as strong as someone like Aaron. I can’t force you to do anything or such, but I can hear your thoughts. I can hear everyone’s thoughts if I try hard enough,” Yuma explained. Her voice was soft and gentle, the same tone she used when he was a child and had suffered a horrible nightmare.

“You didn’t fail Aaron,” Yuma told him sternly, “And even if you did, that boy could never get enough of you.”

“Mother...” George whispered, remembering his family’s past and the stories he grew up with.

“She knew,” Yuma told him, a fond smile appearing on her face, “Your father did too. When I interviewed for the job, I told them about my powers. I was honest and truthful and I told them that I deserved a chance just as much as anyone. I don’t know if that’s what convinced them, but they agreed to let me try for three months. I had three months to prove that I wasn’t dangerous or I would go to jail just like everyone else.”

“What convinced them to let you stay?” George asked softly, rethinking everything he every believed about regle users. If his parents had be okay with employing one, then there had to be something George had missed over the years.
“You.”

“Me?”

“You were so young, still learning, still figuring out the world, but it was easy for me to take care of you. I just had to read your thoughts and I knew what you wanted. Knew when you were tired but didn’t want to go to bed because you were waiting for your parents to come home. Knew when you were upset because you couldn’t get a spell right. Knew when you were taking the blame for one of the other children’s mistakes. I knew it all, but I never let it show. When your parents saw that, when they saw how well I could help people, how hard I tried to keep my powers a secret at the same time, they allowed me to stay. When they died.....when they died my only regret was that we weren’t able to finish our project.”

“Project?”

“What do you think of when you picture a regle user?” Yuma asked instead. George paused, his mind going wild with images.

“No you,” he finally confessed. Yuma was probably the last person he would imagine when he thought about what a regle user was like.

“Or Aaron,” Yuma added, “You imagine a criminal. Someone who doesn’t care about others, who only wants to hurt people or use them because that’s what Catherine did. But I’m not her. Neither if Aaron. Nor are the countless other people who have been punished for being who they are. We shouldn’t be persecuted for the mistakes of one person. The current law targets people who are innocent, who have done nothing wrong other than being born with a gift that is precious. Your parents realized that. It took them awhile, but they did. They were working to change the law, to make it so that regle users would become more accepted.”

Regret, guilt, and shame tore George's heart apart as he listened to Yuma. He knew she was right, knew that everything she said made sense, and it all made him realize how horrible he had been. How he was a hypocrite. How it was his fault as much as anyone’s for everything that had happened to regle users. For so many years he had blamed every single regle user for Catherine’s actions and the pain that her horrible plan had caused. He had been grateful for the law, glad to have it as protection against the same thing happening again. He never stopped to think about if the law was fair, how people were treated by society, or the family members who had to watch their love ones get dragged away. George had never cared because it didn’t affect him. No one he knew, no one he loved was a user. He didn’t have to worry about them being taken away or their magic being bound. Until now. Did he really think it was wrong, or was he just scared for Aaron?

No. No, it was wrong. If George could, he would match down to the dungeons and let every regle user go. Free them all and try as hard as he could to make amends. It wouldn’t be enough. It wouldn’t change what he had done, but it would be a start. However, a much better plan would be to take up his parents’ project and change the law. Change the future and make the kingdom more accepting. It would take time for people’s opinions to change, but if the law changed first, if Lafayette showed his support, the change would be easier.

“It’s not your fault,” Yuma told him, “You cannot blame yourself for being scared, or for being short sighted. You didn’t know and–”

“That doesn’t make it right,” George cut her off, “It doesn’t change that a month ago I would have had Aaron thrown in jail myself. I...I was just as judgemental and cruel as Catherine. I looked at people and through they were out of control and I thought we could change them, could get them in line. By the gods,” he buried his head in his hands from the shame, “I can’t--”
“You sound just like her,” Yuma whispered. George looked up. “Your mother went through the same thing. Blaming herself. Begging me for forgiveness. Thinking she could break into every prison and set people free. You’ve always been just like her. Putting the weight of the world on your shoulders and refusing to let anyone help you carry it. I had been hoping Aaron would help you with that, but seeing as he’s not here, I guess I’ll have to do it.”

“Yuma—”

“It’s not your fault. You didn’t make the law. Neither did Lafayette, but it’s not too late and that is what you should focus on. Stop living in the past. Stop living in your mistakes and focus on what you’re going to do right here. Right now. How are you going to change things for the better? Are you gonna sit on your hands? Or are you going to fight for what is right?”

“I’m going to fight,” he answered without hesitating.

“Good. Here’s what you need to do.”

Chapter End Notes

And then they get worst.

I know, I know, things were going SO GREAT and now they're not, but you know, sometimes that's just how life goes!

Thank you all for your comments! They are the drive behind this story! I can't tell you all how much they mean to me and @SadSeaChild. I want you to know that even if we don't reply, we ARE reading them and they ALWAYS make us smile!

Also, did you catch the reference to the musical? I made it a lot easier this time!
When Lafayette ordered the guards to take him to the dungeon, Aaron had been expecting a dark, damp cell surrounded by other criminals that would make Aaron regret ever coming to Frihet. He’d been expecting a dungeon similar to the one he had seen at home. People chained to the wall inside their cells, beaten and bloody as they waited for their fate to be decided. Aaron prepared himself to hear groans of pain and sorrow, to witness horrible beatings inflicted on other prisoners, and to suffer in a poor environment for hours with no end in sight; however, that was not the case. His cell was clean, the floor made of good, solid wood and the bars polished so well that Aaron could see his reflection. The small bed in the corner offered a pillow and a thick blanket along with a large pile of hay. The area was lit up with hundreds of candles, allowing the guards, who were quiet and kept their distance, to easily see into every cell. Aaron was thankful for the lights, glad that he hadn’t been left in the dark.

Aaron worried that Lafayette was too soft on his prisoners. This didn’t feel like a punishment, didn’t make Aaron fear for his future, but then Aaron remembered what George had told him. Remembered the story about George’s parents and everything that happened with Catherine. This cell was a brilliant cage, making Aaron feel calm and safe even as his fate got closer and closer. Would they try to bind his magic? Would they force him to go back home? Would they order George to divorce him? Would this cell be the last thing he’d ever see in Frihet?

Aaron turned over on the small bed, pulling the blanket up to his chin and curling up in a tight ball. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to force the questions away. He didn’t want to think about it right now. Didn’t want to make himself sick with worry. Instead, he begged his mind to replace his memories of the party up until that horrible moment. Aaron had been confused when Alexander and Bellamy gave him a different outfit. He loved the clothes Hercules picked out, loved how George and he were going to match, but then Alexander and Bellamy told him they had a surprise for the General and Aaron was a major part of it. A surprise George would love. It seemed to have worked the way they wanted. George’s face, the look in his eyes when he first saw Aaron in his red and black outfit, reminded Aaron of all the times where they had lain in bed together. When Aaron would look up to find George staring at him quietly, his eyes soft and a gentle smile on his face. Aaron realized now that it was a look of pure love.

Aaron prayed that George knew how much Aaron loved him, how badly Aaron needed him in his life. Forgiving the General had been easier than Aaron expected, especially with how hard George tried to be better. Aaron’s only regret that was that he didn’t tell George sooner about his mental
magic. All of this could have been avoided if George had known. If Aaron had been brave enough to—No, that’s enough. There was absolutely no point in dwelling on his mistakes now. He pushed his thoughts towards the way George and he had danced together. George’s hand on his hip. Aaron’s hand on George’s shoulder. The music filling the room as they moved so smoothly. It was a perfect moment, one that Aaron never wanted to forget. He was going to hold on to that memory as tightly as possible, begging it never to leave him. Right now, it felt like his only saving grace.

“Aaron?” a soft voice called out to him. For a moment, Aaron thought it was his mother. He slowly sat up on the bed and looked towards the hallway in confusion. He only heard that voice in his dreams, only remembered bits and pieces of his parents that haunted him at night. Instead of his mother, Yuma and Eliza arrived in front of his cell. Eliza looked exhausted, still wearing her dress from the party with blood covering part of the skirt and both her sleeves. Aaron rose from his bed and slowly made his way over to the bars with the blanket still wrapped around his shoulders like a shield. He wasn’t sure how they would react, wasn’t sure if they would be scared of him now.

“Eliza,” he said, looking her up and down to see if he could find any injuries. He wasn’t sure if the blood was hers or John’s or someone else’s. How many people had been hurt? How many didn’t make it? “Are you okay?” The woman only nodded, offering him a weak smile. Aaron didn’t quite believe her, but he didn’t want to push. “Is John okay? And Hercules?” Aaron was almost fearful about what her answers would be. Worried that he was too late. That everything had been for nothing.

“They’re both recovering, John more than Hercules. John was stabbed in the side, but his wound healed up nicely and he could be back on his feet tomorrow. Hercules...Hercules took a hard blow to the head, but with some rest he should be okay,” Eliza replied, her voice hopeful.

“That’s good,” Aaron whispered, some tension leaving his shoulders, but he was unsure what else he could say. Watching John bleed, seeing the look on Alexander’s face had been horrifying.

“Alexander?” Hercules flying through the air right in front of the King and hitting the ground with a loud thud. Lafayette’s terrified face as he watched Hercules crumble. “Lafayette?”

“Both worried sick, but they’re holding up well. Bellamy too. Alexander and Bells wanted to come see you, but we didn’t want to overwhelm you. Theodosia didn’t want to come, said she wasn’t sure she could take seeing you like this.” Aaron couldn’t help but feel a small sense of relief. As much as Aaron would have loved to see his friends, it would have been too much for him. Alexander would have questions. Bellamy would want nothing more than to break him out. Theodosia, sweet Theo, would be guilt stricken. It was best for only Yuma and Eliza to come. However...Aaron wished that George had come. Wished that his husband was here. Why didn’t he come? Did he not want to? Or were they preventing him from visiting?

“Is George...?” Aaron trailed off, unable to finish his question. George tried to protect Aaron, tried to stop the guards and stood up for him, but Aaron wasn’t sure that George felt the same way now. Wasn’t sure if someone was able to talk him out of it. Aaron remembered the words from the crowd, their fear that he had used regle on the General. He would never be able to do that, but he wasn’t sure George would believe that. The idea of George believing the accusations of the crowd nearly made him sick.

“George is doing okay,” Yuma said, reaching through the bars to take Aaron’s hand, “He wanted to come, but Lafayette refused to allow it. As far as I know, George is still up there fighting with the King about it.”

“That sounds like George,” Aaron muttered, a fond smile flashing across his face before it faded. Lafayette was a different story. Aaron considered him a friend, but he knew that Lafayette had to put
his kingdom first. He didn’t know what the King would do. Didn’t know what Lafayette would decide.

“What about you? Are you okay?” Eliza wondered.

“I’m fine,” Aaron lied, looking down at his feet. He was grateful for the news, glad that his friends were okay. Glad that George was okay, but he wasn’t sure that they others would care so much about him now that they knew what he could do. Bellamy and Theodosia had known for years, but the others had no idea until now. Until Aaron ruined everything by making a careless mistake. He refused to come between his friends and the people they loved, refused to tear everyone apart by forcing them to pick sides. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that, but Aaron was ready in case that’s what happened next.

“It wasn’t a careless mistake,” Yuma argued. Aaron’s head snapped up at her words, his eyes widening.

“What did you say?” Aaron asked, thinking for a moment that he had misheard the older woman. Eliza stared at Yuma, her eyes glancing at Aaron for a moment before returning to Yuman.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to this,” she muttered to herself.

“Use to wha...” Aaron trailed off, his eyes going even wider as he put the pieces together. Yuma could hear him! She could...she could use regle! But she just used it in front of Eliza! She was in danger now! “Yuma, you have to go! If they find out–” Yuma shook her head and squeezed Aaron’s hand tightly as a soft smile appeared on her face. Aaron looked her up and down, realizing now that she looked different. Younger almost. As if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She had hid this secret for so long, longer than Aaron. It must have been a heavy burden to carry for all those years.

“It was a heavy burden, but now everyone knows. I told George just a few hours ago. Then I told Lafayette and his advisors,” Yuma explained, sounding proud rather then scared, “They’re not going to arrest me, or anyone else for that matter. The law isn’t fair, Aaron, it never has been, and it’s time for that to change.”

“I don’t understand,” Aaron confessed. The story George told him made it sound as if no one cared what happened to regle users. It had seemed as if everyone thought the law was fair because it was for the common good. Aaron wasn’t sure that such a thing would be so easily changed.

“George’s parents were working on changing the law before they died,” Eliza spoke up. Aaron’s eyes widened at the news. George’s mother, the very woman who defeated Catherine, working to change the law? How could she have such a huge change of heart? “Yuma was helping them by providing information on different types of regle users, but when they died, the project died with them.”

“It wasn’t until Alexander started researching different types of regle for his book that I thought about returning to the project. I was unsure, scared even for a very long time, but then you came. I knew about your powers as soon as I met you, and I knew that it was time for the world to change. I just needed the right moment, the right amount of information that would show Lafayette and all his advisers how cruel and unfair the law was,” Yuma added. Aaron squeezed Yuma’s hand in shock and awe. Part of him still couldn’t believe it, didn’t want to get his hopes up, but that didn’t stop his heart from filling with relief. Didn’t stop the way his mind went wild at all the possibilities. He looked between the two women, trying to figure out what to say, trying to understand what would come next.
"Does that mean they’re going to let me go?" Aaron asked, unable to keep the hopefulness out of his voice.

"That’s the plan," Eliza replied with a smile, “but there is one small thing.” There always was, but Aaron was ready to do anything to get out of here and be with his friends.

“What is it?”

“Lafayette wants to make sure that you didn’t use regle on George,” Yuma explained, a torn look on her face. Aaron thought about her words for a moment before deciding that such a condition made sense. The crowd had been terrified that George had been tricked, been used, and it was only fair that Lafayette would want to ensure that his old mentor, his friend, was safe.

“I didn’t,” Aaron told them. He would never do that. Could never hurt George that way. Not after everything that happened between them.

“We believe you,” Eliza assured him, “but other people don’t. To make sure that you’re not lying, we have a suggestion.”

“We won’t force you. No one will. It’s only an idea, only a way to help, but there are other things we can try to do first—” Yuma told him, a pained, worried look on her face as she scrambled to talk as quickly as possible. For a moment, Aaron wasn’t sure who she was trying to comfort more, him or herself.

“What’s the suggestion?” Aaron cut the woman off after gently as possible, sparing her from spinning herself in circles. Eliza reached into her dress pocket and pulled out a small glass bottle. The liquid inside was pure white, glowing brighter than any of the torches. Aaron knew what it was. He had seen it before, watched it get used on others, but he had never used it himself.

“A truth potion,” he clarified. Eliza nodded in confirmation. If he drank it, every word he said would have to be the truth, and he would be compelled to answer any direct question. There was no doubt in his mind that it would work. No one would be able to deny his confession if he drank the potion first; however, such a potion was also dangerous. If someone asked him the wrong question, or if someone tried to pry too far, Aaron would have no choice but to answer. It was a gamble. One that Aaron was willing to take.

“Again, you don’t have to—” Yuma tried to assure him.

“I’ll do it,” he declared before she could get too far. He understood her concern, but he wanted to clear his name. A dark thought popped into his head. He pushed it away for the time being, deciding that he would deal with it in a moment. “But I have one small request.”

“What is it?” Eliza wondered, tilting her head as she stared at him. Aaron was thankful that he didn’t see any fear in her eyes. Eliza wasn’t treating him any different, wasn’t scared or nervous around him. It was clear to see that she was worried, concerned even, but not because of him.

“I want George to be here when I take it.”

“That won’t be any trouble,” Yuma replied.

“We’ll go tell Lafayette,” Eliza said, stepping away. Aaron held on tightly to Yuma, refusing to let her go just yet as Eliza moved down the hall. He shut his eyes and pushed his thoughts out. With Indigo, it was easy. He didn’t even have to try or think about it, but he had never tried to do this with another human before, wasn’t sure if it would even work. He had to try. Had to see if he could tell Yuma what he needed. This could be his only chance.
Can you hear me?

I can. Yuma’s voice echoed in his mind, sounding proud and shocked at the same time, You’re stronger than I thought. Much stronger.

I have so many questions, Aaron confessed, and after this, I would like your help to find all the answers.

I’d be happy to help. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to protect you from this. That I couldn’t stop them from taking you.

This isn’t your fault. I made my choice, and I can live with it. But...think I know who was behind the attack. And my kidnapping. I need you to do me a favor, need you to help me prove it.

Just tell me what to do.

Find my sister. Read her mind and then tell me what you heard.

Aaron, you don’t think— Yuma protested. Aaron nodded his head. As much as he hated to admit it, there was too much evidence against his sister. She showed up unexpectedly, threatened him just a few days ago, and now someone tried to attack the Frihet King. Something didn’t sit right in Aaron’s stomach, and he needed to figure out why. He prayed that he was wrong, that his sister would never try to do such a thing, but he had to set aside his family ties and search for the truth.

I don’t have time to explain why, but yes, I do think she may have had something to do with it. I need you to check, to see if she feels guilty about anything. Then...then I’ll take care of the rest. He wasn’t sure how he was going to take care of it, but he would figure it out later.

She’s your family.... Yuma pointed out, sounding so shocked by the idea.

I know that, Aaron replied, but if she really is the one who tried to hurt Lafayette, then she’ll have to face her crimes. Yuma stared at him for a while, looking him up and down before a soft smile appeared on her face.

Your parents would be so proud of your bravery.

Thank you... Aaron whispered, forced to look away as so many emotions rushed to his eyes.

I’ll see what I can do....Take care of yourself, Aaron. And be careful. That potion—

I know the risks. And I know I can do this.

Yes...yes you can. Good luck.

Good luck to you as well.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Hercules asked, eyeing the bottle in Aaron’s hand as if it was going to suddenly bite him. Hercules was the fifth person to ask Aaron that question. The fifth person that stared at him as if he was crazy for agreeing to drink the potion. Aaron was grateful for everyone’s concern, happy to see that they all still cared, still worried about him the same way, but he knew what he wanted. He wanted to do this. Wanted to clear his name and get through this as quickly as possible. Hercules was joined by Lafayette, who had brought along Lady Angelica and Duke Benjamin as witnesses. Bellamy and Alexander had wanted to be present, but Aaron begged
them to stay with John until he was fully recovered. Instead, Theodosia came for them to bear witness on Aaron’s side. The more people who heard Aaron’s confession, the quicker the fear surrounding him would fade.

“Are you sure that you’re fully recovered?” Aaron countered. Hercules made a face, looking away for a moment. It had been a battle for him to come, a fight against Yuma and Lafayette, but Aaron was happy to see him. Happy to see that Hercules was doing okay, still the same even after the attack. Still treating him the same way instead of being so closed off, like Lafayette. “I want to do this, Hercules. I swear it. I’m not scared. Not worried. I know the truth, and I want you all to know it too.” He looked at everyone in the room, nodding to them all in turn before removing the cork from the bottle. The truth potion was odorless, and from what Yuma had told him, it should also be tasteless. For a moment, Aaron had second thoughts. What if they asked him something that he didn’t want to–No. No. There was a reason Aaron agreed to this. A reason that he wanted to tell the truth, wanted to spill his secrets. A soft hand pressed against Aaron’s back, moving up to rest on his shoulder. He looked over at George who had joined him in the cell.

At first, Lafayette protested George being so close, but Hercules and Angelica were able to convince the King to let George into the cell for Aaron’s benefit. After all, George’s presence was Aaron’s only condition. Aaron was glad George was here, glad that his husband was so close, so supportive. It made it easier for Aaron to finally raise the bottle to his lips. He stared at Lafayette as he tipped it back, swallowing down the white liquid. It was tasteless and went down easily. Slowly, a cold feeling spread from Aaron’s throat down into his chest. It sent a shiver down his spine before it finally faded away. Aaron shifted his shoulders, curious about the feeling. He wasn’t sure what he had been expecting, but that wasn’t it. People who had used the potion before made it seem more...just more, but it didn’t seem like much to Aaron.

“Let’s start with something easy,” Lafayette suggested, glancing at Hercules and the others. He waited until they all nodded before asking his question, “What is your name?”

“Aaron Burr, Crowned Prince of the Kingdom of Tyst, and Second of my Name,” Aaron said, his tongue moving by itself before his mind could even think about answering. It was such an odd feeling, talking without thinking about the words first. It was as if his mouth was no longer connected to his brain. It wasn’t bad, just different.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

“How old were you when you discovered you could use regle?”

“Six.”

“How?” Lafayette’s question wasn’t clear, not direct enough, and even though Aaron knew what he was asking, what he was hinting at, his tongue didn’t force him to answer. Aaron took a deep breathe. He saw this coming, knew that Lafayette would want to know more of his history. It would bring up old memories that Aaron had tried to hide, memories of pain and loneliness. But it was time to face it. Time to stand up to his past and stop letting it define him.

“Lafayette,” George quickly protested, “does it really matt–”

“How what?” Aaron cut him off. Lafayette looked between George and Aaron, even glancing at Theodosia for a moment as if he wasn’t sure who to listen to.

“Aaron, you don’t have to force yourself to–”
“I’m not,” Aaron assured him, giving his husband a grateful smile and kissing his cheek. The words were truth and pure. He wanted to talk about it, wanted to face it, “I’m not forcing myself. I want him to ask. I want to tell you. Just ask the right way, Laf–your majesty. Go ahead.” Again, Lafayette glanced at George, waiting until the General nodded before asking again.

“How did you discover your could use regle?”

Aaron shut his eyes, letting his tongue recite the old memory he tried to ignore for so long. It replayed in his mind, taking him back to a moment that changed his life, the moment he realized he was different, realized how cruel his uncle could be. Realized that his place in the world was already well carved out.

“I got in trouble for something. I can’t remember what it was anymore. I either broke a vase or spoke out of turn. It was something that made my uncle, King Timothy, furious. I had never seen him so mad before. I was terrified, begging him to forgive me, apologizing over and over again, but it wasn’t enough. My uncle decided that it was time I learn the hard way that mistakes would not be tolerated in his castle. He took me to a small closet close to the throne room. A closet I had walked passed countless times. It was a broom closet, barely big enough for two buckets.”

“My uncle had a maid remove all the supplies, leaving the room dark and empty. There was no window, no candles. Nothing at all. It was just a small, dark room. My uncle pushed me inside and shut the door, locking me in. He told me through the wood that he would come back in an hour, said that should be enough time for me to truly learn my lesson. Then he was gone. It was so dark that I couldn’t even see my hand in front of my face. I remember pounding on the door, screaming for someone to let me out. I couldn’t take it. I was scared, scared that the walls were going to close in. Scared that somehow the darkness would eat me. I was only a child, so my mind went wild with all the horrible things that could happen.” Aaron had to paused, had to take a moment, just a moment to catch his breath as his eyes grew wet. Just as when he was young, his mind went wild as he remembered standing in the darkness screaming for someone, anyone to help him before it was too late.

“Aaron,” Theodosia whispered in shock. Aaron kept his eyes closed, unable to look at anyone just yet. He was still ashamed, still upset about it. Ashamed that he had been so scared, so frightened of the dark. Upset that his uncle had betrayed him in such a way, tormented him in order to teach him a lesson. A cold feeling spread through his chest, compelling his tongue to move.

“After no one came, I curled up in a ball to wait for my uncle to return. I don’t know how long I was in there when I suddenly heard a voice. At first, I thought it was my uncle coming back, but as the voice kept talking, I realized that it couldn’t be my uncle. The voice was different, a higher pitch and even the way the person talked didn’t fit my uncle at all. Soon, another voice started a conversation with the first, then another joined, then another. The voices got louder and louder to the point that it felt as if they were talking right above me. I was terrified, worried that somehow a group of monsters had gotten into the closet with me, but when I tried to beg for my life, the first voice told me not to be afraid because rats don’t eat people.”

“Rats?!” Angelica exclaimed. Aaron ignored her, continuing with his story.

“Actually, three rats and a small mouse. Their names were Jaq, Gus, Luci and Ella. They told me that they got into the castle through the kitchen and had been living underneath the floor for months. The closet was just one place they stopped on their way from the kitchen back to where their nest was on the second floor. I explained to them what happened, how I was trapped in the closet and scared of the dark. Together, we tried to escape by picking the lock, but when that didn’t work, they all stayed with me until my uncle eventually came back to let me out. They were nice, and funny,
which made the time go by faster.”

“I thought it had been a dream,” Aaron confessed, “Something I made up to comfort myself while I waited in the dark, but then Jaq and Gus appeared in my bedroom just a few days later to ask if I wanted to play. I didn’t plan on telling anyone about it, but Theodosia’s mother, Ann, walked in at that very moment to drop off my breakfast. She tried to attack the rats, but I stopped her. I told her they were my friends, that I could talk to them. Ann knew about mental magic and knew what the law said, so she warned me never to tell anyone else. Made me swear that I would keep this to myself. Being so young, I wasn’t that good at keeping such a promise and I told Theo and Bellamy a few years later. Ann then made us each promise that we wouldn’t tell anyone else. It was only then that she told me about what could truly happen if other people found out. That’s how I discovered I could use regle, as you call it. It was all just an accident.”

Aaron leaned against George, and slowly opened his eyes. He glanced around the room at everyone’s expressions, surprised to see Duke Benjamin looking furious, Angelica with her head ducked, and Lafeyette looking guilty. That wasn’t the reactions he expected and he wasn’t sure what to make of them. He wasn’t sure what he had been expecting. Blank stares? Confusion? Indifference? Perhaps all of that, but not such pained looks or outright anger.

“That bastard,” Angelica muttered, shaking her head.

“What happened to the rats?” Hercules wondered, pulling Aaron’s attention away from Benjamin. Aaron couldn’t stop the sad smile that appeared on his face. It had been a long time since he thought about his furry friends. He loved listening to Jaq’s stories or holding Ella as he danced around his room. Luci and Gus were the best to sleep with, keeping him warm at night.

“Rats only live for so many years,” Aaron explained, “but I like to believe that they lived happy lives in my bedroom. I buried them underneath my favorite tree in the castle garden with four little rocks as headstones.”

“So that’s why you always left flowers there,” Theodosia spoke up, sounding both proud and impressed. Aaron didn’t think anyone ever noticed him leaving visiting the graves, or leaving behind gifts to his fallen friends, but of course Theo surprised him by proving that she had been paying attention.

“Wait, you didn’t know about the rats?” George asked her in shock. Theodosia shook her head, opening her mouth to verbally confirm her answer.

“This all happened before I ever met Theo and Bellamy. By then, I didn’t want to tell them about the rats because I was scared they would hurt my friends or try to take them away. Ann wasn’t fond of them at all, didn’t like them in the kitchen, so I thought it was best to keep them a secret. When I told Theo and Bells about my powers, I simply told them I could hear animal voices without telling them the whole story,” Aaron spoke up for her.

“That–”

“We’re getting off topic,” Duke Benjamin grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest, “How often have you been using regle?”

“Nearly every day,” Aaron’s tongue moved before he had a chance to think about the question. A heavy silence followed. Shame rose up inside his chest as George pulled away. The looks of pure shock on everyone’s faces made Aaron sick to his stomach. He could only hope that he was given a chance to better explain.
“In–” Angelica paused, glancing at Lafayette and the Duke before continuing, “In what capacity were you using it?”

“I use it to communicate with my dragon, Indigo, and Nessie, George’s griffin,” Aaron explained, “Since Indigo hatched, I’ve been able to communicate with her by using regle. I just discovered a few weeks ago that I could communicate with Nessie the same way.”

“That explains a lot,” George muttered to himself. Aaron gave his husband a look, but George only shook his head and pulled him close. Aaron relaxed against George’s side as he looked at the others.

“How many times have you used regle on a human?” the Duke asked, his voice hard and pressing.

“Once,” Aaron replied. He offered no hesitation, no moment of second guessing. His tongue didn’t even get the chance to answer for him. Aaron had been waiting for such a question and he was ready to lay down the truth. Duke Benjamin opened his mouth, then closed it a moment later in disbelief. Angelica stared at him as if he was a puzzle that needed to be solved. Hercules and Lafayette shared a look on confusion while Theodosia looked proud. Aaron kept his eyes on them, unsure what expression he would find on his husband’s face. He wanted to believe that George would find comfort in all of this, but now he wasn’t quite as sure.

“Once?” Lafayette echoed, sounding unsure as if Aaron was tricking them somehow.

“Only once,” Aaron confirmed. “Yesterday, was it yesterday?” Theodosia nodded. “Yesterday was the first time I even tried to use regle on a human. The idea had never crossed my mind before, I didn’t want to take someone’s else free will away, didn’t wanted to force someone to listen to me, but in that moment I didn’t know what else to do. The King was in danger and the attackers had made it through all the guards. Hercules and John were hurt. George had just gotten stabbed. All I could think about was saving Lafayette, saving my friend, and stopping the attackers from hurting anyone else.”

The room was quiet for a long time, everyone lost in their own minds as they thought over Aaron’s words. He gave them all the time they needed, understanding that he just altered their mindset about regle users in a life changing way. After a while, Aaron risked looking over at George. He was surprised to see the man already looking at him. When their eyes met, George offered Aaron a small, proud smile. Aaron reached for George’s hand, squeezing his fingers tightly and praying that George understood how much Aaron loved him.

“I think we have our answer,” Duke Benjamin spoke first, “The Prince has never used his powers on the General, nor were his actions committed for his own personal gain. There’s not reason for him to be locked up anymore.” Relief started to build in Aaron’s heart.

“I agree,” Angelica said proudly. They all looked at Lafayette, waiting for the King to make the final decision. It was all up to him. Hercules reached out and took his husband’s hand, giving Lafayette a pleading look. The King stared at Aaron for a longer time before a small smile started to appear on his face.

“I couldn’t have asked for a better friend,” Lafayette told him, “You never fail to surprise me. Never. You have proven your innocence, Prince Aaron, and I hereby release you from your cell and clear you of all wrongdoing.”

“Thank you,” Aaron replied.

“No. Thank you. Thank you for saving me. I owe you my life.”
“No, you don’t,” Aaron assured him.

“We’re going to change that law,” Duke Benjamin declared, nodding his head at Aaron, “For you and for all the other people who have been unfairly targeted.”

“There’s no time to waste,” Angelica added, “Let’s get started.”

“Gather all my advisors and court members. I want everyone working on this. Everyone,” Lafayette ordered, “And get a guard to let the Prince out.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Benjamin and Angelica replied together, bowing their heads before making their way down the hallway.

Lafayette looked to Aaron with a hint of something resembling shame in his eyes. “I am sorry about having to lock you up, Aaron. I hope you under–”

“I’m not upset about it,” Aaron cut the King off with a smile, the words truthful and pure, “You had to follow your laws and do what you thought was best for your people. I’m not upset at you or anyone else. I’m just glad I could explain myself and grateful you all were willing to listen.”

“You’re a good man, Aaron.” Lafayette chuckled, the shame in his eyes replaced with a fond twinkle.

Aaron grinned. “I try to be.”

“We should go,” Hercules confessed, “Everyone will want to hear the judgement from you, Laf. And we still have to deal with the count.”

The King sighed deeply. “Do I have to?”

“Yes, do you. But I’ll be right here the whole time.”

“Allright,” Lafayette agreed, taking Hercules’ hand. Aaron couldn’t help but smile at the look the two men shared. So much love and trust in their eyes. Aaron was glad to see them looking so strong.

“I’ll visit you later,” Lafayette promised, “just send a message if you need anything else.”

“I will,” Aaron said. A guard passed Lafayette and Hercules on their way out, snapping to attention before moving to unlock Aaron’s cell. The guard stood there, clearly waiting for Aaron, but he wasn’t ready to leave yet. Wasn’t ready to go back out there.

“Just a moment, please,” he begged, “I need to speak with the General and Theodosia alone.” The guard gave him a confused look, opening his mouth probably to protest.

“Do as he says,” George spoke up.

“Yes, sir!” the guard easily agreed, leaving the cell door open and walking away quickly.

“Is everything alright, Aaron?” Theodosia asked.

“No,” he confessed, unable to stop the truth from finally coming out. “No, everything’s not alright. I need to tell you both something. I need to tell someone, or I fear I will explode from holding it all in.”

“Aaron–”

“Ask me,” Aaron begged, cutting George off. He turned towards the man, staring into his husband’s
eyes and praying that George understood how badly he needed to do this, He was tired of keeping
secrets. Tired of keeping everything locked away. He wanted to tell George everything, wanted to
finally let his wounds heal.

“What?”

“Ask me about when I was kidnapped. Ask me what happened. Please, please I need you—” George
grabbed Aaron and pulled him into a tight hug, holding him against his chest as he took a deep
breathe.

“What happened when you were kidnapped? What did they do to you?” George asked, the voice
soft in Aaron’s ear. Aaron sank into George's chest, letting the potion work its magic.

“The carriage was moving through the farmland when a group of people attacked us. At first, I
thought the guards would be able to handle it. I heard people shouting, heard the sound of swords
hitting one another, but I wasn’t sure what I could do to help. I feared that if I got out of the carriage,
I would cause more problems, so I stayed where I was. I heard Maria tell someone to take me and
run, but by then it was already too late. One of the kidnappers opened the carriage door and dragged
me out. I wanted to fight, wanted to get away, but then I saw some of the guards on the ground. I
saw the blood, saw what happened to them and I got scared. The fear paralyzed me. Then something
hit me and the world went black.”

“When I woke up, I was tied to a bed. A young boy was in the room with me. He gave me some
water and food and told me how he was from the local village. The kidnappers had taken him too.
His name was....” Aaron had to paused, the words thick on his tongue as he remembered the young
boy’s face looking down at him. A sharp coldness spread through his body as he rebelled against the
potion. He just needed a moment, needed a second to get himself together. His tongue didn’t give
him that much time. “His name was William. He had a sister named Patty, and they lived with their
grandmother, Lily. I didn’t understand why he was there. It didn’t make sense that the same people
who had taken me would also take a random young boy, but when the kidnappers arrived, it started
to make sense. They made me drink a potion, shoved it down my throat. It tasted like ash. They
forced William to drink it too.”

“Then they beat him,” Aaron’s voice broke on the words. George's arms tightened around him just
as another pair of hands joined. Aaron looked over to see Theodosia sitting on the ground with them.
She gave him a tender smile, kissing his forehead and wiping under his eyes. “They beat him right in
front of me. And I felt everything. Every punch. Every kick. I felt the same pain. It was as if they
were beating me without even touching me. All I could do was watch. I tried to...I tried to use my
shield, tried to protect him, but it wasn’t enough. They would just wait until I was too tired to keep
the shield up, or they would threaten to find William’s family if I didn’t stop. There was nothing I
could do. The ropes had been charmed so I couldn’t break them. And the door was charmed to
prevent William from leaving. We were trapped together. Trapped in that hell.”

“Everyday, they force feed us the same potion, or every visit. I couldn’t tell what time it was or what
day it was because there weren’t any windows and there was no way for us to keep track of time.
The beatings quickly got worse. William couldn’t even stand afterwards. I was blind with pain, but
the kidnappers didn’t let up. They never seemed to stop. Even when William was bleeding on the
floor and I was out of my mind with pain. They still kept going. Then...then one day, they...”

“Breathe,” George encouraged, “Breathe. It’s okay. We’re here. You’re sa–”

“They killed him,” Aaron stated, his voice void of emotion, “They killed him and I felt everything. I
felt the same pain he did when they stabbed him through the chest. When he was bleeding out all
over the floor, when he finally took his last breath.I felt all of it. George, I felt him die. ” Aaron
swallowed thickly. “They killed him for no reason. He was an innocent boy, but they took him
because they knew it would keep me in line. I couldn’t try to escape, not if it meant William would
be hurt or die. I couldn’t speak up without fear that they would go after his family. They used him
against me. And they...they still killed him.” George and theodosia were quiet, their hands moving
over Aaron’s back and arms to offer as much comfort as they could. It did little to ease the pain in
Aaron’s chest. It didn’t take away the guilt that weighed him down. It had taken so long for the ache
to ease, the feeling of death hanging over him, yet now Aaron swore he could feel it creeping back.
It was as if talking about it made his body remember the pain even more than before. He didn’t want
that. Didn’t want to have to go through all of it again.

“When Eliza saved you,” Theodosia spoke up, “she told me that you were saying something about
how you couldn’t leave. How someone wouldn’t let you. Do you remember that?”

“I do and I don’t. I remember Eliza coming in. I remember getting blood on my feet, William’s
blood. Then it gets a little hazy. I felt so guilty for being alive. It felt wrong that he died while I was
allowed to keep living. I kept having dreams about him. Kept seeing him even when I was awake. I
was scared to leave the room. Scared that I would never be able to outrun his ghost. When she tried
to get me to leave I swore something was holding me back. It felt like...like he was trying to stop me,
trying to make me stay, trying to make me pay for killing him.”

“It’s not your fault,” George told him.

“George–” Aaron warned lowly.


“It is!” Aaron snapped, that same horrid feeling lashing out at George’s attempt to console him as if it
knew he didn’t deserve it. As if it knew George was nothing but wrong.

“Is it my fault you got kidnapped?” George countered just as stubbornly. “Tell me, is it my fault any
of you had to suffer?”

“No, but–”

“It’s it Maria’s fault you got kidnapped?!”

Aaron sucked in a shocked breath. “Gods no, but with him it wa–”

“Did you kidnapped William? Did you beat him? Did you kill him?”

“I should have saved him!” Aaron screamed, a sob breaking through his words as his emotions
overwhelmed him, “I should have been stronger! I should have gotten us out of there as soon as
possible, but I was weak and useless and now he’s dead because I messed everything up!” Aaron
sobbed against George’s chest, hating himself more and more. If only he had been strong enough to
break the ropes. Smart enough to figure out how to break the charm on the door. William had been
so young, so naive. He deserved better. Aaron should have given him better, but he didn’t and now
all he could offer was retribution.

“Aaron,” Theo said, her hand moving up to rest on his head, “You can’t blame yourself for the deeds
of others. You said it yourself, they picked William because they knew you would try to protect him,
and you did. You used your shields to stop them from beating him. You comforted him as it was
over, tired to guide him through the pain. You were there for him as much as possible. His death is
not your fault. It’s not. Those evil people who took you, who took William, it’s their fault, but they
want you to feel bad. They want you to feel guilty. They want you to blame yourself because then
they win in the long run.”

“What?” Aaron muttered, trying to follow Theodosia’s way of thinking.

“They want you to doubt yourself. They want you to second guess everything because then they break you. Then they make you believe that you are just as bad as them when you’re nothing like them. You’re a good person. You’ve proven that over and over again, but if they can convince you that you’re nothing, that you’re weak or useless or evil, then they can destroy all your hope. You can’t let them win. You can’t let them twist your heart that way. It was not your fault. It was theirs. You tried your best to save him, you gave up so much to try and protect him. That’s what’s important. That’s what you should focus on.”

“Theo,” Aaron whispered, unable to say anything else as her words sank into his heart in a way that eased all the aches and sorrowed he had been holding on to.

“She’s right,” George agreed, “She’s completely right. The people who took you want to break you, want to destroy you and the light you bring to the world. Evil people will always try to snuff out the light, but you can’t let them. You can’t fall into the darkness. But, you don’t have to fight the guilt alone. You don’t have to battle the darkness by yourself. We’re here to help you. We are all here to help you.” Aaron turned just enough to press his lips against George, sinking against his husband and letting George hold some of his weight. George kissed back, his arms moving up to hold Aaron even closer until they were almost one person. They were right. He could fight against the guilt. He could battle the darkness. He wasn’t going to give up. He had a family. He had a home. And they were worth fighting for.

“There’s something else you need to know,” Aaron told them as he pulled away. He needed to hurry. Needed to tell them before he lost his courage, “That potion they gave us, the potion that made me feel William’s pain, I know who invented it. I know where it comes from.” George and Theo shared a look, then looked back at him with opened expressions.

“Where? Where does the potion come from?” George asked.

“My uncle.”

Chapter End Notes

Boom!

Also, did you find the reference to a Disney movie?
“My uncle used that same potion on me when I was a child,” Aaron explained. The way he spoke sent chills down George's spine. His voice was so soft, so full of shame and embarrassment. It pushed away George's shock and caused his rage to build. “It started around when I was eight. I drank the potion, then my uncle would order one of the servant children, usually a boy, to drink it too.” Aaron paused as if the following words were physically painful. “Then he would have the servant whipped, but I felt the pain. It was a way to punish me without leaving any marks or scars. He stopped using it when I became a teenager and started locking me away in my room instead.”

George buried his head in Aaron’s neck, unable to look at his husband right now with how fragile his control was becoming. He didn’t want Aaron to see the anger in his eyes, didn’t want the Prince to misunderstand and think even a shred of negative emotion was directed toward him. George was angry. He honestly couldn’t remember a time where he had felt such a rage, but his anger wasn’t aimed at Aaron. George's wrath was only towards the King. He wanted to march into Tyst, grab the ruler by his neck, and demand him answer for his crimes against Aaron. The crimes against his own people, against George’s people. He just could not understand! How?! How could someone do that to a child? How could he lock his nephew in a closet for hours? How could he treat people so poorly? It didn’t make sense. None of it made any sense to him.

“Aaron, what are you saying?” Theodosia said, her voice level and calm. How she was still holding up was beyond George, but he was thankful that at least one of them was able to stay focused.

“I’m saying that,” Aaron paused, pushing George back to stare into his eyes, “George, I think...I don’t...I don’t think you were meant to find me alive.” He swallowed thickly, his voice wavering just barely. “I think I was meant to die in that room. I think that’s how...that’s how my uncle was going to start a war. Through me. Through my death on Frihet’s land.”

“Aaron,” George choked out, unable to bear the thought of Aaron dying, or being in pain. They should have found him faster. No, George should have stopped him from ever leaving in the first place. A young boy was dead because George chased Aaron away. Because George was foolish and hard headed and-But Aaron didn’t blame him. No one did. And George shouldn’t blame himself, just as he couldn’t blame Aaron for William’s death.

“I wanted to tell you,” Aaron confessed, “I thought about it countless times but I was ashamed. Ashamed that my own family would turn against me. Ashamed that I was not stronger. I didn’t figure out how evil he was sooner, and I still feel so foolish for being so blind. I spent most of my life believing that the world I lived in was just the way the world worked, but you showed me the truth. What my uncle did, what he’s still doing, isn’t right. I want to stop him. No, I need to stop him.”

“Are you sure? He’s your family,” George replied. He would support Aaron through anything, but he wanted the Prince to be sure. Making a move against his uncle was a big deal, one that involved countless people and could change the world. It would be seen as a coup, a nephew trying to overthrow his uncle to take control of the kingdom. Frihet would look like they were interfering in
foreign affairs. The other kingdoms could get involved. A civil war could break out. It was a delicate situation all around with every possible chance of going horribly, horribly wrong.

“He’ll never stop,” Aaron insisted, “I know he won’t. He’ll keep pushing and pushing until war breaks out and he knows that he’ll win. He has the army. He has the power. I can’t let him do that. I can’t let him cause anymore pain or suffering. I have to go home. I have to face him.”

“We’ll be with you the whole time,” Theo promised, stealing one of Aaron’s hands and placing it against her chest, “I’m sorry I didn’t-”

“Don’t, Theo don’t,” Aaron cut her off, “It wasn’t your fault. It was never your fault.”

“I didn’t know! I didn’t help you-”

“That was the point! I didn’t want you to know! I didn’t want you to...to see how much of a failure I was.” He glanced away, “I made sure of it.”

“Aaron-” Theo spoke, almost pleading.

“I know, I know. It’s not my fault either. I’m not a failure, but I was also a child at the time. The things he said, what he told me, it made me blind to everything else that was going on. I couldn’t tell anyone. Couldn’t bear it,” Aaron explained, “I’m sorry I never told you. I wish I had. I wished I had seen through the cage he put me in.”

“I wish I’d noticed your pain. I wish...I wish that we could go back and change things,” Theodosia muttered.

“Me too,” Aaron agreed sadly, “but we can’t. We can only move forward. I sent Yuma to read my sister’s mind to see if she knew about the plan. I have a feeling that my sister knows more than I do about this, and it’s about time I take advantage of my gift.”

“We need to tell Lafayette about this,” George spoke up, his mind finally getting on track. He started making plans, mapping out what they needed to do, “Get ahead of anything Sally might say. Anything your uncle might try to do in the meantime.”

“Will you speak to him for me?” Aaron asked.

“Of course,” George answered.

“We should also tell the boys,” Theo added, “And Eliza. They’ll want to help.”

“I would rather no-” George cut Aaron off with a kiss, needing to feel his husband’s lips on his, needing to show Aaron how much love he felt. He held Aaron close, refusing to let him pull away just yet. He needed this short moment to last a little longer, just long enough that he started to have hope again. Hope that they would be okay. That their future was still bright. When he finally pulled away, he shook his head at Aaron.

“We’re a family,” George told him proudly, thinking about the others fondly, “You can’t keep them away. You can’t stop them from helping. So don’t even try it. Just trust us. Trust us to have your back.”

“Okay,” Aaron whispered, looking between the two of them before nodding his head. “Okay. Theo will you-”

“You know I will,” Theodosia replied before he could even finished, giving him a warm smile..
“Good. That’s good. I asked Yuma to...I asked Yuma to check on my sister. To see if we could get any information out of her without her knowing about it.” Aaron explained. George noticed the way his eyes darted away, how Aaron seemed nervous about mentioning Yuma’s powers. George understood, and part of him was even grateful that Aaron understood how strange it was for him to deal with learning just how many people close to him could use regle, but at the same time George refused to see Yuma or Aaron any differently. Yuma was still the same caring, loving, strong woman she was before. Aaron was still the love of his life, the person who gave George hope for the future and made his heart skip.

“Great idea,” he praised Aaron’s quick thinking, kissing his husband’s forehead, “We can use whatever she knows to get ahead.” Aaron hummed in agreement, leaning against George’s chest without a word. He looked tired, tired in a way that made him appear older. It was as if ten years had passed since the party. George’s heart tightened painfully with regret. Aaron didn’t belong here in this prison.

“Let’s get you out of here and into a warm bed,” he suggested, wanting to do nothing else besides wrap Aaron in countless blankets and protect him from all the dangers in the world.

“We have so much to do-”

“You need to rest,” George protested, “Did you get any sleep at all while you were down here?” Aaron was quiet for a moment, but he eventually shook his head. “Then it’s best if you rest first. You can go share a bed with John. That will keep him from leaving and give you time to relax.”

“I won’t be able to relax until my uncle is off the throne,” Aaron confessed.

“I understand,” George replied, “but you won’t be any help to us if you’re dead on your feet.”

“Now’s not the time to act like Alexander,” Theo added fondly, setting a hand on Aaron’s shoulder.

“Maybe a short nap would be helpful,” Aaron finally agreed, “But only an hour or so.”

“Or so,” George echoed, gently moving Aaron away in order to stand up. He helped the Prince to his feet before lifting him off the ground.

“Hey! I can walk!” Aaron protested. Theodosia giggled as his reaction, escaping out of the cell through the open door and heading down the hall. George was grateful to have a moment alone with Aaron, but he started to second guess himself. He should still be giving Aaron space, being mindful of what the Prince wanted after everything. He could not assume anymore that he knew what Aaron wanted, or what was best, or what would make Aaron smile. The last thing George wanted was to mess up everything again. He didn’t want to go backwards, didn’t want to break them apart.

“I know you can,” George replied shyly, unsure if he should set Aaron down or not. He decide to try to explain first. Maybe if he told Aaron why, then the Prince wouldn’t see his actions as being something bad. “I just- I want to hold you. Keep you close. I can’t...It’s hard to explain and I know it’s weird, and maybe a little condescending, but I want to take care of you right now. After everything, after...after what happened, I want to make sure you’re safe. If that’s alright with-”

“I know you can,” George replied shyly, unsure if he should set Aaron down or not. He decide to try to explain first. Maybe if he told Aaron why, then the Prince wouldn’t see his actions as being something bad. “I just- I want to hold you. Keep you close. I can’t...It’s hard to explain and I know it’s weird, and maybe a little condescending, but I want to take care of you right now. After everything, after...after what happened, I want to make sure you’re safe. If that’s alright with-”

“George, I was joking,” Aaron assured him, leaning his head against George’s chest and smiling at him. “Carry me to the nearest bed.” George’s worries faded away at his husband’s smile and it was suddenly easier for him to breath. He returned Aaron’s smile with a fond grin before leaving the cell and carrying Aaron down the hall.

“Hey,” Aaron muttered as they left the dungeons and started up the stairs.
What?"

The Prince reached up and cupped one of George’s cheeks, giving him a smile that seemed to glitter more than any treasure. “I love you.” Aaron spoke softly.

“I love you too.”

“What do you mean you can’t find her?” George asked, looking between Yuma and Maria in confusion. Lafayette had summoned his court to the grand hall, taking his place on his throne next to Hercules as the dukes and lords and other nobles were updated on everything Lafayette and George had found out about Tyst. There was an immeasurable amount of pride in George’s chest at the sight of Lafayette with his crown on his head acting like the King George knew he was. This wasn’t going to be easy, everyone and their mother knew that, but at least they had Lafayette to lead them. He had come so far from the Prince he once was. His parents would be so proud. Duke Benjamin and Caleb were loud supporters of whatever Aaron needed, backed by Thomas and James, but there were others who were less sure about the idea. Yuma’s mission to figure out Sally’s mind was a key element to getting everyone on board.

“We mean that we’ve looked all over the castle, but the Princess is nowhere to be found,” Maria explained.

“Are we should that she didn’t leave?” Benjamin wondered.

“We checked with all the palace guards,” Yuma replied, “None of them saw her leave, but they’re still doing a sweep of the castle grounds to make sure she’s not in the gardens or stables.”

“With all due respect, General, your majesty,” Charles Lee spoke up, “I don’t think this is a good idea in any capacity. The King of Tyst and his family are not our concern. Interfering with their politics will only make us look like aggressors who are hell bent on controlling their kingdom’s affairs.”

“We’re talking about a kingdom who attacked us,” Caleb protested, crossing his arms over his chest. He was always itching for a fight, even when he was a young boy, even when Benjamin and he got engaged, but war was something else. Caleb didn’t like war, didn’t want to face that kind of horror again. George understood completely.

“A kingdom who has repeatedly pushed at our borders over the last month,” Thomas added. Thomas’ and James’ had a home closer to the border. After the war, they relocated further into the kingdom until the tension eased, but George knew that Thomas wanted nothing more than to return to the house that he designed and built for his family. This was bigger than Aaron. Bigger than Tyst. Bigger than politics.

“A kingdom who’s ignored every treaties,” Dolley spoke up, her hand tightly squeezing Abigail’s. Everyone in the room could attest to what Tyst had done and how it had affected them. One Kingdom’s actions always affected its neighbors. No matter how they looked at it, Tyst was negatively affecting everyone.

“And who's King now stands accused to trying to kill his own nephew,” Angelica pointed out, her voice the harshest, coldest out of all of them.

“We don’t know that for sure,” someone protested. The look Angelica gave them could freeze the ocean. She shook her head, clearly upset as she turned her attention to Lafayette.

“I would like to remind you, all of you, that I was against this marriage from the beginning. I told
you that Tyst was up to something, that the treaty didn’t feel right, but none of you listened. No-”

“We know, we know,” Lee whined, “you told us-”

“Now is not the time for us to stand on the sidelines!” Angelica raised her voice, “How many people have to die for you to get your heads out of the sand? First the war, which killed countless people on both sides, then they pushed and pushed at our borders and violated our treaties, and now this, but you still want to sit back and let them get away with it. I don’t understand how you can all stand aside. This is our nation, our home. We need to take a stand with pride and tell the King that we will not let him get any with anything else.” She snapped, “Or suffer whatever he has planned for us.”

“You’re right,” Lafayette told the room.

“And another thing-” Angelica halted, her eyes widening in shock at the King’s words. She had been ready for a fight, but Lafayette wasn’t giving her one. George didn’t even try to hide his smile. Angelica was a strong, powerful woman whose heart was always in the right place. She had spoken out against the marriage, spoken out against the King, and demanded something more be done, but they hadn’t listened. They let the King’s actions slide and now Angelica was right. It was time they took a stand, time for them to stand up for what was right. They were so scared after fighting for their independence, putting everything on the line, that they had started to ignore the growth of evil next door. It was time to put an end to that, time to become the light that the world needed.

“Your majesty,” Lee tried to protest, but Lafayette silenced him with a raised hand.

“Lady Angelica is right. We can no longer ignore what is going on beyond our borders. It’s time to put an end to this. If Prince Aaron asks for my help overthrowing his uncle, then I will do everything in my power to support him. We have countless reports from Tyst about the King’s actions, each coming from people working in the castle or towns that have faced the King’s wrath. Now even the Prince is adding to those reports. I can not stand by any longer and let this tyrant get away with his evil deeds. We put an end to the Northern King’s terrible reign. Now we must do the same with Tyst,” Lafayette told the room. It was quiet for a long time, everyone staring at their King in awe and pride. Benjamin and Caleb moved first, bowing down on one knee towards the King on his throne.

“We will follow you wherever you take us,” Caleb swore his alliance proudly, soon followed by Dolley and Abigail, then Thomas and James, then even Charles Lee and some of the other protestors. Lafayette looked slightly overwhelmed by their words, his eyes scanning the room before landing on George. George offered the younger man a bright smile, nodding his head proudly. Lafayette returned the smile with an easy grin.

“George, work with Yuma and Maria to find the Princess. We’ll need to know what she knows before we make our move,” Lafayette ordered.

“Yes, your majesty,” George replied, offering the King a low bow before guiding Yuma and Maria from the room. “Do we have any ideas where the Princess might be hiding?”

“We thought that she would try to get close to Aaron,” Maria explained as they moved down the hall, “But so far, none of the guards have reported her trying to get into his room. We checked in with Bellamy and Alexander, but they haven’t seen anything either.”

“We can’t be sure that none of the guards helped her escape the castle,” Yuma commented, “though I doubt that’s the case. We did check the secret passages just to be sure, but she wasn’t there either.”

“She must know that we’re on to her,” George muttered, thinking about where he would go if he was being sought after, “Perhaps if we sweep the building one more time, check all the secret tunnels
and passages again for just evidence we’ll figure out where to start. She has to be here still.”

“I agree. Where do you want to start?” Yuma wondered. They paused in the hallway as George thought it over. Starting near Aaron sounded like a good idea, but Sally could also be trying to get to Lafayette to finish the job. If they split up they could cover more ground, yet they couldn’t ensure that Sally would go down easily. George had to make a decision, had to decide what was best, but he wasn’t sure which path to take.

“We should start—”

“Get back!” Maira screamed, shoving Yuma and George away from her.

CRACK!

The floor between them split, pieces of wood flying through the air as a large mass of ice extended up towards the ceiling. George shielded Yuma from the flying debris, watching in horror as the ice climbed higher and higher. It scrapped against the walls as it grew, cutting through all the paintings that were hanging in its way. George moved to stop it, needed to get to Maria and save the castle, but Yuma put a hand on his arm and held him back.

“Yuma—”

“It’s growing too fast,” she quickly explained, “there’s no way to stop it without you getting crushed!” George cursed under his breath as they watched the ice grow without any way to stop it.

“Maria, go get help!” George yelled just before the ice pressed against the ceiling, cutting Maria off completely. The ice was thick and foggy, preventing George and Yuma from seeing through it. They couldn’t be sure if Maria heard George’s words, or if someone was standing on the other side.

“On the bright side, we won’t need to go looking for the princess anymore,” Yuma muttered. George glanced at the older woman, then over his shoulder. Sure enough, Princess Sally was standing down the hall in front of another wall of ice. She had her arms crossed over her chest and was wearing an all black dress with long sleeves. She looked ready for a funeral. She looked ready to cause a funeral.

“How long does it take for you to use your powers?” George whispered to Yuma.

“Usually, not very long,” Yuma confessed, “but there’s something about her. Something that’s stopping me from getting in.”

“I heard you were looking for me,” Sally declared, “I thought I’d make it easier on you.”

“How kind of you, your highness,” George replied, sharing a look with Yuma. If he could distract the Princess, then maybe Yuma would be able to get inside her mind. It was a fool’s errand, but it was worth a shot. “Is there a reason you’ve trapped us like this?”

“I would have thought a great general like you would find a way out of such a situation,” Sally replied, “Perhaps you aren’t as great as people think.”

“Everyone is allowed to have their own opinion of me,” George shrugged, trying his best to keep his face neutral at her poorly disguised insult. He knew he could find a way through her walls if he really wanted to, and even if he couldn’t, Yuma could. All he needed right now was some time to figure out how that could happen.

“Then let me give you mine,” Sally suggested. The way she smiled sent a shiver down George’s
spine. He had never seen a person smile in such a dark way. It was as if her teeth were razor sharp, ready to cut into him as soon as possible. “I think you’re a very good actor.” She hummed, catching him off guard. That was not what George expected and he was sure his shock showed on his face.

“Actor?” he echoed in confusion.

“Yes, you see, you tried to fool me, tried as hard as you could, but you can’t even fool yourself. You don’t really love my brother,” Sally explained as if it was a matter of fact.

“That’s not true,” George countered, anger building up inside him at her words. She was trying to cut deep, trying to throw him off balance, but he refused to let her get to him. He knew how he felt. He wouldn’t let her change his heart, “I love Aaron more th-

“Oh don’t lie to me. I can see through it all. Deep down you know that you don’t love him like you try so hard to convince everyone, and deep down in that poor, little heart of his, Aaron knows too. I made sure of it. Aaron knows that what his role is. He knows that he’s just a pawn for anyone to use or neglect him as they see fit. Though, it was a bit sad how easily he learned that lesson. Pitiful, really.”

“Stop talking,” George growled, shaking his head as if that would allow him to shake Sally’s words out of his thoughts. She was lying. Trying to get under his skin. Trying to twist his thoughts, but he couldn’t help but think that what she saying had some merit. The way Aaron talked about his childhood, the stories he shared about his uncle, it was clear that the young man had been used by countless people throughout his life. Did Aaron see himself as a pawn? Did he really think he had no control over his life?

Did he really think George didn’t love him?

“Don’t act like you’re any different. You’ve used him again and again haven’t you? Brought him close when you needed a little toy to play with and tossed him aside when that use was over, reminding him of his place in the world just like his family,” Sally kept talking, each word sickly sweet with venom.

“I said stop talking,” George snapped.

“I’m almost impressed,” Sally praised louder, “You learned so quickly how to play my brother like a lute. He is an easy tool to wield, but don’t think for a second that you can turn him against us. My brother knows where he truly belongs, and he knows that you don’t really love him.”

“Enough!” George bellowed, the floor beneath their feet shaking as his magic flowed through him. He couldn’t take it anymore. Didn’t want to hear another wicked word come out of Sally’s mouth.

“I’m not done with you yet,” Sally declared, a wicked grin taking over her face, “In fact, I think I’ll show you what I used to do to Aaron when he didn’t listen.” Before George had a chance to process her words a long, sharp icicles flew towards him. He dodged it at the very last second, watching as it piece into the ice wall.

“Decent enough dodge, but you won’t be able to do it again,” Sally warned. George touched the ring on his finger, whispering the words he needed and summoning a shield just as Sally sent an array of icicles his way. The shield held up, forcing the icicles to break upon impact. Sally gave him a bored look, shaking her head as the icicle barrage came to an end.

“Is that really all you can do? Dodge and hid behind a shield? You’re worse than boring, old Aaron. At least he fought back at first,” she taunted. There were hundreds upon thousands of things George
could do, but he held back in fear of actually hurting the woman. No matter how he felt about Sally, how much anger and hatred he had towards her, she was still Aaron’s sister. He wasn’t sure how Aaron would react if he injured her. The floor started to shake dangerously; however, this time it wasn’t because of George.

Spikes of ice shot up through the wood, one after another on their way towards him. George ran towards the nearest wall, sending just enough magic into his hands and feet to climb out of the range of the spikes. Thankfully, all of Sally’s attacks had been aimed solely at him. The Princess didn’t seem to care about Yuma’s presence, though the woman was staring at Sally with intent clear on her face. George had to do something, had to keep Sally distracted long enough. Taking a deep breath, he shut his eyes and let his magic extend to every part of his body. The time for playing games was over. He had to do what he needed to do. He pushed his magic out and when he opened his eyes, two more of him were hanging off the wall on either side of him.

“Impressive,” Sally commented, looking between George and his doubles with a critical look on her face. It didn’t matter how long she looked, she wouldn’t be able to figure out which one was the real George. He spent years perfecting his illusions until they were flawless recreations. No one was able to tell them apart. Together, George and his doubles scaled the walls until they were able to drop back to the floor without landing on any spikes.

“Which one, which one,” Sally said to herself before shrugging and sending another spray of icicles their way. Together, George and his doubles summoned their shields, advancing slowly towards the princess even as the icicles broke around them. “Well if that won’t work, let’s see how you handle this.” George was expecting something like the spikes she send his way, or something else made of ice. He wasn’t ready for the air to pick up and form the small tornado Sally unleashed inside the small hallway. His shield was useless against such an attack, unable to block out the wind as it cut deep into his arms and legs. He used his magic to protect his head, neck, and torso the most, hissing as more and more cuts started to litter his body. With each new wound, the magic inside him grew in strength. It was an old power passed down his family for generations. Each hit, every moment of pain as turned into new energy that could be used for bigger, stronger attacks. His body had a limit, which George had reached a few times in battle, but now he was grateful for the magic building up inside of him. He knew what he had to do.

George traded his shield for a sword, first sending his doubles at the princess to test her hand to hand combat. Sally barely dodged the first double sending a well formed fireball at him just before the second double took a swing at her. A thick wall of earth appeared through the floor to shield her from the sword. Then she sent the earth into the double, knocking him back to the ground. Ice. Wind. Fire. Earth. Elemental powers were dangerous and unpredictable, and it was surprising that Sally could use so many without showing any signs of strain.

“As fun as this had been,” Sally called, “I think I’ve had enough of our little game.” She dropped to the ground, bracing her body on her arms in order to swing her legs in a circle. Balls of fire formed around her feet and as she spun, a cyclone of fire formed. It grew quickly, too quickly for George to react in time. It took out his double first, burning them up within seconds before coming at him. George only had enough time to turn his face away before the fire caught his clothes. It burned into his side and arm, sending him howling to the ground as the pain blinded him.

“Knew that would get you,” Sally said in triumph, slowly walking towards him, “Big, tough General can’t handle a little fire.” It hurt. By the gods it hurt, but it also sparked new energy inside of George. His magic was pushing back against his skin, begging to be released. He turned back towards Sally, watching as she formed a sword out of ice. “I have to say, this really has been fun. The moment my Uncle chose you, I knew this would be a real treat. Watching you flounder, watching you try so hard to be something you’re not was really worth it, and so hilariously entertaining.”
“What are you talking about?” George muttered. He needed to give Yuma all the time he could. He had to keep her distracted as long as possible no matter the pain thrumming throughout his body.

“Do you really think your name just randomly came up during the treaty negotiations?” Sally replied, “Of course not, you oblivious idiot! My uncle had you picked out the second day into the war. The famous George Washington, leader of the Frihet army and the biggest obstacle standing in our way. What better way to get rid of him then to throw my obedient little brother his way to help tear you and your pathetic army from the heart of it. The perfect plan. If only Aaron hadn’t been so predictable and failed. My poor brother was never one to finish the job, but I always do.”

“You can’t do this,” George warned her, “Everyone will know it was you.”

Sally scoffed. “A month ago, I would have cared, but not anymore. Let the whole world know that it was I who killed General George Washington. They will learned to fear me, to worship me or they will be destroyed just as you will be,” Sally answered, raising her sword above his chest, but she wasn’t given the chance to lower it. George summoned all the magic he had inside him and sent it out in one giant blast. It knocked Sally off her feet and shattered the ice walls into millions of pieces. As the magic faded, all George could feel was pain.

“George!” Maria shouted, finally making it past the barrier.

“Stop her!” someone else screamed.

“Do you really think that would be enough to stop me?” Sally hissed, staggering to her feet and closing this distance between them again with a broken piece of ice in her hand. It was cutting into her palm, leaving a trail of blood behind her. “This isn’t over until you’re de-” The Princess froze, her eyes widening in shock and confusion. She looked around the room blearily as if lost in her own mind. Her eyes glanced toward George before they rolled back in her head. She slumped to her knees then fell forward onto her face.

“Finally,” Yuma sighed, “Maria, get a medic for the General! And another for Princess Sally.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Maria answered. Yuma appeared in George’s field of vision a second later, her hand resting on his forehead.

“Good job, my boy. Very good job,” she whispered to him.

“It hurts,” George gasped, the pain becoming too great, “It hu-”

“Shush now. We’ll take care of you. We’ll make the pain go away.” Yuma replied, pouring as much comfort as she could into her words.

“Was it enough? Did I give you enough time?”

“You gave me more than enough time,” Yuma assured him.

“Aaron, I need to get to-” George barely sat up an inch before a violent flash of pain sent him right back down.

“You need to rest.” Yuma ordered.

“Aaron needs to kn-”

Yuma’s voice smoothed out, dropping a tiny bit lower. “You need to rest.”
George blinked, the fight leaving his eyes. “I need to rest.”

“Sleep now,” Yuma ordered, her hand feeling so cool against his forehead. One minute George was looking up at the old woman in confusion, the next darkness flooded his vision and soon he was fast asleep.

George woke up in a panic. All he could remember was Sally’s twisted smile. The murderous look in her eyes as she stalked toward him with that blade of ice cutting into her palm. A feeling of dread filled his heart. Had it been enough? He needed to know. Needed to be sure that it wasn’t all for nothing. There was no way he could just stay still and wait. He tried to sit up, tried to look around for Yuma and Maria, tried to call out for them, but strong hands kept him down. Aaron’s concerned face overtook his vision. It gave George something to focus on, helped him calm down slowly. He settled back against the mattress and stared at his husband in worry, hand wrapped gently around the Prince’s wrist as if he was scared the other would disappear if he let go. He needed to know. He needed to ask.

“Yuma-”

“She’s okay.” Aaron nodded.

“Maria-”

“She’s okay too. Everyone is okay. Calm down.”

“Are you-”

“I’m okay,” Aaron assured him, running his hand over George’s head, “I’m right here. I’m more worried about you. How does your ar-”

“Was it enough?” George cut him off.

“What?”

“Was it enough? Was Yuma able to do it?”

“It was more than enough,” Aaron answered. He kissed George’s forehead a few times, offering George a soft smile. “You did it. Yuma got into Sally’s head and figured out the problem. All thanks to you, though I do wish you hadn’t gott-.”

“Problem? What problem?”

“I’ll explain in a minute. Right now, I just want to sit here with you and be grateful that you’re alive,” Aaron requested. George tried to sit up again, shaking his head. They had so much to do, so many things to take care of. He needed to see Lafayette, needed to help the King plan their next move. He had to call upon his captains and lieutenants. They had to be prepared to make their move.

“We don’t have time to wait. We need to-”

“You need to rest,” Aaron cut him off, pushing down on his shoulder.

“We need to start planning,” George argued.

“Relax. Please, you’re still injured,” Aaron begged.

“I’ll be fine,” George grumbled, fighting against Aaron’s hold.
“George, you are not leaving this bed until I say you can!” Aaron snapped, his voice cutting through the air like a knife. George froze, staring at his husband with wide eyes. Aaron stared back, his eyes slowly filling with tears. “I can’t... I just need a little time with you. Just in... In case this is the last time I see you. I already spent hours thinking I missed that chance, and I will not have your impatience take it away from me this time so- Just please let me have this. Let me have you with me.”

“Aaron...” George trailed off. Aaron shook his head, trying to hide his face as the tears escaped his eyes. George reached out and took his hand, surprised to see his arm wrapped in a white bandage. He nearly forgot about the burns now that the pain was gone. Eliza or Yuma must have taken care of it. “I’m here, Aaron. I’m here.”

“But you might not be next time,” Aaron whispered. “You told me...” he paused and shook his head again.

“Talk to me,” George begged. Aaron wiped under his eyes and took a deep breathe.

“You told me that your heart stopped when you found out I had been taken. You couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t imagine a world without me, and at first all that didn’t make sense to me. I’m just one person, and the world would keep going without me, but then... then they brought you in covered in burns and I suddenly understood. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think of anything besides losing you. People kept telling me it was okay, but I couldn’t believe them because you looked so horrible, and I was scared. I was so scared that you were gone, and I would never get another chance to tell you how much I love you.”

“Do you really?” George couldn’t help but ask as Sally’s words echoed in his head. He knew it was wrong of him to ask, wrong of him to questions Aaron’s words, but he needed to know. He had to be sure or it would eat away at him.

“What?”

“Do you really love me?”

“I just said-”

“I know, but do you... do you believe me when I say I love you too? Or do you think I’m lying, trying to play with your heart and use you?”

“I would never think that!” Aaron replied in shock, “Who told you... Sally.” He paused, visibly deflating. “George, she’s wrong. Whatever she said about us, about you, is wrong. She doesn’t know you. Doesn’t know me as well as she thinks she does. I love you. And you love me. I don’t think you’re using me. I don’t think you’re lying. I believe you with all my heart.”

“Come here,” George ordered, moving across his bed to make space for Aaron, “I just want to-” He didn’t even have to finish his request for Aaron to move. The Prince climbed into bed, pressing his chest against George’s side. George wrapped his arm around Aaron and held him close, kissing him before shutting his eyes.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too.”

“I’ll try to never scare you like that again.”

Aaron let out a shaky laugh. “You better not or I’ll kill you myself.”
I'm sure many of you are like "why hasn't this story been updating?!" and that's because school and life and trips and everything like that. I'm not sure when the next update will be for sure, but I promise you, I will finish this story. I have it planned out, and most of it written, but I need some time to get it all done.

Thank you for your patience! And thank you for sticking with me for SO long!

“Say that again,” George asked, looking between Yuma and Aaron in confusion and shock. Aaron understood his reaction, it was the same one Aaron had when Yuma told him the news. It didn’t make sense, didn’t seem possible, but as he looked at his sister laying on the bed, her wrists and ankles tied to the posts to keep her from escaping if she woke up, his heart prayed that it was true.

“A brain worm,” Yuma explained it again, “An ancient creature that was used in the past to control people’s minds. They haven’t been used for decades, and I wasn’t even sure there were any left, but-”

“But there’s one in Sally’s head?”

“There’s one in Sally’s head, yes,” Yuma confirmed, “That’s why I couldn’t get into her mind right away. The worm was blocking me, keeping me from seeing inside. Sally’s thoughts are not her own, right now. The worm is directly connected to the King. What Sally sees, he can see. What Sally says comes directly from him, even her actions come from the worm and her uncle.”

“She’s a puppet,” George muttered in dismay, rubbing a hand over his face. He was looking better, though he still had bandages around his arm, but Aaron didn’t feel guilty for letting him out of bed sooner than Eliza recommended. George wanted to be here, and Aaron hadn’t wanted to fight about it. He wanted George here, wanted his husband close by. It gave him strength.

“Yuma thinks there might be a way for us to remove the worm without harming her,” Aaron told him, stepping closer to his sister’s bed. She looked younger when she was sleeping, less like a monster that was featured in every one of Aaron’s nightmares. Aaron thought back to all the times when they were little when Aaron would sneak into Sally’s room at night in order to listen to a bedtime story. She was his source of comfort for so many years, and it still hurt that he lost her. He knew he shouldn’t get too hopeful, shouldn’t forget that things could go from bad to overwhelmingly worse, but he wanted to believe that his sister, the one who loved and cared for him, was still in there. He wanted her back so she could have the chance to be herself again.

“What do we need?” George asked.

“I have a theory-”

“What do we need?” George repeated, cutting Yuma off with a fierce look on his face, “Give me a list and I’ll handle it. I don’t need to know the theories or what your plan is. You don’t have to justify it to me or anyone else. Just tell me what you need and you’ll get it.” The room was stunned to silence, and even Aaron was a bit shocked but in the best possible way. Just when Aaron didn’t
think he fell more in love with the man, George found a way to surprise him.

“We’ll need Indigio, the necklace of heroism, and a potion of light,” Yuma listed off.

“The what?”

“Necklace of heroism. It belonged to Lafayette’s mother. The King should be more than willing to part with it. The potion of light will come from Alexander and John. Aaron will collect Indigo from the stables,” Yuma replied.

“Okay,” George agreed, looking between them again. “Okay, we’re doing this.”

“Yeah. Yeah we are,” Aaron told him. George closed the distance between them, pressing a soft kiss to Aaron's lips. Aaron shut his eyes and let himself sink into his husband’s embrace. George held him longer than Aaron expected, nearly refusing to let go when Aaron tried to back up.

“I’ll go speak with Lafayette, then I’ll come right back,” George promised, kissing Aaron a few more times. “I’ll be back.”

“I know that. Now go,” Aaron ordered, gently shoving him away. George headed for the door, giving Aaron a smile over his shoulder before he left the room. Aaron watched him disappear and took a deep breath as he turned back towards Yuma. He was a bit startled to find the older woman staring at him with a knowing smirk on her face.

“What?” He asked a bit too defensively to seem unaffected.

“Nothing.” She hummed in reply, unconvinced.

“Yuma—”

“I’m a mindreader, Aaron. Let’s leave it at that,” Yuma suggested.

“But I—”

“Not you.” Aaron’s cheeks heated up at her words, his thoughts racing as to what George must have been thinking before he left. What had Yuma heard? Should he ask? No, no. He didn’t want to know what Yuma heard. It was bad enough that George thought it, but it was even worse that the older woman had heard.

“I should go get Indigo,” Aaron muttered, stepping towards the door.

“Yes, you should.”

“I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Without another word, Aaron fled the room and made his way through the castle. Excitement and fear mixed in his heart and mind. He felt as if they were so close, so very close to changing the game, but he was still fearful that he was getting too hopeful. His Uncle had already proven that he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. Aaron didn’t want to go two steps forward only to be knocked back four. He wanted progress. Wanted to finally make a difference and do something. The servants jumped out of his way with wide eyes as he made his way through the halls, yet he couldn’t offer them any words of comfort or even a quick apology for his behaviour. He didn’t have the time. The stablehands bowed as he walked in, but he didn’t acknowledge them. Instead, he rushed
towards Nessie’s stall, finding Indigo laying casually on the griffon’s back. The dragon lifted her head as he stepped inside.

Aaron! Indigo cried out in excitement, reaching out her beak to press it against his cheek, It’s great to see you! It has been much too long. How are you?

It’s good to see you too. I need you to come with me.

Is something wrong? she asked with concern, tilting her head as she stare into his eyes.

How much do you know about brain worms? Aaron asked hopefully.

If I remember correctly they taste pretty good.

That’s all I needed to hear. Let’s go. Aaron ordered, stepping towards the stall door.

Aaron, Aaron, Aaron, Aaron, Nessie chanted happily. Aaron paused, turning to smile at the griffin. It was hard not to grin with how excited the creature sounded. He took a moment to pet Nessie’s beak and head, pressing his forehead against her’s.

Yes, Nessie?

You are happy?

Well...Happier than I was when you last saw me. Aaron confessed. There was a lot going on in his head, but overall he was feeling better. First they would help his sister, then everything would be good.

That is good. Nessie stated.

Yes. Yes it is. Indigo, we need to g-

Will you tell George that I’m no longer mad at him? Nessie requested, her voice sounding shy in his head. Aaron stared at the creature for a long time before nodding his head.

Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be sure to tell him, Aaron promised, Indigo.

Coming! She replied, jumping from Nessie’s back onto Aaron’s shoulder. Right away, hundreds of daffodils flooded the stables. Aaron hadn’t meant to cause it, wasn’t even trying to, but Indigo’s lightweight pressure on his shoulders was so familiar and calming that it sent countless thoughts of happiness through his mind.

How did I... Aaron tried to ask, confused as he looked around at all the plants

You don’t have to think about it anymore, Indigo explained. The plants simply want to grow for you. Now, when we are together, you will be able to create whatever you want.

But nothing’s changed, Aaron protested

That’s a lie and you know it. A lot has changed. You have changed. Something inside you was broken and lost; however, something else has taken its place. Something stronger and bigger. Something that is just waiting to break out, and the plants feel it too. They want to answer it, wanted to answer you. A forest grows back just as strong, if not stronger, after it has been burned down by flames and been given the chance to rise from the ashes.
Something inside me, Aaron echoed the words, unsure what Indigo meant, yet the words made so much sense to him.

Don’t we have to be somewhere? Indigo reminded him. Aaron snapped out of his thoughts and exited the stables. He made his way back into the castle, heading straight back towards his sister’s room. Hopefully, George would be able to get the necklace from Lafayette. Hopefully they would be able to save his sister. He had to cling to that hope. He had to stay positive.

I’m not happy that you were thrown in jail... Indigo stated as they made their way through the halls. Aaron nearly forgot about that. It seemed so long ago even though it had only been a day and a half. So much had changed since then. So much had shifted.

We’ll talk about it after this is over, Aaron assured the dragon as he rounded the last corner before Sally’s room. But don’t be mad at George about it. It wasn’t his fault and he tried to stop it.

I believe you. I hold no ill will towards him anymore.

You don’t?

“Aaron!” George voice called out. Aaron looked over his shoulder to see George making his way down the hall with a necklace in his hands. Aaron quickly took the hand George offered, squeezing it tightly as his husband pulled him into the room. “Good to see you again, Indigo. Yuma! We’re back.”

“Perfect timing,” the woman replied, taking the necklace from George. She walked away towards Sally, taking great care as she wrapped the necklace around Sally’s neck.

I can tell that something has changed between the two of you, Indigo explained, The love you have for him has grown, and the way he looks at you is different then before. The bond between you too has gained much more strength.

I-I told him about my powers. I had to, but then I told him about my past. About my uncle and everything that happened. And he...he understood. He didn’t turn against me. Doesn’t treat me any differently. He still.....

Still loves you. Imagine that, Indigo replied. She didn’t sound surprised in the slightest.

“Aaron, bring Indigo over here,” Yuma softly ordered. Aaron obeyed, walking over to the bed and allowing Yuma to pull Indigo off his shoulders. She set the dragon on Sally’s chest, helping Indigo find a comfortable spot. “Now back up. Both of you.” Aaron didn’t need to be told twice as he moved away from the bed. He took his place next to George, leaning into the man. George wrapped his arm around Aaron’s waist and held him close.

“She should wake up any moment now,” Yuma explained, stepping back from the bed herself, “When she does, the necklace will force the brain worm out of her head, and Indigo will be able to eat it. The potion of light will protect the rest of us from the brainworm, preventing it from getting to any of us.”

“How long will it take?” George wondered.

“As quick as lightning. It should only take a few seconds from start to finish, but we still have to be exceedingly careful.”

“Will it hurt her?” Aaron asked, worried about his sister’s safety and wellbeing.
“That, I can’t say,” Yuma admitted, taking Aaron’s hand and squeezing it gently, “but this is the only way.” Aaron nodded his head in understanding. He kept his eyes on his sister, waiting for the moment that she would finally wake up. Yuma pulled a potion out of her dress pocket and held it tightly as they waited. The seconds ticked by, each one feeling like an eternity as they watched Sally for any signs. Finally, Sally’s eyes flew open. Aaron held his breath as he watched her blinked once, then twice. Suddenly she let out a high pitch scream of pain. It tore through Aaron’s heart, and if it wasn’t for George’s arm tightened around his waist he would have rushed to his sister’s side. Yuma broke the potion bottle in her hand, releasing the light. Sally kept screaming as a bright, white light overtook the room. Aaron couldn’t see his sister, but he could still hear her. He squeezed his eyes shut as he tried to block out Sally’s screams of pain. He couldn’t do anything to help her. Couldn’t make her pain go away. Thankfully, a second later, the screams died down and the room was quiet. A loud sob cut through the air silence as the light started to fade away.

“Aaron?” Sally called, her voice cracking. Aaron’s heart skipped a beat at his sister’s voice. He couldn’t remember the last time she said his name like that. There was no mocking tone. No double meaning behind it. Nothing hiding in the shadows to wound him later on. Indigo landed on Aaron’s shoulder suddenly, pressing her beak into his cheek.

“So...” Aaron answered, unable to help himself.

She needs you. Indigo told him. She needs you now more than ever before.

“I can’t—I can’t hear him,” Sally tried to explain, sobs cutting between her words. As soon as Aaron could see he made his way over to his sister’s bed and fell to his knees next to her. Sally looked so young, her eyes wide and confused as she stared at him. Her hands pulled at the blankets on the bed. She shook her head a few times as if that would help her think straight. “I can’t hear him. Why can’t I...I don’t understand...I should—”

“The brain worm is gone, your highness,” Yuma spoke up, getting Sally’s attention for a moment. Her voice was gentle and kind, the same tone she used to soothe Phillip or Martha when they were upset. “You are no longer under anyone else’s control. You’re safe.” Sally stared and stared and stared as tears flooded her eyes.

“It’s gone?” she echoed. Yuma nodded her head. Sally reached up to touch her face, a broke laugh escaping from her mouth. “It’s really gone.” She suddenly reached out towards Aaron. “Aaron, I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted anything of this to happen. Gods I should have been stronger than this. I shouldn’t have been so weak against this— It’s... It’s all my fault. Everything is my fault.”

“It’s not your fault,” Aaron protested, lifting himself up to sit on the side of the bed. He grabbed his sister’s hand and held on tightly as he wiped away the tears that kept coming. Indigo slid off his shoulders to rest in Sally’s lap. She curled her tail around Sally’s leg and rested her head on Sally’s stomach as she watched silently.

“But it is,” Sally claimed, leaning her head into Aaron’s hand, “It really is.”

“We’ll give you two a chance to talk,” George said. Sally’s eyes snapped towards him, widening to the point that Aaron was worried they would never shut again.

“You’re alive,” she whispered. George tilted his head in confusion, unable to hear Sally’s words. He offered her a kind smile which only served in making Sally’s tears come faster.

“He’s alive and well,” Aaron assured her. He started to rub her back and hope the motion would help her calm down.
“I thought...I was sure that I...” Sally trailed off, turning her eyes down to her lap. Aaron could only imagine what she thought. George had lost so much blood that even Yuma had been worried a few times, but George was okay and that was the important part.

“Some time would be nice,” Aaron admitted, turning to give George a grateful smile. His husband nodded in understanding and led Yuma out of the room. Aaron waited for the door to close behind them before turning back to his sister. “Sally-”

“You should hate me,” Sally cut him off, shaking her head, “After everything I’ve done, you should hate me.”

“Sally, despite everything that has happened between us, I could never hate you,” Aaron replied, “Never.”

“But you should!”

“Why?”

“Because this is my fault! It’s all my fault!”

“How?” Aaron begged, wrapping his arms around Sally as she was overtaken by sobs.

“Because I let him hurt you! I wasn’t strong enough to stop him. I wasn’t strong enough to fight back. I couldn’t save you! I was supposed to protect you and I failed!” Sally screamed between her sobs.

“Sally-” Aaron tried to assure her.

“You don’t understand,” Sally choked out, leaning against his chest, “It was you he wanted. It was always you.” Aaron’s blood went cold at her words. She didn’t have to say it. They both knew who she was talking about.

*Let her calm down first,* Indigo suggested, *Then it will be easily for you to talk.*

*I don’t know how to calm her down!* Aaron confessed.

*Yes you do. Let go of your sorrow and worry and focus on happier memories. Let the flowers come to your aid.*

*Happier memories....* Aaron shut his eyes.

“How do you remember how I used to be scared of thunderstorms?” he asked, smiling to himself as the thought about the memory. His uncle didn’t care that Aaron was scared, so he would sneak into Sally’s bedroom for comfort. His sister welcome him with open arms, wiping away his tears and shushing him as she held him close. Now, it was his turn to repair the favor. Sally’s sobs quieted down as she listened. “I hated the thunder more than anything else. It would shake the walls and the floor, and I used to think the castle was going to fall down while we were sleeping.”

“I remember,” Sally muttered. Aaron opened his eyes, letting out a happy sigh. A few aster flowers started to grow along the edge of the bed. Aaron focused more on the memory as he watched them get bigger and bigger.

“Do you remember what you told me?” Sally shook her head. “You told me not to be afraid of the thunder because it was just the gods playing games in the sky. It was a sign that they were happy and good things were just around the corner. Then we would play games in your room so we could be
happy to.” A sad smile appeared on Sally’s face. Aaron’s heart lifted at the sight. Forget-me-not joined the aster along with a few red rosebuds.

“I remember that now. You used to hide under the covers until I challenged you to a game. That way you were more focused on winning then on the weather,” Sally added. Her tears slowed down. Aaron wiped them away again and gave his sister a fond look.

“You always knew just what to say to help me,” he told her, “When I was scared or sad or worried that I could do anything right, you were there to help me through it.”

“I tried to be,” Sally confessed, “but then-then I ruined it be-” Her tears threatened to start up again, but Aaron refused to let her go back down that path.

“No, you didn’t. You didn’t ruin it at all,” Aaron cut her off gently, “Because I still remembered what you told me. Even after we grew apart, I still thought about the stories you told me and it made life so much easier. When the thunder came, when I got nervous about my lessons, when I started to miss mother and father, all I had to do was think about what you said and then I could get through it.”

“Why are there flowers? And what is this thing in my lap?” Sally asked. Aaron couldn’t help but laugh and throw his arms around his sister’s shoulders, holding her close for a moment until she pushed him away with a smile on her face.

“That thing, which doesn’t like being call a thing, is Indigo, my dragon,” Aaron explained, happy that he finally got to share with his sister, finally got to tell her about the life he had now, “When we’re together, flowers bloom based on my strong emotions.” He reached over and picked one of the aster flowers, passing it to Sally with a smile.

“A dragon? Since when you do....Lafayette’s gift! It actually hatched!”

“It did! A few months ago actually. Indigo is a sweetheart and she’s just trying to help you calm down,” Aaron said proudly.

“Can I pet her?” Sally softly asked, already reaching out towards Indigo.

“Of course. Go right ahead.”

Sally gently and carefully ran her hand over Indigo’s head, feeling over the dragon’s back all the way to her tail. The look on his sister’s face was priceless. She looked happier than she had in years. Softer and younger too.

*Can you tell her not to get so close to my eyes?* Indigo asked.

“Careful about her eyes. You’re getting a little too close,” Aaron said without hesitation, reaching out to help guide her hand.

“Can you...can you hear her?” Sally wondered, her voice barely above a whisper as she stared at Indigo.

“I can. Ever since she hatched. It was scary and strange at first, but now I’m used to it.”

“No. I can’t. And I won’t try to. I don’t use my powers on humans. I did it once and that’s—”
“My fault,” Sally cut him off, looking away.

“I doubt that,” Aaron argued, wrapping his arm around Sally’s shoulders.

“It’s the truth.”

“Sally.”

“Aaron.”

“Can you explain...do you want to talk ab-” Aaron asked softly.

“Yes,” Sally cut him off again, “Yes, I want to talk about it. I want a chance to explain.”

“Okay. Okay we can talk about it. Do you want to talk now or?”

“Now. I mean as long as now is good for you,” Sally begged. Aaron nodded his head. “I see no reason in putting it off any longer.”

“Now is good.”

Sally took a deep breathe, leaning against Aaron as she took a deep breathe. Aaron gave her as much time as she needed, not wanting to rush her into talking. He understand that sometimes it was best to give people a chance to get their thoughts in order before forcing them to speak.

“I didn’t want to push you away,” Sally explained, “but I didn’t know what else to do. I overheard Uncle Timothy talking to his advisers about you. You were nine at the time and I had just turned ten. Somehow they’d figured out that you had mental magic and were trying to figure out how they could use it to their advantage. I had to run away before I got caught, so I didn’t hear the rest of their conversation, but I knew that I had to do something to keep them away from you. I started pushing you away to protect you. Looking back, I should’ve just told you what I heard, but I was young and stupid and I thought I was strong enough to protect you all by myself. I thought if I had all of Uncle’s attention on myself, if I showed him that I was the better out of the two of us, then he wouldn’t try to do anything to you.”

“And for a while it worked. I had his attention and you were safe. Plus you had Theo and Bellamy to keep you company. I kept tabs on you as much as possible to make sure you were getting into too much trouble,” a small, fond smile appeared on Sally’s face as she talked, but it soon faded away and she shook her head. “But then it wasn’t enough. Nothing I did was enough for his and he started making plans. Started talking to you more, checking in on your studies and mentioning how you were getting stronger. I got worried that he was going to start to use you, so I...I had to do something.”

“Sally-”

“I’m not proud of it,” she forced the words out, “I knew our Uncle was a bad man. Knew that from the time I was very young, but I wanted to protect you. I helped him...I...I did horrible things, Aaron. I led soldiers against our own people. I helped our Uncle plan how to ruin lives. I stole information for him. I-It was so stupid. I kept telling myself that it was for you. It was to protect you. To keep you safe, but that’s not an excuse. That’s not a reason for me to have done what I did. And then he wanted me to-” Sally stopped, her face going pale. Aaron pulled her close.

“Nothing you tell me will make me stop loving you. Nothing. I understand how...I know how it feels to do things you’re not proud. I did...I wasn’t innocent either growing up. I blamed other people for my mistakes because I was scared of him,” Aaron mumbled, praying that his words gave Sally some
comfort. Instead, his sister laughed.

“He told me to kill you,” she confessed. Aaron’s eyes widened in shock, the words piecing his heart. He knew his uncle was a horrible man, but he never thought he would go that far. “The night of your wedding was meant to be your last. Uncle had it all planned out from the moment the treaty was signed. He was going to make it look like General Washington murdered you in your sleep, which would plunge our kingdoms back into war.”

“But-but I’m not”

“I couldn’t do it,” Sally whispered, “I told him I wouldn’t. Told him that—that I could never hurt you. I thought he had changed his mind, thought he realized that he had gone too far when he changed his plans, but then...then he put that thing in my head.”

“I’m so sorry,” Aaron told her, reaching out to take his sister’s face in his hands, “I’m so sorry I didn’t realized right away. I’m sorry that you had to suffer with that thing in your mind for so many months. I’m sorry that he hu-”

“Aaron-”

“Aaron,”

“I’m so sorry,” Aaron said again.

“It’s not your fault.” Sally assured him, reaching out to run her hand over his head. Aaron felt tears forming in his eyes. It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair. All the pain, all the terror that their Uncle had inflicted on them. If only Aaron has seen it sooner. If only he had done something to stop it.

“It’s not yours either, Sally!”

“I didn’t have to do what he said. I could have refused so many times,” Sally pointed out. Aaron shook his head, refusing to hear it.

“Aaron?” George’s voice cut through the room, “Is everything alright?”

“Ye-”

“No!” Sally cut him off, pushing Aaron away. Before Aaron could say anything, the door to the bedroom flew open. George stepped in with a look of pure concern on his face. Part of Aaron was relieved while another was annoyed at George’s overprotectiveness; however, after everything that had happened over the past few days Aaron could understand why George would respond so quickly. “Get away from me, Aaron! Get away! I just...you shouldn’t...I don’t deserve-”

“Sally, please. It’s not your fault,” Aaron begged for her to listen, but nothing he said soothed his sister’s guilt. He didn’t know how to help her, didn’t know what to say or do or how to act. He was helpless, and it hurt. This was his sister, the only family he really had left, and he was still failing her. Without a word, George walked over to the bed and pulled Sally into his arms. She tensed at his touch, but didn’t struggle as he took a seat on the bed next to Aaron. They sat in silence for a while before George took a deep breathe.

“You can’t imagine how happy I am that you’re okay, your highness,” George told Sally softly. Sally’s eyes widened. Aaron was sure that he had a similar look on his own face. There was a hundred things he imagined George saying, yet that was not one of them.

“You can’t imagine how happy I am that you’re okay, your highness,” George told Sally softly. Sally’s eyes widened. Aaron was sure that he had a similar look on his own face. There was a hundred things he imagined George saying, yet that was not one of them.

“I stabbed you!” Sally exclaimed, pushing against George to get away. George only shrugged a shoulder with a soft smile on his face and kept Sally against his chest. She calmed down after a while, allowing George to reached out in order to take Aaron’s hand. Aaron leaned against his
husband’s shoulder.

“You’re not the first person whose done that,” George pointed out, “and I’m sure you’re not the last with how my life goes.”

“I don’t unders-”

“You were a child, Sally,” George cut her off, his voice so gentle and kind that it even helped Aaron’s shoulders relaxed. “From what Aaron’s told me, along with Theo and Bellamy, your Uncle was never a kind man and that can have a terrible impact on a child’s life. You were only trying to protect Aaron, only trying to keep him safe-”

“You were listening-” Sally accused him. George didn’t even bat an eyelash at her harsh tone.

“I didn’t need to,” he assured them both, “I’m older than both of you, and you’ve forgotten that I’ve met countless people in my lifetime. I’ve seen stuff like this before, and I know how siblings act when they feel like they are in danger. Alexander used to be the same way when he first came to live with me. He was hardened by his early childhood, the lost of his mother and the way people had treated him. It was hard for him to move past that, hard for him to trust people and feel safe. He became extremely protective of John, Lafayette, and Eliza in a way that no child should be. It’s a hard habit to break, even harder when you are trapped in a horrible place for years.”

“I did horrible things,” Sally muttered, hiding her in shame.

“Many people would say the same about me.”

“But I hurt people,” Sally added.

“So have I,” George countered easily. Sally scowled at him, which Aaron couldn’t help but smile at them. Both so stubborn, so strong and brave. Aaron loved them both so much.

“They won’t forgive me for what I’ve done,” Sally insisted.

“You might be surprised what people will forgive you for,” George replied, meeting Aaron’s eyes for a moment, “The point is, Sally, you were a child whose world was twisted and controlled by your Uncle, an adult who should have been taking care of you and giving you the love you deserved. You didn’t know what to do, had no one else to turn to, and when he tried to cross a line you said no. People will always judge you. Always. But no matter what they say, they will never understand what it was like to be in your situation and you shouldn’t let them get to you.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Sally admitted, hiding her face against George's chest.

“You don’t have to say anything,” George told her, “All you have to do is focus on recovering. You’ve been through a lot, and now is the time for you to lean on other people that want to help get you back on your feet.”

“We’re here for you,” Aaron spoke up, reaching out to run his hand through his sister’s hair, “I love you, Sally and I always will. George and Yuma and Eliza will be able to help you. And La-King Lafayette has offered to help us as much as he can.”

“Would he help us get rid of our uncle?” Sally whispered.

“Yes,” Aaron told her, no doubt in his mind. Sally stared at him in shock.

“Now isn’t the time to talk about that,” George advised.
“No,” Sally protested, “No I want to talk about it. His reign has gone on for too long and it’s time to stop him.”

“But George is right,” Aaron softly told her, “You need to take care of yourself first before we can start planing how to stop him.”

“But.”

“Please?” Aaron cut her off, “Please. I want to get rid of him just as much as you do, but right now I just want to sit here and spend some time with you. After everything, after all that’s happened, I need a moment where both of us are safe.”

“Okay,” Sally agreed, giving him a soft smile, “Why don’t you tell me about what I’ve missed since you got married.”

“You haven’t missed much,” Aaron replied with a shrug.

“He hit me with an apple,” George quickly offered, giving Aaron a knowing smirk as Sally gasped. Aaron’s eyes widen as his face heated up. Out of all the things, why did George chose that moment?

“He didn’t!” Sally exclaimed in excitement, a giddy look on her face as she looked between them.

“He did,” George confirmed, almost sounding proud.

“It was an accident!” Aaron insisted.

“I wish I could have seen this.” Sally mourned with a smile.

“He also started a food fight.”

“I did not start it! Alexander did!” Aaron protested.

“I doubt that,” Sally added. And just like that the months and years melted away as they laughed and shared tales about their lives. Sally started to look like her old self as she told Aaron embarrassing stories from their childhood. George repaid her with stories of his own, the room filling with their excitement and happiness. For the most part, Aaron stayed quiet and watched them, his heart swelling at the sight of his husband and sister getting along so well. He wanted to freeze this moment in order to remember it forever. He was going to let anyone take this away from him. Not even his Uncle. It was time to take a stand, time to repair the damage that King Timothy had created.

Aaron would never stop until he brought his Uncle to justice.
I'm back with a huge chapter! I'm sorry it took so long, but this chapter fought me tooth and nail the whole time. If it wasn't for SadSeaChild I'm not sure I would have ever been able to get it done. But I'm back now and I hope you like it!

And I hope you're ready for what's around the corner!

“–But the brain worm is gone now and Aaron’s talking with Sally and the others about what to do next,” George finished his recap of the day’s events, looking around at his students one by one. Alexander sat in the middle of the bed with Eliza on his left and John to his right. Looking at them now, George suddenly realized how far they had all come from when he first met them. Such a revelation made George pause as he studied each of his students closely. Alexander, an orphan with no family had risen through the ranks to become an amazing potion master and an even better military strategist. A man who would never stop fighting for what he believed in no matter what obstacles were placed in his path. Eliza, the middle child of a wealthy family who set aside her rank and privilege to focus on medicine instead of power. Now she was a well known healer, and George just knew that one day she would come up with a way to heal the world’s deadliest illnesses. Her heart was pure, and her kindness knew no bounds.

John, the rebellious boy whose own father had placed the weight of the world on his shoulders when he was too young. His love of animals, and the strength to keep going no matter what life threw at him, helped him turn into a legendary creature trainer. He stood up for those who didn’t have a voice. Stood up for what he truly believed in. George was so proud of all of them, so proud and glad that they were all safe. After everything; the party, the attack, Aaron’s imprisonment and now Sally, George was just happy to see his students sitting in front of him like they had when they were young.

“How do you feel about all of this?” Eliza gently asked.

“I’m fine,” George replied, “Once Aaron and Sally come up with a plan and figure out what they need, Lafayette will do everything in his power to support them. I plan to–”

“How?” Eliza cut him off with a knowing look in her eyes.

“I’m fine,” George tried to assure her. None of them looked convinced. Alexander pressed his lips together in a fine line, clearly holding back from spitting fiery words at George. John’s eyes flickered between George and the floor, a nervous tick that George thought he had grown out of during his teenage years. Eliza stared George down without blinking, waiting for any sign of weakness. For a moment, she reminded George so much of Yuma that he almost gave in. Almost.

“Really I’m–”

“You were stabbed,” John muttered, his voice barely above a whisper, “I know that...That Aaron almost lost you, and that’s important, but...but we almost lost you too. You have to understand how we can’t...it’s not something we–I can’t just get over it. The idea of losing you after everything...I can’t–” Alexander reached out and pulled John closer to his side, allowing him to hide his face so George couldn’t see. That didn’t stop George from hearing the soft cry that escaped from him, nor
did it help George escape the sudden guilt that wrapped around his throat. He had to look away, unable to handle the sight.

“George,” Eliza begged. There was so much sadness in her eyes, so much hurt and confusion on Alexander’s face that without a word, George moved forward and took his own spot on the bed. Eliza was the first to move towards him, the first to take his arm and wrap it around her shoulders. Alexander guided John over and they pressed against his other side. George held them all close, shutting his eyes and enjoying the moment. He hadn’t realized how much everything had been affecting them. He should have, should have known that his fight with Sally would shake them, but all he could do now was try to offer them as much comfort as possible.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, “I’m sorry for worrying you. I’m sorry that I didn’t think about how such a thing could affect you, all of you. I was so caught up that I–”

“It’s okay that you got caught up,” John quickly cut him off, “I understand that–”

“We understand,” Alexander gently corrected him.

“We understand how important Aaron is to you. And we can’t fault you for such a thing. But we...we just need to know you’re okay too.”

“I’m okay. I promise you. It’s a lot to take in, to think about, but I’m okay and I will always be here for you,” George promised, offering them a gentle smile.

“Don’t say stuff like that,” Eliza sharply ordered. Out of all of them, Eliza was the last person George expected speak up in such a way. If it had come from Alexander or John than George wouldn’t have questioned it, but from Eliza? That was much more concerning.

“Why?” he asked her in confusion.

“One day you’re not going to be here. One day you’re not going to come home, and we should...we shouldn’t pretend like that’s not going to happen. We should be prepared,” Eliza explained. Alexander and John were quiet, staring at her with a mixture of shock and understanding in their eyes. George knew she was right. No one could live forever. One day his time would expire. One day he would have to leave them all behind, and they would have to learn to move on, but that wasn’t going to happen yet. Not if George had anything to say about it.

“Eliza, even after I’m gone, after my soul has left the Earth, I will still be with you. I will still be in your heart and your memories. I will never truly leave you. Never,” George assured her.

“It won’t be the same,” she whispered sadly.

“No, it won’t,” George agreed, pulling her close. He understood her fears, understood why she couldn’t get passed it. He had the same problem with his own parents, “but it won’t happen for a long, long time. I can promise you that.”

“I’m just not ready,” Eliza confessed, turning to press her face into his chest. George ran his hand down her back, giving her all the time she needed.

“You never will be, but you won’t be alone.”

“You’ll never be alone,” Alexander added. Eliza nodded her head, but kept her face hidden for a while longer. A light silence filled the room as they sat there on the bed.

“George,” John spoke up, “When Aaron goes to...when he faces his Uncle, I want to be there with
“Me too,” Alexander echoed.

“Boys, I don’t think–”

“We have to be there,” John insisted, “We have to go with him. I need to...I need to stand by his side. Need to show him that I care.”

“He knows you care,” George rushed to assure him.

“But after everything,” John trailed off, turning away in shame, “After everything I want to...to..”

“It’s what family does,” Alexander offered. John nodded in agreement. “Family takes care of one another, fights alongside one another. We want Aaron to know that he’s family. We need to...I need him to feel like that. I want him to know that no matter what happens, we will always be by his side.”

“I know he knows I care, but I want to show him. Not just tell him,” John explained.

“You’ll have to ask Aaron about it,” George told them, “but I’m sure he’ll agree.”

“Even if he doesn’t, I’m go–”

Knock, knock.

Everyone froze at the soft sound, looking at one another to confirm that it wasn’t just their own imagination. George eyes snapped towards the door, wondering who it could be. Aaron would have voiced his arrival. Lafayette wouldn’t have bothered to knock. Another set of knocks followed, setting off a chain reaction. Alexander was the first one off the bed, smoothing down his jacket and fixing his hair as he stared at the door. Next was Eliza. She pulled a white cloth out of her sleeve to clean her face, then passed it on to John. The man wiped his cheeks as he stood up and squared his shoulders before handing the cloth back to Eliza. George watched as his students transformed right before his very eyes. Gone was their innocent. Their youth. They were no longer his young students. They were soldiers. Fighters ready to face whatever was standing beyond that door. George was conflicted. He wanted to be proud of their bravery, but he feared what they had all lost over the years. He stood up himself and straighten his clothes before giving them a soft smile.

Knock–

“Come in,” George called. The door opened just enough so Theo and Bellamy could slip into the room. George's shoulders relaxed at the sight of them. He can’t say that he felt the same way about them as the others, but he still cared for them and wanted to see them safe. However, they stayed closer to the door with wide, unsure eyes. Even when John stepped towards then, even when Eliza whispered their names, they kept their distance. Worry twisted around George’s heart.

“We didn’t mean to interrupt,” Theodosia spoke first, placing her hands in front of her and looking down at them, “but Aaron sent us to check up on you.” A moment of heavy silence followed.

“And we wanted to...to check up on you too,” Bellamy added as if he couldn’t stand the quietness any longer, “All of you.” John let out a soft noise and quickly crossed the room to stand in front of Bellamy. George expected the other man to meet John in the middle, but still Bellamy refused to move. His eyes darted away to stare over John’s shoulders.
“What’s wrong?” John asked, his lips turning down as he tried to catch Bellamy’s eyes

“Nothing,” Bellamy answered too quickly. George straightened his back as his eyes narrowed.

“Bells?” Alexander whispered in confusion. Bellamy’s eyes snapped to him before he shook his head.

“Are you doing better?” Theodosia asked, changing the subject with ease as she looked at George. George placed a hand over his bandages and gave her a firm nod mixed with a small grin.

“Much better. Little sore, but that comes with old age.”

“You’re not that old,” Theo assured him, her mouth turning up in a smile, but it faded too quickly for George’s liking, “And the rest of you?”

“We’re okay,” Eliza answered, “Are you?”

“We’re—”

“Fine,” Bellamy finished for her, clipped and hard in a way that was so unlike him that George felt his eyes widen. Theo shut her eyes and took a deep breath. It was a grounding measure, one that only raised the concerns George already had.

“Bells, what’s wrong?” John asked, “What’s going on?” Bellamy refused to answer, looking anywhere else besides John or Alexander. It was clear that something was wrong. That something had changed. George wasn’t sure what to do. He didn’t want to overstep, didn’t want to demand they talk about it if they didn’t want to, but he also couldn’t stand by and let things continue the way they were. He couldn’t take the concerned look on Eliza’s face. The longing way Alexander kept staring at Bellamy. The fear in Theo’s eyes and Bells’ exhaustion. He had to do something.

“Come sit down,” George suggested, though by his tone he let them all know that it was more than just a suggestion.

“We don’t want to bot—”

“Now.”

Bellamy and Theo shared a look for the briefest moment. George wasn’t sure what signal passed between them, but it motivated Theodosia to walk towards him. Bellamy’s eyes followed her every step, a look of betrayal and confusion taking over his face. Theo stopped a few inches away from George, tilting her head up to meet his gaze.

“We can’t do this,” she said, shaking her head as tears formed in the corner of her eyes, “we can’t...” George reached out and pulled the woman close, letting her sink against him as she shut her eyes and let out a choked noise. “I can’t—”

“Theo,” Bellamy tried to comfort her, but he refused to move away from the door and Theodosia didn’t want to listen.

“I can’t keep it a secret, Bells! I’m tired of secrets! I’m tired of lying and keeping things to myself and pretending that everything is okay!” Theo snapped, pulling away from George enough to look over her shoulder, “I’m not as strong as you.” Bellamy looked away in shame.

“What happened?” Eliza wondered, drifting over to Theo and placing a hand on her shoulder. Theo opened her mouth to answer, but all that came out was a choked sob as her tears started to escape.
George passed her to Eliza and guided them down onto the bed. Right away, Theo curled up against Eliza’s chest as her emotions overwhelmed her.

“A letter came,” Bellamy answered for her, “Our...our families–”

“No!” Alexander cut in with a sharp cry. Bellamy’s face twisted and George’s heart fell into his stomach.

“The King is...He’s threatening them. Threatening everyone Aaron and Sally know back home. If they try to stop him, if they stand in his way.....who knows how many innocent people could die?” Bellamy suddenly stopped, his eyes flooding with tears. He covered his mouth to muffle his sobs, taking a moment to calm himself before he kept going. “I’m sorry. I thought I could handle this. I thought–”

“Bells,” John cut him off with a soft whisper,

“I’m scared,” he confessed, “I can’t lose my family. I can’t. I don’t know what to do! The letter said–”

“Bellamy, look at me,” Alexander ordered, his voice so strong that George felt a sense of pride well up in his chest. It still took a moment, but finally Bellamy looked at him with a tear stained face. Alexander’s face relaxed and he took a step towards the man. “I’m scared too. We’re all scared. But you don’t need to be alone in your fear. You don’t have to carry the weight of the world. At least not alone. We’re here for you. All of us.”

“Let us help you,” John added. Together they reached out their hands to Bellamy. He looked between them both a few times before throwing his arms around their neck and holding on tight.

“I’m sorry! I just wanted to be brave. I thought I could take it. Thought I could push it aside, but I can’t. They’re my parents. My siblings. I can’t lose them,” Bellamy cried. Alexander and John held him close, whispering soft words and rubbing his back. Theo and Eliza were in a similar position.

“You won’t lose them,” Alexander promised, “And you’re not in this alone. We’re going with you. We’re going to fight by your side–” George was out the door before anyone could stop him. He pressed his back against the wall, tilting his head back to stare up at the ceiling. Countless thoughts ran through his mind, making it hard for him to think. At the same time, his heart was filled with conflicting emotions and he could barely breathe without feeling as if he was drowning. He been through wars before, seen countless battles, yet this time it felt different. He didn’t know why. He was still defending his kingdom and protecting his people. Still fighting for what he believed was right. Still helping those who needed it, but it still felt as if this was so much bigger than he had originally thought.

The combination of hearing Theo’s and Bellamy’s fears, knowing how war never spares the innocent, and understanding how King Timothy will stop at nothing to keep his throne was weighing him down. He wasn’t going to be able to protect them all. Something was going to have to give. Someone would march with them to Tyst, but they wouldn’t come back. He knew it in his heart. He wasn’t ready for that to happen, wasn’t ready to lose anyone else. Wasn’t sure he would be able to take it. They had all come so far. To lose one of them now would break his heart in a way that could never be repaired.

“George, are you okay?” Aaron’s soft voice echoed down the hall. George’s head snapped towards him and he quickly pushed himself off the wall, standing tall and removing any signs of doubt from his face. The concerned look on Aaron’s face didn’t change, much to George’s disappointment.
“I thought you were with your sister,” George replied, avoiding Aaron’s question.

“We’re taking a break, or I’m taking a break. I wanted to come see you and make sure you would doing okay. Sally went to talk with Lafayette instead,” Aaron explained. He slowly walked closer, giving George a soft grin as he stopped a few inches away. Something was different about Aaron, something that George couldn’t help but notice. The younger man appeared to be walking taller, his chin up and his eyes bright. He looked better than he did when they first brought him to Lafayette’s castle. Much better. George wanted to kiss him until neither of them could think straight. Wanted to grab Aaron’s hands and run away to where they could be safe. Wanted to protect the young prince from everything that had happened to him. But he couldn’t. They had to face this. Had to stand up for what was right even if it meant putting themselves in danger. “Are you?”

“Am I what?” George asked innocently, raising an eyebrow for good measure.

“Okay?”

“Of course,” George answered easily. He glanced at the door, taking a step towards it. He could probably distract Aaron using Bellamy and Theo. Get the attention off himself as he tried to figure out a way to cope with how he was feeling.

“Please don’t,” Aaron begged, reaching out to grab his arm, “Don’t lie to me. We agreed no more lies, remember?” The guilt build up inside of him, but he quickly shook it off and focused on the present. The past was the past and there was no point holding on to his previous mistakes. Aaron was right. They did make that agreement, that promise, and he wasn’t going to go back on his word.

“Bellamy and Theodosia came to check up on us and,” George had to pause for a moment, had to take a deep breathe, “and they told us about the letters. About how your uncle is threatening their families and the people you care about. I thought I was okay, but it’s a lot...It’s a lot to handle,” George confessed. Aaron closed the distance between them, reaching up to place his hands on George's face. George allowed himself to sink into the touch, letting it chase away his worries and fears.

“It is a lot,” Aaron agreed, “That’s the other reason why I came to see you. I’ve been talking with Sally about the letters, about what my uncle is saying he’ll do and we’ve decided, I’ve decided that you...I want to keep everyone safe and I think it’s best...I need you to....” Aaron cut himself off with a sad little shake of his head. “I’ve decided that you and others will stay here with Lafayette while Sally and I handle our uncle.” George stared at the Prince in confusion, waiting for Aaron to say he was kidding. Waiting for his husband to come to his senses and retract his words, but neither of those things happened and George realized with horror Aaron meant what he had said.

“What?!” George exclaimed, unable to keep his voice level at the very idea of letting Aaron go alone.

“But–”
“But nothing!”

“George–” Aaron tried to protest, his voice rising in volume to match George's, but he refused to listen to Aaron’s misguided reasons.

“I am your husband!”

“George!”

The door to the room opened as the others spilled from the room. Aaron pulled away from George, shaking his head and fixing his clothes even though they were still perfectly fine. They stared at each other for a long time, neither wanting to break the silence now that there was an audicent. The others looked between the two of them in confusion and concern.

“What’s going on?” Bellamy wondered, finally breaking the silence. George pressed his lips together before decided that they had a right to know.

“Aaron has decided that none of us are going with him. That he should fight his uncle alone,” he growled. Aaron’s eyes narrowed at the accusation, but he didn’t deny it.

“What?!” John exclaimed, reacting the same was George had earlier, “That’s outrageous!”

“Of course we’re coming with you!” Eliza sternly added.

“You just had to get them involved, didn’t you?” Aaron grumbled, shaking his head even as the others continued to protest. Theo stepped towards the Prince, but she froze midway when Aaron gave her an icy, firm look. Part of George felt bad for getting the others involved, but a larger part of him knew the others could help. George understood wanting to keep everyone safe and go alone, but Aaron needed to realize how blind and naive he was being.

“Aaron–" George tried to get through to him. Tried to explain as best as he could.

“It is what is best,” Aaron cut him off, each word punctuation in a way that twisted them into daggers that pierced George’s heart.

“It’s not,” Eliza argued, “We’re a family. Families fight together.” Aaron ignored her, though a sad looked appeared on his face for a moment.

“You can’t,” George tried to tell him, “You can’t do this alon–”

“I have made my deci–”

“No!” George snapped. Everyone in the hallway jumped at his sharp cry, but he didn’t care, “No! I can’t lose you again!”

“You won’t lose me–” George rushed forward and covered Aaron’s mouth with his hand. Aaron’s eyes narrowed in fury for a moment until George pressed their foreheads together.

“I have to be there,” George whispered, feeling his emotions rush up from his heart into his eyes, “You have to understand. I need to be there. I need to be by your side. I can’t let you go alone. I can’t stay here and wait for you to come back because what if...what if you don’t come back? If I’m not there then you might.....I have to be there. Let me be there for you. Please.”

Aaron’s eyes widened at the words, but his shock soon faded into one of understanding. He tried to speak from behind George's hand, but his muffled tone still sounded like a protest, an argument.
George shut his eyes, unable to look at his husband anymore. How many times had he watched men and women march off to battle, leaving their loved ones waiting back home, only to never return? He couldn’t do that. He couldn’t stand back and let Aaron leave without him.

“Please?” he tried one last time, his voice sounding like shattering glass. His emotions overwhelmed him. If Aaron made him stay behind, George would never be able to move passed his guilt, never be able to live with himself for failing to protect the one he loved. “Please don’t make me stay behind.” Aaron gently pushed George’s hand away from his face, and George prepared himself for another round of fiery debate. Instead, he received a gentle kiss on his lips. The touch so soft, so fleeting that he was sure he imagined it. He opened his eyes to meet Aaron’s gentle gaze, noticing the small pool of tears in the corner of Aaron’s eyes.

“Okay,” Aaron agreed, his voice no louder than a mouse’s footsteps, “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“You can come with me, but...but you have to promise me something,” Aaron whispered, pressing another kiss to George’s lips. George reached up to grab the back of Aaron’s head, demanding the kiss last just a little longer. He pressed their foreheads together once more.

“Anything.”

“Don’t die.”

“I swear on my life I won’t,” George assured him. A broken laugh escaped Aaron, prompting George to pull him into a tight hug. Another set of arms soon joined in. George looked over to see Bellamy giving him a proud smile. Soon, everyone gathered around them and held on tightly.

“This is lovely and all,” Aaron wheezed, “but I can’t really breathe.”

“What was that?” Bellamy teased, squeezing harder until Aaron let out a whine. George kissed his husband’s head before letting go and pushing everyone else back as well.

“I’ll get you for that,” Aaron promised. His harsh glare didn’t work with the small grin on his face, but Bellamy still pretended to be scared.

“Don’t worry,” George assured him, “John and Alexander will protect you.” The two men wrapped their arms around Bellamy’s waist protectively, both placing a kiss on Bellamy’s cheeks. Their small gestures made Bellamy’s face turn red and he tried to hide his face. Eliza and Theo cooed at him, earning a dark look from Bellamy that turned into a shy smile. George watched and felt his heart yearn for this moment to last forever. Let them stay happy and safe. Keep them from danger. Save them from the darkness closing in around them. He glanced over at Aaron, noticing how his husband stared at his friends with longing and fear.

“Alright everyone, get some rest,” George announced, “We’ll go over the plan after we’ve all gotten a chance to clear our heads.” Surprisingly, no one protested and they slowly started to return to the bedroom. George reached out and grabbed Aaron’s arm, giving him a pleading look. “I need to talk to you. Alone.” Aaron glanced into the bedroom where the others were settling down on the bed together. He gave a single nod, allowing George to guide him away to their private bedroom. George shut the door behind them, watching as Aaron made his way over to the bed and sat down on the edge.

“We should probably get some rest ourselves,” Aaron said quietly, his voice so soft and timid. He stared at his hands in his lap to avoid George’s eyes.
“We should, but first...first...” George struggled with where to start. There were so many things he wanted to say, so many things he wanted Aaron to know, but he didn’t want to overwhelm the younger man. George slowly walked towards the bed and knelt down in front of his husband, reaching out to take Aaron’s hands. “Aaron, my love. Please, talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Aaron muttered, still refusing to look at George. He almost pulled his hands away, but George tightened his grip just enough to stop him. His shoulders sagged, reminding George of a wilting flower. It only raised the concerns he already had. “It’s nothing you need to worry about.” Clearly, this was going to be harder than George thought. He needed to come at it from a different way.

“You said it was for the best. For me to stay behind. Why would you think that?” George asked, keeping his voice gentle and curious. He didn’t want Aaron to feel as if George was attacking him, but he needed answers. He needed to understand. The room was quiet for a very long time. It took all of George’s patience not to ask again, or demand answers. His waiting finally paid off.

“My uncle...” Aaron whispered, shaking his head, “My uncle has made it very clear that he’ll stop at nothing to keep his power. I can’t lose...I don’t...” Aaron trailed off, lifting their hands to hide his face. George gave him all the time he needed to get his thoughts in order, understanding how overwhelming things were.

“I can’t lose you too.” Aaron choked, “I’ve already lost so much and I can’t...I know he’ll target you the most to get to me. I can’t–”

“Aaron,” George softly cut him off, moving their hands out of the way as he stretch up to place a kiss on Aaron’s lips, “You’re not going to lose me.” Aaron shook his head, but George grabbed his chin to hold him still. “You will not lose me. We are stronger than him.”

“You don’t know that! You don’t know what he can d–”

“Maybe not. But I know what we can do, and I know that our powers are stronger when we’re together. Your uncle may be strong, but he’s cold hearted and blinded by his own ego. Our power is based on more than that. We’re doing this to protect people, to save people and that’s a cause that gives us more power, more heart,” George assured him, pressing his forehead against Aaron’s, “I know you’re scared. I’m scared too, but I would rather be scared together than be left behind.”

“I just can’t stop,” Aaron hiccuped, his body starting to shake as tears slipped out, “I can’t stop thinking I’m going to lose you.”

“I’m right here, my little spark. Lean on me. I will help you through this.”

“I don’t want to be weak.”

“This isn’t weakness. It’s not,” George stated firmly, pulling back to stare into Aaron’s eyes, “Admitting you’re scared takes more strength then you think. Facing your fears takes even more.”

“You love Alexander and John and Eliza,” Aaron suddenly changed the subject. George nodded in agreement, allowing Aaron to guide the conversation. “They’re like children to you, and they’re your family. I fear you will....You’ll hate me if they get hurt because of me. Because of my uncle.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is true!”

“Aaron–”
“If anything happens to them it’ll be my fault! Even if you don’t say it, I know in your heart you’ll blame me!”

“I won’t,” George argued, “I swear I won’t.”

“You’re lying,” Aaron cried, pulling his hands away to wipe his tears away with a frustrated look on his face. He crossed his arms over his chest, curling in on himself. George set his hands on Aaron’s crossed arms, shaking his head.

“I’m not. I’m really not. Aaron, this is not your fault. If your uncle hurts them, any of them, Bellamy or Theo too, it’ll be on him. Not on you.”

“He’s my family.”

“True, but his sins are not yours. What he’s done, or what he will do, is not a reflection of you. You’re nothing like him, neither is Sally, and you don’t have to pay for his mistakes. If he hurts them, I’ll only blame him. Not you. Not Sally. Not anyone else in that castle. Only him,” George promised. Aaron stared at him quietly for a moment before leaning forward to capture his lips in a gentle kiss. George reached up to cup Aaron’s cheek, using his thumb to brush away any remaining tears.

“Get up here,” Aaron ordered when they pulled away, swinging his legs onto the bed before sliding under the covers. George easily obeyed, more than happy to climb into bed next to his husband. He pulled Aaron close to his chest, running his hand down Aaron’s back again and again and again. He kissed the top of his husband’s head.

“I love you, Aaron. I love you so fucking much that I can’t imagine being without you in my life. I want to go with you. I know you’re scared, but don’t push me away. Don’t leave me behind,” George begged, shutting his eyes as his emotions grew and grew.

“I love you too,” Aaron replied softly, pressing his forehead against George’s chest. George looked down at Aaron with wide eyes, “And I won’t leave you behind. We’re going to do this together, side by side like we’re meant to be. You’ll never have to be without me again. Never.”

“Never is an awfully long time.”

“It’ll be an adventure for both of us.”

“I’d like that,” George muttered, smiling to himself as he reached down to pull the covers over both of them only for Aaron to kick them off the bed completely. “What ar–” Aaron cut him off with a rough kiss and easily climbed into George’s lap to lean over him.

“Just in case,” Aaron whispered against George’s lips, “Just in case this is our last night together, I want to remember everything about you.” He slid his hands underneath George’s shirt.

“Everything.”

“This won’t be our las–”

“I said just in case,” Aaron grumbled, pushing George’s shirt up to his neck so he could run his hands down his chest. “Besides...it’s been so long and...and I didn’t think I would miss this as much as I did.” George removed his shirt, throwing it aside before covering Aaron’s hands with his own.

“I’ve missed it too,” he whispered with a tender smile. He didn’t want to mention it before, too scared that he would make Aaron uncomfortable, but now he was glad to hear that Aaron felt the same way. Being apart for so long made him miss Aaron’s touch and kisses and noises more than he
wanted to admit. Aaron returned the grin with one of his own before leaning down to attack George’s neck with his teeth. George bit his lip to keep himself from making any embarrassing noises, yet that only served to make Aaron try harder. He quickly went for the weak spot behind George’s ear, earning a sharp gasp followed by a soft moan.

“I love you,” Aaron mumbled before moving to another spot. This time, George didn’t even try to keep quiet and he could feel Aaron smiling against his skin.

“I love you too,” George echoed, reaching up to push at Aaron’s shirt until the man pulled away long enough to remove it. He slowly ran his hands up and down Aaron’s sides, then tried to lean up to kiss his chest, but Aaron pushed him back down.

“No,” Aaron ordered. George went as still as a wooden board, his eyes widening with concern, “Sorry, that’s not–I meant–” Aaron struggled to get the words out, huffing loudly and grabbing George’s hands. He placed them above George’s head, pushing them firmly into the mattress. “You’re mine.”

“Always,” George agreed without hesitation. Aaron smiled, shyly biting his lip. He placed a soft kiss on George’s forehead, then his cheek before moving to bite George’s ear. It tickled and George tried to wiggle away but he didn’t get very far.

“I’m going to be in charge this time,” Aaron whispered in a low voice. George shivered at the words and tone, unable to help himself from pressing his hips up into Aaron’s. “You’ve taken me apart so many times. It’s only fair that this time, I repay the favor.”

“Are you sure you can handle such a task?” George teased, turning his head to place a kiss on Aaron’s nose before giving him a bright smile.

“Oh, I’m very sure,” Aaron replied, pulling away to give George a lustful smirk, “Keep your hands where they are and just let me take care of you.”

“I’ll try.”

“Good enough for me.” Aaron returned his mouth to George’s neck while one of his hands found its way into George’s trousers to rest on his hip. Even while Aaron was biting his neck, surely leaving mark after mark, George’s attention was drawn to the hand resting hot against his skin. He could feel Aaron’s thumb rubbing against his hip bone. It was distracting, yet it was giving George so many ideas of what his husband might have planned for him. It left him wanting more.

“Aaron,” he gasped, “Aaron, will you–”

“Nope,” Aaron replied, popping the ‘p’ and giving George a knowing look before kissing his chest, “You’ll have to wait.”

“I can’t wait,” George whined, unable to help himself. Instead of going further, Aaron pulled his hand away from George’s hip completely. “Oh, come on!”

“Patience. I wanna try something,” Aaron told him, sitting up to look down at George with a more serious look, “You mentioned it before. Weeks ago actually, and I couldn’t get it out of my head for days. Now seems like the best time for it.”

“What did I mention?” George asked in confusion.

“Marks don’t have to hurt. Do you remember saying something like that?”
George tried to recall what Aaron was talking about, but nothing came to mind. He frowned, cursing himself for being unable to remember. Aaron only smiled, gently kissing George’s forehead and running his hands up and down his sides slowly.

“It was the night Philip and Martha slept in the bed. You said you would wear my marks with pride, but I was worried about hurting you,” Aaron explained. It still took a moment, but then something clicked in George's head.

“You said you were too sore to go again, so I let it go,” George said, “I can’t believe you remember all that.”

“I only remember because I kept thinking about how you’d look covered in my marks,” Aaron confessed, “And that’s what I want to do tonight. I want to cover you with my marks.” He moved off George's lap enough to pull his trousers down, throwing them aside before reaching into the side table for a long, thin string.

“Is that okay?” he asked, draping the string over George’s wrists. George nodded his head, hoping he didn’t look too eager about the idea. He’d had dreams about Aaron taking control, but never thought they would come true. Suddenly, he felt a calm feeling roll over him as Aaron wrapped the string around his wrists. It wouldn’t take much for him to break free, but something about the feeling of the string was comforting. Aaron ran his hands down George’s arms, rubbing the muscles here and there before he placed a kiss on each arm.

“I love you so much,” he whispered, “You have no idea how often I would think of you throughout the day, even when everything seemed to be going wrong.”

“I’m sorry about all th–” George tried to apologize again for his countless mistakes. Aaron pressed a finger to his lips.

“Shhh,” Aaron told him with his lips still brushing George’s skin, “it’s in the past. I forgive you and we’ve moved passed it.”

“But sti–ah!” George gasped when Aaron firmly bit into his arm, creating a light red mark. George’s eyes locked on the mark in shock before snapping shut with another sharp inhale when he felt a similar sting as Aaron repeated the process on his other arm. George arched his back, craving more contact like what he had just experienced. It was a strange, new feeling that sent fire down George’s spine. He could feel a steady heat building in his stomach, growing hotter with each passing second.

“Okay?” Aaron wondered thoughtfully.

“More than okay,” George assured him, watching as Aaron smiled triumphantly before placing a quick kiss in the center of his chest. He moved to the right first, giving George's nipple a quickly lick then biting to the right of it. George choked on a gasp at the dull pain that faded into burning pleasure. It was something he’d always been embarrassed by, a need he didn’t often share, but Aaron was doing a wonderful job of pulling that desire to the surface. His darling husband trailed a heated path with his mouth to George’s left side, leaving a matching teeth mark there before licking over George's nipple until it was becoming slightly too much.

“Please, Aaron, please,” he begged, trying to press his hips up to move Aaron’s attention further down.

“You sound so lovely when you beg,” Aaron replied, kissing over George's stomach before leaving a series of six marks, three on each side of his belly button. Each one was just as hard as the last, and George swore that all his blood left his head in favor of filling his cock so much it throbbed. “Keep
“This is torture,” George whined, “You’re torturing me—oh fuck—” Aaron left a dark mark on the side of George's hip, leaving him a moaning mess. Having his husband so close to where he needed him most but unwilling to give him that pleasure was driving him mad with anticipation and want. He scrambled to remember what he was saying, but words were lost to him as Aaron switched sides to give him another mark on the opposite hip. Aaron pressed his thumbs into the marks until George arched his back off the bed, his cock leaving a wet trail on his stomach.

“After this is over, after we return home, I’m going to find some good, strong rope and tie you to our bed then have my way with you all over again and again and again,” Aaron promised, pulling George into a deep kiss that seemed to rob the very air from his lungs. When Aaron pulled back to speak, the heat in his eyes and the promise in his tone cause a delighted shiver to run down George’s spine, “I think a riding crop would leave lovely marks on your chest and back. Don’t you agree?”

“Aaron,” George gasped, staring at his husband in wonder.

“Yes, love?”

“Promise me.”

“What?”

“Promise me that it’ll happen. That after this is over, we’ll do that.”

Aaron stared at him for a moment, opening and closing his mouth a few times before a gentle smile appeared on his face and his eyes went soft. He pressed his lips against George's forehead then nose, prompting George to shut his eyes and take a deep breath. It seemed dumb to get emotional now, yet he couldn’t help it. He was thankful that Aaron didn't call it out, didn't focus on it.

“I promise. I promise we’ll do it and so much more,” Aaron said firmly.

“Thank yo—ah! Ah! Aaron!” George nearly bit his tongue as Aaron suddenly wrapped his hand around George's cock and gave it a few quick, tight strokes. His toes curled, his legs shaking with need.

“Can I...” Aaron trailed off, letting George's cock go in order to slide his hand lower.

“Gods yes! Yes!” George replied, spreading his legs as much as possible to give Aaron more room. Aaron's lips turned up in a smirk. He pulled his hand away and leaned over to reach the side table. George lifted his head just enough to kiss Aaron’s shoulder, earning a smile from his husband as Aaron grabbed a jar and got to work, slicking up his fingers and rubbing them against George's hole. George bit his lip and tried to keep as still as possible as he worked. He knew his husband was still new to bedroom activities, and it’d been quite a long time since George had been on this end of things.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” Aaron ordered as he slowly pushed one finger inside. George tilted his head back to gasp, an easy smile growing on his face. He forgot how good this felt.

“I will— Ohh...I promise I will,” he muttered. His words seemed to be enough encouragement for Aaron to push his finger deeper. He carefully started to experiment, moving one way then another to see what noise George made. The look of pure concentration on his face was precious and George tried commit it to memory. He suddenly curled his finger just right to produce a loud moan and gasp from George.
“Now I just–”

“Add another, yes,” George guided him softly, holding still as Aaron followed the instructions. He was overly gentle, but George allowed Aaron to go at his pace for now without whining or complaining. Aaron started to chew on his bottom lip while moving his fingers in and out slowly. Too slowly, but it still felt good. More than good. George rolled his hips at the same time to show Aaron how well he was doing. Without a word of warning, Aaron suddenly added a third finger.

“Fuck!” George exclaimed, grabbing onto the sheets of the bed for something to hold on it. It was hard with his wrists tied, but he still managed.

“Are you okay?” Aaron asked with concern.


“Alright, alright,” Aaron cut him off, curling his fingers again. George’s whole body shook in pleasure as he gasped. His cock leaked on his stomach and he felt his face flush. “As much as I love your praise, I like it much better when you’re begging.”

“Aaron, please,” George readily obeyed, “Please, hurry up. I’m ready. I swear I’m ready.”

“Ready for what?” Aaron wondered, moving his fingers painfully slow in and out. George pulled at the sheets, feeling as if he was going mad with how damn torturous his husband was. He’d never thought he would find someone who could do this, who could make him feel so helpless yet safe at the same time, but Aaron had always exceeded his expectations.

“I’m ready for your cock.”

“I’m not sure you are,” he argued, still moving so damn slowly.

“I am!”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Gods be damned, Aaron!”

“You need to be more clear about what you want,” Aaron told him with a knowing smirk as he twisted his fingers just right. George’s eyes rolled back in pleasure but it still wasn’t enough. He wanted more. Needed more. “Otherwise, how can I be convinced you really want it?” Aaron replied, his tone damn near purring. George could feel something in him snap.

“Aaron. Aaron, my darling little, fucking spark. Will you please fucking hurry up and fuck me with your cock?!” George demanded almost hysterically, doing his best to beg with his voice as well as with his eyes and body. “Please..” He whispered heavily, giving Aaron his strongest pleading look. Aaron laughed and gently removed his fingers, wiping them off on the sheets before shifting forward to rub his cock against George’s. George’s mouth watered with need and want, wishing to flip the situation and make Aaron scream, but he held back.

“You have no idea how good you look,” Aaron whispered, wrapping his hand around both their cocks and giving just enough strokes to leave George’s mind swimming in pleasure, “Covered in my
“You’re all I want,” George sighed as Aaron shifted enough to press the head of his cock against George’s entrance. He shut his eyes and tilted his head back, focusing on what his body was feeling instead of what he could see. A strong, familiar hand took hold of his waist as Aaron guided his cock in. The first push was always the worst, always the one that made George tense, but he forced his body to relax by taking deep, calming breaths. George cracked open an eye and was surprised to see his husband’s previously controlled expression crumbling under the pleasure.

“This is different,” Aaron muttered, sounding just as breathless as George felt, “Holy shit–Does it–Does it always feel like this?”

“Feel like what?” George panted. He wanted to snap the string and grab onto Aaron’s shoulders or his hips or something, but he held himself back. Instead, he wrapped one of his legs around Aaron’s waist, placing his heel into Aaron’s back to pull him closer.

“So tight and warm,” Aaron groaned, pushing his cock deeper with a loud groan. George shuddered at his husband’s words, doing his best to encourage him to speed up, but Aaron continued to go at a snail pace. It only served to drive George wild. He could feel every single inch of Aaron’s cock as it slide into him, each inch dragging relentlessly against every sensitive nerve. George bit at his lip, trying not to give in so soon, but it only got worse when Aaron maintained his pace even as he started to pull back out. George’s willpower finally snapped. He couldn’t take it anymore. He needed Aaron to fuck him into the mattress. Needed it like he needed air.

“Please. Please. Please please please! Aaron! Hurry up!”

“Hurry up?” Aaron asked with a small, devilish smirk on his face. How did George end up so lucky? Aaron was perfect in so many ways. Smart and cunning. Beautiful. Quick witted. Kind. Gentle. Caring. Adventours. The list could go on and on forever. He couldn’t have asked for a better partner even if he tried and he was forever grateful that he got to call such an amazing man his husband. Aaron raised an eyebrow, and George realized he’d hadn’t replied to the question yet, too busy staring at Aaron instead.

“You know what I mean and what I want.” Perhaps he should add constantly testing his patience to the list as well.

“I want to hear you say it. Say it for me, George. Please?”

“Fuck me. Take me until I can’t think of anything else besides how you make me feel. Drive me crazy,” George begged, lifting his head for a kiss, “I’m nearly there already.” Aaron didn’t disappoint, pressing their lips together for a deep kiss as he started to increase his rhythm. George gasped into the kiss, forcing himself to pull away as Aaron’s slow thrusts turned faster and faster. It was just what George needed– No…It was so much more. Each thrust sent a wave of pleasure flooding through his body. Every movement built him up till he felt like he was almost floating with it.

“Reme–remember when–when I was shy about making noise?” Aaron panted, pressing his lips against George’s throat. He let out a loud groan as he shifted his hips and slammed into George with more force.

“I–I remember,” George replied, smiling at the memory of their first time so long ago. “I also remember you being so worried about messing up.” Aaron huffed, shaking his head as he pulled away to look at George’s eyes, one of his hands moving to rest on George’s cheek.
“We’ve come so far, my sweet husband.” he whispered.

“So far indeed. And we’ll go even farther.”

“Together.”

“Always together,” George assured him, raising his arms to place his bound hands around Aaron’s neck, keeping him close so George could kiss over his face until Aaron started to laugh between his moans. His hips never skipped a beat, thrusting into George over and over again. George moved with him as best as possible, their pants and moans mixing together. It was heavenly and he never wanted it to stop, never wanted to leave this moment.

“George,” Aaron choked out, sounding out of the breathe as he wiped off his forehead, “How do you— the thing—how do you find it?”

“Find what?”

“The spot that’ll make you feel good. The thing you do to me every time. I can’t remember what it’s called right now.”

“Oh! That’s...well...Try to aim towards the front,” George explained. It was hard to guide Aaron towards the right angle without his hands or any real idea how he did it, but the younger man refused to give up. Even with his thrusts becoming more wild and rough George enjoyed himself and he continued to try his best to help.

“You make this look so fucking easy,” Aaron complained after another trial and error, “I’m never gonna get it.”

“Giving up already?”

“Don’t mock me.”

“I’m not, but maybe now you’ll appreciate how well I tr–AH!”

“Finally!” Aaron cheered, repeating the same motion again and again as George cries got louder and louder. He pulled Aaron down for a messy kiss that left them both breathless before arching up into the next thrust. He lost track of where Aaron’s mouth went next, so lost in his pleasure that he could hardly think straight. Their bodies move together, sweat building on George’s forehead as they kept going and going. The heat in his stomach grew with every thrust until it began to coil like a wire ready to snap.

“A–a–a–Aaron,” he choked out, praying to the Gods for his husband to understand.

“I know. I know, just a little longer. Hold on just a little longer for me. I want you to cum with me. Just like the first time. I want us to finish together.”

“That wa–ah!” It was nearly impossible for him to speak and it only got worse as Aaron wrapped one of his hands around George’s cock, stroking it slowly in comparison to his thrusts. Aaron pressed their cheeks together, breathing heavily in George’s ear.

“Cum for me. Fall apart with me,” he ordered, “let me catch you.”

“Aar–Aaron!” That was the only warning George could give before he threw his head back and let the pleasure consume him. His body arched off the bed, legs and arms shaking as he let out a cut off groan followed by a sigh, spilling into Aaron’s hand and across his stomach. It only took three or
four more thrusts for Aaron to echo his pleasure. George felt a sudden heat fill him, flushing at it before he smiled. Aaron collapsed onto George’s chest, breathing heavily. George counted to twenty in his head, then snapped the string holding his wrists together. He wrapped his arms around Aaron and held him tight.

“Hey,” Aaron whined, “who says we’re done?”

“I do,” George replied, kissing his head, “It’s time for sparks to sleep.”

“I’m not even tired.” George had to fight hard to keep himself from laughing.

“Neither am I,” he lied, “but some rest will do us both good.”

“If you say so,” Aaron finally agreed, pulling his hips back just enough to slide his now soft cock out of George. George bit back a groan at the feeling, reminding himself that this wouldn’t be the last time he’d experience such a wonderful thing. He whispered a small spell to clean them both off, then pulled the blankets up over them as Aaron got comfortable.

“I love you,” he softly said.

“Love you too. Now go to sleep.”

George couldn’t stop himself from chuckling as he shut his eyes. It only took a few seconds for Aaron to fall asleep, and if George held him a little tighter that night no one else could judge him.
"Aaron, on your left!" George warned.

Aaron didn't even bother to look as he moved his shields to cover his left flank. His sword clashed with one of the King's Guards, but the woman was not ready for the large oak tree that suddenly broke through the floor. Aaron stepped back just in time to watch the guard fly towards the ceiling. He sent a set of vines to catch her, leaving her helplessly tangled up as he made his way further down the hall to catch up with George and the others. He'd been expecting his Uncle to resist, but it still pained Aaron to see so many guards standing in their way. He'd given strict orders for no one to be killed. He refused to take back his kingdom through bloodshed and death. The only person who needed to die today was King Timothy. Two guards let out matching battle cries and charged at Aaron. Thankfully, they didn't get very far before Benjamin and Caleb intercepted them with a clever attack. The two men fought as a single unit. Their magic was so intertwined that it was hard to know where one ended and the other started and together they were incredibly strong. Benjamin was a master illusionist, everything he created look so real that even Aaron believed it. On the other hand, Caleb was the best manipulator Aaron had ever seen. It was easy to see how their talents fit together. Benjamin created a visual illusion while Caleb morphed the material world. The confusion Benjamin's illusions caused gave Caleb enough time to create giant sinkholes to catch and trap multiple guards. Aaron had even seen him using the wall to create stone hands to safely hold their enemies at bay. Caleb and Benjamin cleared a path for Aaron towards his sister, offering Aaron matching smiles before turning back towards the battle.

Benjamin and Caleb weren't the only people from Frihet who'd join them. Dolley and Abigail were scaling the walls above them, both specializing in mimicking the abilities of animals. Dolley made her skin tough as tough as a rhino while Abigail transformed her eyes to match a hawk's. They were the best lookouts Aaron could have asked for. They kept to the high ground, shouting down warnings and picking off guards here and there. Lafayette had offered to send the full Frihet army and cavalry with them for their mission, but Sally and Aaron politely refused. This wasn't an invasion, nor an all out battle. Aaron didn't want his people to be frightened by countless soldiers marching through the city. Aaron did allow for Lafayette to select a team of knights, including Maria, to accompany them. John, Alexander, and Bellamy had come as well, though Aaron had tried his best to get them to stay behind. Aaron had begged, threatened, and even tried to blackmail Bellamy into staying in Frihet, but his friend refused to listen. At least Theo wasn't in middle of the battle. Aaron had been able to convince her that it was best for her to stay with Eliza and maintain a medical station while keeping the peace among the people who lived in the capital city. Aaron had no such luck proving to Bellamy that it was best for him to stay behind, and where Bellamy went, so did Alexander and John. Aaron had to admit that they worked together well, but that didn't stop the fear that squeezed his heart. Bellamy had everything to lose in this fight. His family, his partners, and his life were all in danger. Aaron had ordered Maria to keep an eye on all three of them. He wasn't sure what he would do if something were to happen to any of them. There was so much at stake, so much
that could go wrong.

_Don't dwell on stuff like that_ Indigo told him. Her weight on his shoulders was comforting as they moved through the castle. He'd been fearful that she would thrown him off balance, but they were able to easily correct any mishaps thanks to his Regle.

_I can't help it_, Aaron replied as he scanned the hallway. They were making good time and standing their ground, yet the guards kept coming. How many guards did King Timothy have? Was this just a distraction so he could slip away? They had a few back up plans in case Timothy made a run for it, but Aaron didn't have much hope for catching his uncle if he ran. He knew that Timothy had friends in low places who would probably be willing to help him. They had to catch him here. It had to be today, or everything that Aaron and Sally hoped to achieve could be ruined.

_He's here_, Indigo assured him.

_How do you know?_ Aaron wondered.

"Aaron!" Sally called, freezing a guard's feet to the ground before melting his sword. She fell in step next to Aaron looking out of breathe but alive and unharmed, _"We're getting closer to the throne room."_

"We are," Aaron replied, still waiting for Indigo's reply, but the dragon had gone unusually quiet. He pulled Sally closer to him as he slammed three guards into the nearby wall with his shield. He pressed just hard enough to knock them out before returning his shield to his side.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Let's keep moving."

He didn't make it very far before Sally reached out and grabbed his arm. He paused, looking back at her in confusion to find a terrified look on her face.

"Sally?" he muttered.

"What if-" Sally tried to ask.

Aaron didn’t have time to listen to the rest, shifting his shields just in time to protect everyone from a barrage of arrows. Indigo helped to keep him steady as the arrows broke against the shield. John and Alexander suddenly rushed by to help George, who was struggling with a large team of guards. Aaron gave Sally an apologetic look, wishing he had more time to talk to her. He understood the fear in her eyes. He felt it too. The castle with it's cold stone walls and thick doors held countless painful memories for both of them. As they got closer and closer to the throne room, the memories only grew darker. Soon they would pass the closet where Aaron's Uncle had locked him away. He wondered if the throne room still held the whipping bench or if it'd been removed after Aaron was married. Did Timothy have the bloody curtains replaced? Aaron doubted it. The blood had been a reminder of what happened to people who spoke out of turn. Aaron could still feel the slap that split his lip and caused his nose to bleed. He could only imagine the harsh memories that were plaguing Sally's thoughts as well. But he couldn’t afford to stop. He had to keep everyone safe. Had to keep moving. He placed his hand over Sally’s, then ran to catch up with the others. He kept a closer eye on his sister as they made their way down the hall. As soon as he was close enough to George, he reached out and grabbed the man’s hand. Just for a moment. He need one touch, just one, to give him the strength to move on.

"Are you okay?" George asked, pushing Aaron down at the last second to disarm a guard. Aaron set
another woman flying before she had a chance to get any closer to George's back.

"It's—it's hard to be back here," Aaron confessed. Caleb made a quick set of stairs in front of them, allowing them to climb up above the battle. Alexander threw Aaron a splash potion seconds before Abigail grabbed him off the ground. He threw the potion, leaving nearly fifteen guards stuck in a green goo.

"Stay with me," George suggested, landing next to Aaron and waving Dolley ahead of him. Aaron couldn't help but smile at the words.

"Always," he replied, catching another potion from Alexander.

**Aaron, your uncle,** Indigo spoke up.

*What is it?*

*I can hear his thoughts.*

*What? How? I thought—*

*It's not like speaking with you or Nessie. It's...it's distorted and dark. I think...I think he found a way to use Regle unnaturally. Usually, a person needs to be born with the ability, but he may have found another way.*

*Why would he...* Aaron didn't even have to finish that thought. He knew why. If King Timothy could use Regle, then he would be able to control the people around him. He wouldn't need to use a brain worm or anything similar in order to get into someone's head. He would have complete control. That's what he wanted.

*Can you tell me where he is?*

**He's in the room straight ahead of us.**

"Sally," Aaron called, "Do you know about Uncle doing any experiments on himself?"

"On himself?!" Sally exclaimed, shaking her head, "Not that I know of? Why-"

"Heads up!" John warned. Caleb moved a wall just in time to stop a flying dagger from hitting Sally.

"Why are you asking?" George wondered. For a moment, Aaron panicked. How was he going to explain how he-He quickly cut off that line of thinking. George knew the truth about his gift. Everyone knew and no one feared him because of it. It was still easy for him to forget and hard for him to move passed years of hiding the truth.

**Embrace it.**

"Indigo thinks my uncle may have found a way to use Regle. An unnatural way. And if he did, then we might all be doomed," Aaron warned. George's eyes widened at the news. He looked down the hall at the guards standing in their way and shook his head.

"We don't have time for this nonsense."

"Should we move to the next stage?" Aaron asked.

"We don't have a choice," George confessed, lowering his sword for a moment. He had such a
hopeless look in his eyes. Aaron couldn’t stand it. He placed a hand on his husband’s shoulder and squeezed.

"We can do this," he assured the man, believing his words more than ever before. As scared as he was, as horrible as the memories were, he was still willing to face those fears in order to bring peace and happiness to everyone else. He’d been living in the dark long enough. It was time to bring back the light that his parents had tried so hard to create. He wasn't going to let his Uncle ruin this. Never again. The hopelessness faded from George’s eyes. He squared his shoulders and raised his chin, looking proud and ready. Just when Aaron thought he couldn’t fall any more in love with George.

"Benjamin! Caleb!" George yelled, "We need to try to get into the throne room now!"

"Yes, sir!" the couple replied in unison.

"Everyone to George and Aaron!" Dolley called out. Abigail dropped down from the ceiling while Alexander and the Frihet guards rushed back towards them. John and Bellamy helped Sally make her way over as Dolley scurried down the wall. Aaron double and triple checked that they had everyone.

"Shield us, Aaron," George ordered once they were all together. Aaron nodded his head before shutting his eyes. He pushed out his magic and expanded his shield until he created a dome big enough to hold them all. The guards hit against the purple walls, trying their hardest to break in, but they were never be able to break through Aaron's shield. Never. He'd been trained his whole life to handle as many enemies as possible. All his uncle's training, all the tests and pain he put Aaron through, was coming back to haunt him. Aaron couldn't wait to show his Uncle what he could do. He was going to make the man pay for all the suffering he had caused.

Using Aaron’s shield to bid them as much time as they needed, Benjamin and Caleb started to take care of the rest of the guards. Caleb created holes upon holes that trapped the guards feet while Benjamin created enough illusions to distract the guards from what was happening. It took time and concentration, but finally all the guards were either stuck or knocked unconscious. Their path was finally clear and they could make their way to the throne room door.

"Sally," George called the princess forward, "We need to get through." Aaron took his sister's hand, squeezing it tight and offering her a soft smile. Sally only gave him a fearful look before she looked at the tall door.

"I don't know if I can do this," she whispered, "I don't know if I can face him."

"You can," Aaron stated.

"What if-"

"There are no what ifs," Aaron cut her off, "We can face him together because together we are stronger then he will ever be. We are not alone anymore, Sally. We have friends and a new family that will protect us. Love us. Care for us."

"I'm scared."

"I know. I know. But you can do this. Show Timothy how strong you really are. Show him that you won't be his puppet anymore." Aaron watched as the fear left Sally's eyes. Her shoulders relaxed and she stood up taller.

**You go girl.** Indigo praised. Aaron smiled, letting go of Sally's hand and preparing himself. Sally took a deep breath then stomped one of her feet against the floor. The ground broke beneath her feet,
the crack growing towards the door. As soon as it reached the wood, the door exploded into thousands of pieces. It was nearly impossible to see through all the dust and debris. They stood ready and waiting.

"Great job," George whispered, placing his hand on Sally's back for a moment. Her face lit up at the words and Aaron felt his heart melt. This was the life he'd always wanted. This was the family he'd craved as a child. He wanted Sally to be apart of it too, wanted to create a brighter future for all of them where they would be safe and happy. They could have that as soon as they got rid of Timothy. The whole world would be better once he was no longer in power. Slowly, the dust from the door cleared away. Aaron's blood run cold. Bellamy's let out a sharp gasp. Sally shudder in fear. Alexander swore under his breath. None of them moved. Aaron doubted they were able to as they all took in the scene before them.

The throne room was filled with people, ordinary people. No armor. Only a few swords here and there. Most of them were carrying rakes and other household items. They were line up in rows all the way back to the throne. Bellamy's family members, including his younger sister were among them. As were Theo's parents and grandparents. Of all the horrors Aaron had prepared for, this would never had made it on his list. How could his uncle do such a thing? How could he hide behind innocent people? The throne room was the same as Aaron remembered. Perfectly white walls with golden details outlining the history of Tyst. The floor was white and featured a black carpet that lead from the door to the base the steps that sat before the throne. There used to be two identical thrones back when Aaron's parents were alive, but according to the castle servants, the thrones had been destroyed after their death and replaced with the current one that King Timothy was lounging in. It took every in Aaron's power to stay calm. His Uncle looked so smug, so pleased with himself. Aaron hated him more and more with each passing second.

"Mother?" Bellamy called out, his voice cracking. "Mother!" The woman in question didn't move, didn't even blink. It was as if she hasn't heard him. Bellamy marched forward towards her. He nearly made it out of Aaron's shield before Alexander grabbed his arm and pulled him back. Aaron looked closer at the people, swearing that there was something familiar about them. Something that he recognized. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

"Let me go! I have to get h-" Bellamy snapped. Suddenly it clicked.

"Bells, Bells she can't hear you," Aaron tried to explain.

"Of course she can hear me! Just let me go get th-"

"Brain worms," Sally stated. Bellamy went still, his eyes widening at her words as the horror started to sink in.

"That bastard," Dolley cursed.

"More like the devil," Caleb growled.

"Look everyone!" King Timothy declared, "Our prince and princess have returned and they brought guests! Come in, come in." No one moved. His uncle sighed, snapping his fingers. The crowd jumped to attention and pointed their makeshift weapons at them. "I said come in." Everyone looked at George, who then looked at Aaron and Sally. Aaron took a deep breath and reached for Sally's hand. Together, they walked into the throne room. Aaron kept his shield up and his mind sharp. The crowd parted as they walked. It was eerie to see the maids and cooks and guards Aaron had grown up with standing as still as statues. It was easy enough for him to guess what Timothy's plan was. Aaron didn't have the heart to hurt these people and he knew the others didn't either. Countless human shields. They didn't have a plan for this. Aaron didn't know what to do.
I have an idea, but you're not going to like it.

I'm opened to anything right now, he confessed. He flinched as King Timothy stood up from his seat, unable to help himself as his mind raced. How many times had he stood in this exact place as a child? Timothy had only ever descend from that throne to cause Aaron pain and suffering. Clearly, that hasn't changed.

There's more then one way to get rid of brain worms. An easier way, but it involves you using Regle, and a lot of it.

You're right. I don't like this idea, Aaron admitted. He'd been trying his best to avoid using Regle on people, but looking around at the crowd, he didn't see any other option. He would have to try. He just hoped the others would be able to forgive him or at least understand.

"Sally," King Timothy said, walking down the steps towards them, "It's so good to see you, my dear. It's a shame that you failed me again, but I can't say I'm surprised. You were always a weak girl. So much time and effort wasted." Aaron's shield kept him at bay, but he was still close enough that Sally started to shiver with fear. George stepped in front of her and glared at the King.

"Your time has come, Timothy. Your reign is over," he growled. Timothy only smiled, lifting his hand to knock against the shield.

"My reign has only just begun. I have so many plans for the future. It's a shame that you won't be around to see them. I have to say, you've gotten much better, Aaron. You were always skilled at protecting yourself, but now you'll have to make a choice. I do hope you make the right one."

"Let my mother go, dickhead!" Bellamy ordered.

"Why you're so surprised, boy? I did warn you that this could happen," Timothy replied, sounding bored in the face of Bellamy’s anger. Something wasn't right. Aaron didn't like this at all. They needed to get these people out of here before Timothy could make his move.

What do I need to do?

You'll have to get into their minds and kill the worm from the inside.

That doesn't sound easy...

It won't be, but I'll help. Think of it like firing an arrow. You want to cast out your mind towards the person, then pull their consciousness towards you.

Like summoning an apple.

That's not a bad comparison. Start with someone close. I'll guide you.

Aaron turned his attention to a man standing just outside the shield. He shut his eyes for a second and cast out his magic in a thin line, similar to the way George taught him to grab the apple. It took a few tries before he felt the magic land on something. Aaron shuddered as an additional voice echoed inside his mind.

You've got it! Now pull him in.

Aaron gently pulled, remembering how he'd hit George with the apply by using too much force the first time. Slow. Gentle. The voice got louder and clearly the more he pulled.
Stand still. Don't move. Keep your eyes on the Prince, the man's voice echoed. It was distorted and dark. It didn't sound human. Aaron felt a chill run up his spine as it kept talking.

This is the harder part, Indigo instructed. You need to send a shock or something into his mind to kill the worm without killing the man at the same time.

Sounds like a piece of cake, Aaron grumbled.

You can do this, Aaron. You can. And you need to hurry up. We don't have much time before your Uncle stops talking and you have a lot more to go.

What was the best way to kill the worm? For Sally, they'd used the necklace of heroism, but Aaron didn't have that on hand at the moment. They'd protected themselves with a potion of lig—that might work! Light! It was worth a shot. Aaron shut his eyes and tried to focus all his energy on thinking about light. The more he thought about it, the clearer things became. The light couldn't come from the sun or a candle. It had to be something more magical, something that always stirred up good emotions in living things. Star light. Aaron created a clear image in his mind, then pushed it out through the connection. The man fell to his knees, catching everyone's attention. Aaron didn't let go. Not yet. He could feel the worm trying to fight back, could hear it screaming in his mind, but he refused to let go, refused to give up. The man bent over on his hands and started to gag. Aaron pushed more and more star light until finally the man expelled a small black worm. Aaron broke the connection between them. The man looked around the room in confusion, his eyes widening in fear. Aaron waved at him to run.

Be careful! Your shield is flickering, Indigo warned. Damn it. That was a problem. He still had so many people to go, but he also needed to protect the others from Timothy.

I'm not going to be able to do both, he admitted. It took too much concentration to maintain the shield, concentration he needed to expand his thoughts. They needed to think of something else. Aaron looked over at George, noticing that his husband was already looking around the room. Dolley and Abigail were whispering, their voices so quiet that Aaron couldn't hear a word of what they were saying. The others were already working on a plan. Aaron needed to trust them to have his back. They could do this. They had to. Timothy moved to stand in front of Aaron, looking him up and down before laughing.

"Do you know how long I've been waiting for one of you to show signs of your mother's gift?" Aaron paused at the words, starting at his Uncle in confusion. His mother's gift? What was he talking about? "I'd been hoping that it would be your sister. She was always easier to manipulate. A simple threat towards you and she obeyed every order perfectly. I should have guessed that you, the disobedient child, would be given the gift of Regle," Timothy explained, "And just like your mother, you refuse to embrace the true power it gives you."

"You have no right to talk about our mother," Sally snapped. Aaron felt pride swell up in his heart at her words.

Focus on your task!

Aaron cast of his thoughts again, trying to expand his area to see if he could lash on to more than one mind at a time. Again, took a few tries, but finally he felt his mind connect with two people. He went through the same process of pulling them towards him slowly as his Uncle ranted.

"She was my sister before she was your mother, and she was always a weak hearted witch. She never understood real power, and neither do you. She could have used Regle to bring peace to the
world, but instead she wanted to pretend that she was normal. Her husband was just as bad, wanting to pass new laws that would give commonors the right to use magic whenever they wanted. Such a weak minded couple," Timothy complained. It was hard for Aaron to ignore his Uncle's words, but Indigo was there to help, encouraging Aaron every step of the way until two set of voices filled his mind. He cast of the light. It was easier this time and it didn't take as long for the worms to be expelled. He feared that Timothy would catch on, but the King was quickly distracted.

"Is that why you killed them?" Abigail wondered. Aaron had always feared that that was the case. Timothy had never been in line for the throne after Sally and Aaron were born, but, with their parents dead and both of them too young to rule, the crown had been given to Timothy. He had to have known that his sister's death would cause such a chain reaction. Aaron had hoped and prayed it wasn't the case, but now he knew in his heart that it was true.

"The lives of a few are worth maintaining order," Timothy answered.

"You monster!" Sally yelled, "She was your sister!"

"And that is why you will never be fit to rule, Sally. You're too emotional. You don't see the bigger picture. Sometimes, you have to spill a little blood in order to create something better."

"You're wrong," John growled, "You're just a horrible person and you've convinced yourself that your way is the best, but it's not."

"Keep going Aaron," Bellamy whispered, his voice sounding right in Aaron's ear, "We'll keep him distracted for you." Aaron had to fight back a smile as he cast of his mind again, this time aiming for three people. It was getting easier with each pass, and Aaron could tell that he was more quicker. There was still so many to do, but at least he felt more confident about it.

"Maybe I am," Timothy replied, "But my way is working out better than your King. Lafayette doesn't stand a chance against my armies and soon Frihet will fall."

"Morker will never let that happen," George assured him.

"Morker will be too busy dealing with the Northern Islands to come to Frihet's aid."

"We won't let that happen," Alexander said, "We're going to stop you." Aaron smiled at the man's words as he freed three more people from the brain worms. The first man Aaron freed helped them towards the exit.

"It's sweet that you think that," Timothy chuckled, "but you're very naive if you think that you'll be able to stop me. You forget that I trained Sally and Aaron for years. I know their weaknesses and their strengths. I can promise you that none of you will be leaving here alive."

"You shouldn't make promises you can't keep," George warned. Timothy only smiled in return.

CRACK!

The ground in front of Aaron's feet broke. A hand holding a knife shot out and sliced into Aaron's ankle.

"AH!" he cried out in pain, jumping back to avoid another attack. The hole got bigger and bigger. Rebecca suddenly crawled out of it wielding two long daggers. She rushed towards Aaron, but was stopped at the last second by George's own shield.

"It will give me great pleasure to kill you," Rebecca snarled at him, "It will be my final lesson to the
Prince." It wasn’t difficult for Aaron to remember Rebecca’s lessons. She had been his teacher from the moment he was old enough to fight, and she believed the best way to learn was through pain. She used to force him to run laps until he nearly passed out just for a single mistake in his technique. The worst was when she made him read a book out loud. Every time he missed a word or stuttered, Rebecca would berate him. He could still hear the insults she used to throw at him. It’d taken him years to create a thick skin in order to prevent her words from cutting him so deep, yet the scars were still there. It didn’t surprise him that she was here. She had always been Timothy’s right hand knight, and Aaron knew she would go to great lengths to keep her own power.

"Fuck off," Sally yelled, pulling up pieces of the ground and toss them at the woman. Rebecca used her daggers to brush them, but she missed the dagger that Benjamin had hidden among them. It pierced through her shoulder and forced a painful gasp from her mouth.

"You little-" Rebecca snarled as she pulled the dagger out.

"Keep working, Aaron," George ordered, "We can handle her." Aaron wasn't so sure about that. There wasn't enough room inside his shield for a battle, and the open hole in the ground was an easy entrance for more enemies.

*I need to work faster. I need something better.*

**Attack them all at once.**

*What? How?!*

*Think of the light and push it out towards everything. You'll hit George and the others, but it won't hurt anyone or anything besides the worms.*

*My shield...*

*You'll have to let that go.*

"I have to drop the shield," Aaron quickly told the others.


"Are you sure?" Caleb asked. Aaron could only nod as he looked around the room. Would he really be able to do it? This was the first time he'd tried anything like this before. One or two minds was one thing, but a blast this big was going to take a lot more out of him.

"Get ready," George ordered, prompting everyone to brace themselves. Sally and Benjamin were still doing a solid job keeping Rebecca at bay, but they all knew that the minute Aaron dropped the shield, they would be opened to attacks from Timothy himself. And they had no idea how many guards were waiting to attack. Aaron was more worried about the people. Timothy had already proven that he didn't care about using them. The last thing Aaron wanted was to force Bellamy to fight his own family. He let go of his shield, pulling the magic back towards him. Caleb placed himself in front of Aaron while Abigail guarded his back. Aaron shut his eyes, calling forth the image of starlight.

"Archers!" Dolley screamed.

"Prepare yourselves!" Alexander warned. Aaron heard the twang of bows and felt an arrow fly passed his cheek. It didn't scare him as much as it should have. He was ready to bleed, ready to face any amount of pain as long as it meant they defeated his uncle in the end. He wasn't leaving this
castle until Timothy was dead. He thought long and hard about the same starlight as before, yet this time he knew it wouldn't be enough. He was dealing with too many minds for such a simple thought to work. He needed more, something that was so strong not even Timothy would be able to counteract it. But what? What thought would create enough light? An idea slowly took shape in Aaron's mind. George's last surprise. The two of them sitting under the stars together. Tears had been shed, but Aaron had never felt more alive and loved under those stars. He would never be able to forget those lights. That type of light could never fade away. That had to be it.

He cast out the memory and the light across the room, feeling it brush over the minds of his friends and lover. Bellamy gasped in shock while Alexander loudly swore. Aaron couldn't help but smile at their reactions. Thankfully, everyone soon relaxed and let the light take hold without fighting back. Rebecca tried to resist, pushing back against the light. Aaron kept his focus and soon she was overtaken by the light. Aaron cast it wider and wider until the light filled the room. Voices upon voices echoed through his mind. Some were familiar, like George and Bellamy, but he could also hear the distorted voices of the brain worms. He turned all his attention on them, ordering them to be expelled from their hosts. Suddenly, the voices turned on him together and screamed. Pain tore through Aaron's mind.

"Ah!" he cried out in agony, nearly falling to his knees. The screaming grew louder and louder as the brain worms tried to push him out, but Aaron planted his feet and shoved them back. He was not going to lose to them. He was not going to let anyone else get hurt. They continued to scream. Aaron decided that he simply had to scream louder. He took a single deep breath, held it for a moment, then let it out all at once.

GET OUT! he commanded. One by one the distorted voices faded. New voices, full of confusion and fear took their place. Aaron held on to the connection until the last voice faded. He slowly pulled back the light and opened his eyes to find the crowd of people on their knees. Brain worms littered the floor, burned to a crisp and harmless. George and the others were shaking their heads, unsteady on their feet.

"Shake it off," Aaron pressed them, "We still have to-"

It all happened so fast. One moment, Timothy was over ten feet away. The next, he was in front of Aaron.

"Aaron!" George screamed. Aaron saw the glint of metal. He prepared himself for pain. Then someone shoved him out of the way. He fell hard to the floor, turning just in time to see Timothy's dagger sink into Bellamy's stomach.

"NO!" Aaron screamed. He couldn't move, couldn't breath. The world moved around him, but Aaron could barely focus on anything else as he watched blood stain Bellamy's shirt. This was all his fault. He should have made Bellamy stay back. He should have moved faster. He should have protected his friend.

Get up. Aaron, get the fuck up! Indigo screamed at him. The world came rushing back all at once.

"Fuck you!" Alexander roared, charging towards Timothy. Rebecca stepped in his path and deflected his sword. John came next, but Rebecca was too fast for both of them. Aaron knew she'd been holding back before. She always did enjoy toying with her enemies before making the finishing move.

"Dolley, Abigail, get everyone else out of here," George ordered. Dolley and Abigail obeyed, rushing towards the confused crowd of people.
"My son! Please, let me see my son!" someone cried. Aaron's eyes snapped over towards Bellamy's mother. His heart broke at her tear stained face. Dolley refused to let her go, dragging her out of the room as she screamed.

"This is your problem, Aaron," Timothy whispered as he pulled his dagger out. Bellamy crumbled to the ground. "You care too much about other people. They’re just pawns, things you can cast aside when they stop being useful. But instead you become attached. It's a pity really. You could have been a great King if you’d only listened to me."

"I'm going to kill you!" Alexander yelled. Rebecca blasted him back with a spell before turning it on John. Caleb caught them both before they could hit the ground. George moved to Aaron's side, a silent question in his eyes. What were they going to do? That was the problem. Aaron didn’t know what to do. Guards started to come through the door behind them. Soon they would be outnumbered. They needed a plan. They needed to do something!

“As Rebecca said before, Aaron, this will be your final lesson,” Timothy told him, raising his hand and pointing it at him. Aaron braced for an attack, summoning all his magic into his hands in preparation for a shield. Timothy was known for countless curses and hexes, many of which Aaron’s learned to counter; however, he was ready for Timothy to throw anything at him. He was not going to back down.

Aaron- Indigo tried to warn him, but it was already too late. At the last second, Timothy shifted his attention to George. Something, Aaron didn’t even know how to describe it, shot out from Timothy’s palm and slammed into George’s chest. The dark redish blast sent George backwards into a wall. The man crumbled to his knees.

“George!” Aaron screamed, rushing to his husband’s side. He knelt down, scanning the floor for blood as he placed a steadying hand on George’s shoulder. There wasn’t any. No burns. No marks. Nothing. George didn’t appeared to be injured at all. That didn’t make any sen-

Aaron look out! Indigo yelled. George’s hand flew up and wrapped around Aaron’s throat. He grabbed at the man’s wrist, but George’s grip only tightened.

“Ge-George-” Aaron wheezed. The man finally lifted his head. Aaron’s heart dropped into his stomach. Dark red eyes stared back at him. George slowly stood up from the ground, dragging Aaron up with him by his throat. Aaron struggled as much as possible. He shoved at George's shoulders and arm. He twisted one way then the other, yet nothing he did loosened his husband’s grip on his throat.

“Let’s begin the lesson,” Timothy announced, clapping his hands. George’s lips curled up into a creepy, dark smile. Aaron opened his mouth to call for help just as George started to squeeze even harder, cutting off his air completely. Aaron grabbed onto George's wrist with both hands, trying with all his might to pull him off.

“Aaron!” Sally screamed.

“Sally, watch out!”

“I need help!”

Aaron could hear them, his friends and family fighting, but it was getting harder and harder for him to focus. His vision started to go black. He felt too light headed to keep his eyes opened any longer. His hold on George’s wrist loosened. Was this it? Was this how it ended?
Chapter End Notes

Do you think this is how it ends?
The General XIV

Chapter by captain_trash

Chapter Notes

Prepare yourself for the pain.

WARNING: This chapter contains character death and mention of injuries.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Squeeze harder. Don't let go. Smile. Let him know that he's lost.*

No matter how hard George tried to ignored it, he couldn't stop his body from obeying the dark voice that had entered his mind. Every word sent an icy chill up George's spine, yet his body rushed to obey. The voice ordered him to grab Aaron, and now his arm refused to let go. His fingers wouldn't loosen their grip. Nothing he tried worked. He was helpless. He couldn't do a damn thing as he watched Aaron struggle to breathe. George's heart was breaking as the light in Aaron's eyes started to fade. They'd come so far, been through so much together, but now it all laid broken at George's feet. Was this how it was going to end? After all their careful planning, all their promises to one another, all their brave efforts, was his face going to be the last thing Aaron saw before he died? George would never be able to live with himself. Perhaps that was part of Timothy's plan. If only he'd been faster. If he'd only dodge the blast then this wouldn't be-

Indigo darted out and sank her teeth into George's wrist. Pain shot up his arm and he was forced to let go of Aaron's throat. His husband crumbled to his knees. He gasped for air, placing his own hand over his throat as he tried to stay awake. Indigo wrapped around him protectively as she bared her fangs at George in warning. She'd never bit anyone before, but her attack worked. A few more seconds and Aaron would have surely lost consciousness. He needed to figure out how to fight this voice, but he didn't have the faintest idea on how to do that.

*Both of you are so weak,* the voice taunted,* It's taken me years to perfect this spell, and no one has been able to break it. You've lost. Give up now, and I'll spare Aaron's life.*

*Timothy*....

*I confess, you're so thick headed that I wasn't sure this spell would even work on you. But you'll be the final piece of the puzzle. Make your choose quickly. Your kingdom, or your husband.*

*Both.*

*Tsk tsk. How greedy. Guess I'll make the choice for you. But first, let's have a little fun. I want to enjoy this.* I don't need two heirs

*You fucking basta-*

"Marrying you was a mistake," the voice cut him off with a low growl. George felt his mouth start to move, his own voice echoing the words in a dark, angry tone. Aaron lifted his head and met George's eyes, looking lost and confused. George tried to shake his head, tried to give Aaron some
type of signal, but he couldn't. Timothy's hold on him was too great. "I never wanted to marry you. Never. But they forced me and I tried to make the best of it, but you're impossible to love." Aaron flinched at the words, climbing to his feet and backing away. George's heart broke at his reaction.

**Kill him.**

*Never!*

*I offered you a choice and you didn't take it. I don't need two heirs, and Aaron has always been more trouble than he's worth. It'll be a shame to lose a Regle user, but I'll settle for a Frihet general instead. Now, kill him and make sure it hurts.*

George's body moved by itself, marching towards Aaron and summoning the sword from his ring. Aaron's eyes widened in fear. He stumbled backwards and raised a shield just in time to protect himself from George's first attack. The sword slammed into the shield, which thankfully didn't give at all, but George's body kept pushing.

*Aaron's shield will never give...*  

**Look closer,** Timothy sang. George's eyes narrowed as he stared Aaron down. It took him a moment to notice, to understand, but then it all became clear. Aaron's whole body was shaking. He looked nearly dead on his feet. He'd used too much magic, and now even the shield was draining him. Eventually the shield would give if George kept pushing. It was all just a matter of time. Time that Aaron and George didn't have. He needed to think. Needed to try and remember his mother's lessons. There had to have been something she said that could help him.

**There's nothing you can do.**

*Shut up. Just shut up.*

**He's going to die by your hands. Then, you're going to help me take Frihet.**

*Never. I would rather-*

"Aaron!" John yelled.

"Stay back!" Aaron ordered, "Stay back! He's not-I don't know what's happening, but stay back! I can handle this!"

"You can't. We both know how weak you are. You're going to fail. They're all going to die and it's all your fault," George spat, hating himself more and more with each word that passed his lips. He raised his sword and slammed it down as hard as he could on the shield. It flickered for a moment, then vanished completely. George stepped towards Aaron, raising his sword again. Aaron didn't move, didn't even blink as George got closer and closer.

**Run! Aaron Run!**

**Now he decides to be brave. What a fool.**

Suddenly, countless vines sprang up from the ground and wrapped around George's legs, arms, and waist. He tried to keep walking, but the vines tightened until his legs no longer moved. One vine squeezed his wrist until he was forced to let go of the sword. Another vine pulled it a safe distance away. No matter how George twisted and turned, he couldn't escape the vines.
What the hell is this!? Timothy snapped.

Ha! Didn't see this coming did you? George couldn't help but taunt him. He'd never been so happy to be stuck before, but now Aaron was safe from him. It would buy them all some time. No matter how hard you think you are, we're going to find a way to stop you. Your time has come, Timothy, and we'll not leaving here until you're defeated.

I admire you for having so much hope, but it'll be for nothing. You won't be leaving for a very long time. Not until I'm done using you, the King growled, But my naive nephew won't live to see another sunrise. It took George a moment to feel it. A rush of heat down his spine, a warmth spreading to his hands and feet. He cursed the gods, feeling sick to his stomach as Timothy started to twist his own magic against him. George tried to pull it back, tried to get control, but nothing he did seemed to have any effect. Timothy concentrated George's magic everywhere the vines were holding him, then set the plants on fire.

Much better, Timothy happily sighed as the dried up vines fell away. Aaron stepped back with fear written across his face.

"George. George you need to fight it," Aaron ordered, slowly backing up with fear written across his face, "You need to fight him."

I'm trying.

Fight all you want. You'll never beat me.

"How do you get rid of dark storm clouds?" Aaron asked as George broke free from the last vine and advanced towards him again. Rose bushes covered in thorns grew in his path, but Timothy easily had George summon his sword again and cut them down before they had a chance to do any damage. "You need light, George. Light. The type of light that comes from love and happiness an-" George swung his sword, aiming for Aaron's head. The prince barely managed to dodge it in time. George struck the floor instead, cracking the stone into pieces.

You are strong, Timothy praised, The perfect man to kill King Lafayette.

Never!

You don't get a say in the matter. Your body is mine. You are nothing but a tool. You can kick and scream and fight all you want, but no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, you will never be able to get rid of me.

"George please," Aaron begged, "Please you need to fight this! Please! I can't hurt you!" Nothing Aaron said stopped George from walking towards him. He dodged another attack, but even George could tell that he was getting slower. He's breathing was labored. His eyes less focused. Aaron couldn't keep this up for much longer. George had to do something. He needed the type of light that came from love, but he didn't even know what that meant! You don't get light fro-it hit him like a blow to the chest. The realization flooded his senses with new hope. The idea still didn't make complete sense to him, but it was worth a shot. He had to try. An idea was better than nothing. He thought back to his parents, to his mother's singing. No matter how scared George was she was always able to make him feel better. No matter how big the monster his mother's lullaby always chased them away. Her songs were a light in the darkness. He remembered the first time his father gave him a sword. The rush of power and strength he felt inside him. He imagined the excited look on his parents' faces after his first successful spell. So much joy and love and laughter. He pulled up memories of Yuma sneaking him cookies before dinner. He thought about the first time he held
Alexander in his arms during a thunderstorm, swearing to all the gods that he was going to love the small boy as his own until his dying breath. He recalled when Eliza healed her first animal, how proud he was at that very moment. All of these memories filled his soul and mind with so much love and happiness.

**Impressive,** Timothy's dark voice cut through the memories, *But you're forgetting something. Let me help you remember.*

His parents gravestones flashed through his mind followed by bruises on John's cheeks after another visit with his father. The way people looked down on Alexander in public. Their harsh whispers echoing as Alexander broke down. Eliza wailing after being too late to save someone's life. Aaron's face when George screamed at him in the library. The heartbroken look in his husband’s eyes as he climbed into the carriage. All George's fault. If he'd only trusted him. If he’d only been honest than Aaron would’ve never been kidnapped, never hurt in such a horrified way. George couldn't breathe, the sorrow becoming too great. He couldn't take it. Couldn't fight against it.

“Fuck!” Aaron swore, the memories fading just in time for George to watch his sword slice through Aaron’s stomach. It wasn’t a deep wound, but it was enough to make Aaron bleed. The prince pressed his hand against it as he moved away.

**Stop it! Just stop!**

Timothy only laughed, the sound echoing through his mind. George swung his sword again. Aaron tried to block it with a shield. It shattered on impact, allowing the sword to catch Aaron’s forearm.

“Ah!” Aaron cried, jumping away and holding his arm against his chest. George could see the blood covering Aaron hand. He was getting closer and closer with each passing moment. It was only a matter of time before he landed a killing blow. George could hear the others fighting, the sword of swords clashing behind him, but he couldn’t turn his head to see what was going on. He could only hope that the others were okay. That’s all he had left. Hope.

**Give up and I'll let you kill him peacefully,** Timothy offered. **I'll even let you hold him while he takes his last breath.**

*Shut up. Just shut*—He shook his head. He needed to ignore Timothy and focus. Focus on the light. Focus on...on...Laughter! The food fight! Everyone laughing and screaming as the food flew around the room. Aaron's teasing face after his clever trick. Martha and Philip screaming for joy as they raced through the halls. John and Alexander pranking each other before getting tricked by Eliza. Dancing with Lafayette at his first ball. The love struck look on the King's face when he got married. Hercules laughing at stories from Lafayette's youth.

**You're trying so har-**

This time, George prepared himself for the dark memories. The Queen's funeral was brushed aside in favor of Lafayette and Hercules enjoying dinner with George and Aaron. A memory of John breaking his arm, his tear stained face that used to haunt George, was swept away by Aaron reading a book out loud to Philip and Martha. Each character was given a different voice with the sole purpose to make everyone laugh. Aaron’s scared expression was chased away by the smile he wore when George showed him the surprise. Love was not always easy. It wasn't always light and happy, but no matter how dark the storm, no matter how long the rain, love always survived. The same would be true today. It didn’t matter what Timothy did to him, he was going to break free and protect Aaron. He was not going to be the one to kill him. Not today. Not ever.
You can't get rid of-

Get out.

What?

You heard me. Get the fuck out of my head. Out of my body. I won't be your tool anymore.

You really think it's that easy? You think some happy thoughts are enough to get rid of me-

No, but this might be. George cut him off, summoning the love and happiness he'd felt and turning it into a single candle. He wasn't sure it would work, but he didn't let that stop him. He added as many thoughts he could come up with the candle's flame, and watched it grow brighter and brighter. The warmth from the candle spread through his mind and body.

Enough! Timothy demanded. George ignored him. Instead, he added even more thoughts and watched as the candle grew even brighter.

I will not lose! the King screamed. George swung his sword. Aaron was too slow this time.

“AHHHH!”

The sword struck Aaron's shoulder, cutting deep and sending Aaron to his knees.

NO! George's candle flickered. The flame started to get smaller and smaller. The light almost completely faded until George got a handle on himself.

Do you see now?! You will ne-

Get OUT! George roared, the candle's flame bursting with light and heat. It filled every inch of George's body. Timothy screamed in rage, but he was not match for the candle this time. The light slowly faded, and George waited. And waited. And waited, but nothing happened. No voice. No movement. Nothing.

"Aaron?" he softly whispered. His husband looked up at him, his eyes brimming with pain and out of focus. "Aaron!" George fell to his knees. He reached for the sword, but pulled his hands away at the last second. He shouldn’t remove it yet, not until he had a way to stop the bleeding. Aaron's shirt was already soaked with blood and it looked like the sword had hit bone.

"It's going to be okay. I'm here. It'll be okay," George promised, gently placing a hand on Aaron's cheek to look him in the eye.

"I'm sorry," Aaron muttered, his words faint and slurring together, “I'm sorry, George.”

"Shhhh. Shhhh," he replied. He didn't a quick survey of the room and was relieved to see that the others had taken care of most of the guards. Alexander and John were still struggling with Rebecca, but Benjamin and Caleb along with Dolley and Abigail had cleared out the rest of their enemies. They just had to find Timothy and deal with him. Hopefully the King hadn’t made a run for it.

George didn’t want to prolong this anymore. He wanted it to be over for Aaron’s sake.

"I wasn't quick eno-"

"Shhhh. Don't talk," George ordered, turning back to place a kiss on Aaron's forehead. They needed a healer, and quicker. George created a small blue bird and sent it off with a message for Theo.
"I love you."

"I know. I love you too," George whispered, petting Aaron's head as he kept him steady. Hopefully, help would be coming soon.

"George, lookout!" Caleb warned. George turned to see Timothy appear out of thin air less than a foot away.

"You think you’ve beat me!? You really think a shitty little candle is enough to beat me?" Timothy growled, getting closer and closer every second. He saw the dagger a second later, but before he could react Indigo jumped off Aaron's shoulders towards the King. With a loud hiss she knocked Timothy off his feet and sank her teeth into his neck. His dagger flew across the floor. Indigo went for his throat, but the King grabbed her by the back of her neck and threw her aside. It all happened in a flash, so quick that George wasn’t sure what really happened. One second, Timothy climbing up from the ground, the next Sally had pierced his chest with a long spear. The King wrapped his hand around the spear, a look of pure shock and pain on his face.

“For my brother,” Sally growled, lifting the spear in order to slam it down again.

"For my parents."

"For my kingdom!"

By the third stab, Timothy was no longer moving, but Sally still lifted the spear again. Her eyes were wild and clouded with rage. George turned Aaron’s face away. He didn’t need to see this. Didn’t need to watch his sister lose herself to her grief.

"Sally! Sally, enough!" Dolley ordered, rushing over and wrapping her arms around the young princess. Sally finally let go of the spear, letting it fall to the ground as tears started streaming down her face. She collapsed into Dolley’s arms and let out a loud sob. George’s heart ached for the young girl. It would take months, if not years, for her to overcome the trauma Timothy had inflicted on her. George swore an oath to himself that he’d be there with her every step of the way. No one deserved the pain Sally had felt. No one. George would make it his mission to help her live with it.

“I can’t believe it.” Aaron muttered. George looked back at his husband to find him staring at Timothy’s body with a haunted expression. “I...I expected him to...I don’t know, crumble into dust or melt or vanish into smoke. Something like that. I didn’t expect this.” George pulled Aaron close, holding the younger man against his chest for a long moment.

“At the end of the day, Aaron, he was just a man,” he whispered. Aaron choked on a sob, reaching up to grab George’s shirt tightly.

“It’s not fair,” he cried, his voice shaking, “He didn’t suffer enough.”

“I know, but it’s over now. You’re safe. Your sister is safe. Your kingdom is safe and the world will be a better place.”

“Then why don’t I feel any better?”

“It’ll take time, lots of it, but one day you’ll feel lighter.”

“Ungrateful brats!” Rebecca shrieked, advancing towards Sally with a crazed look on her face, “You think this is over?! You think this is the end?” Aaron flinched in George’s arms. George held him tighter, refusing to let anything else hurt him. Dolley pushed Sally behind her and stood her ground even as Rebecca got closer and closer.
“This is only the beginning. As long as I live and breathe, you will never be que-” She didn’t get to finish her rant before John and Alexander made their move. A potion bottle shattered by Rebecca’s feet. A cloud of pink smoke blocked her from George’s vision. There was a single scream, then silence. Alexander and John exited the smoke with blank looks on their faces. It was the same look George had seen on countless soldiers on their way home from war. They may have won today, but it would take a long time for the events of today to leave their minds. When the pink smoke cleared, Rebecca was on the ground and it was finally over.

“The King's dead,” someone said, their voice traveling through the throne room like a ripple through water. Caleb released the guards one by one. Benjamin and Abigail watched them all closely, but none of them made any move to attack. Instead, they slowly sink to their knees one by one.

“Long live the Queen,” one of them called. Sally’s head snapped towards them with a horrified look on her face. Dolley held the young girl tighter as the call filtered through the room. It was soon followed by cheers, yet neither Sally nor Aaron looked excited or relieved. The weight of the world was on their shoulders, but they wouldn’t have to carry it alone. George wasn’t going anywhere. Neither was Alexander or John or even Benjamin. They would stay and help as long as they were needed.

“Aaron!” Theodosia called, rushing into the throne room followed by Eliza and a series of nurses. Theo fell to her knees at Aaron’s side, her hands reaching up towards the sword before she paused. “Is he-”

“He’s not dead,” George answered.

“Thank the gods,” Theo muttered, “Hold him while I remove the sword.” George held Aaron steady as Theo lifted the weapon away. As soon as the wound was clear of it, Theo placed her hands over top, shut her eyes and started to mutter under her breath. Her hands started to glow a light pink color. Aaron’s eyes clouded over as her magic started to take effect.

“Bellamy,” Aaron mumbled.

“Shhh. Eliza is looking at him right now,” George told him.

“The guards?”

“They’re getting help too.”

“Good. That’s good. But where’s Indigo?”

“Right here,” Benjamin spoke, bringing the dragon over and gently placing her by Aaron's side. Indigo leaned her head against Aaron’s legs, looking up at George with a solemn look in her eyes. George ran his fingers over the her, silently thanking her for saving him.

“Rest now, Aaron. We can take care of this,” George assured him, kissing Aaron’s forehead and watching as his eyes slowly closed. Indigo cuddled closer and shut her eyes as well. Theo kept working, her magic knitting Aaron’s shoulder closed before she moved on to his stomach.

“He’ll be okay, right?” he asked. Theodosia cracked open one eye to give George a single nod. George let out a loud sigh and let his shoulders relax. He looked around the room again, watching as nurses and doctors alike help the guards to their feet. Eliza was kneeling next to Bellamy, Alexander and John hovering over her as she worked. Three older men were trying to speak with Sally, but Dolley refused to let them get close to the princess. Sally’s eyes were fixated on Aaron, a fearful expression in control of her face.
“Sally,” George called, “Come here. Come see him.”

“Princess-” one of the older men tried to protest, but Dolley shot him a dark glare that shut him up before guiding Sally over to them. George took the Princess’ hand and pulled her down to the ground. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, holding her against his side.

“They want me to be crowned queen,” Sally muttered. She reached out and took Aaron’s hand, petting the back of it over and over again. “I don’t want to be queen.”

“Shush child,” Dolley ordered, “You don’t need to think about that right now.”

“But our kingdom needs-”

“You need to take a moment for yourself,” George cut her off, “As I told your brother, rest now. Let yourself breathe and we will solve the world’s problems at another time.”

“I just...I can’t believe he’s gone. I keep thinking he’s going to jump up and attack us,” she confessed, her voice soft and quiet like a scared child. In many ways, that’s what she was.

“He can’t hurt you anymore,” Theo promised, pulling her hands away from Aaron, “You’re safe now.”

“I don’t think we’ll ever be safe. Not while we’re charged with ruling,” Sally protested, “I don’t even know if I want to rule.”

“We’ll deal with that at another time,” George reminded her as Theodosia reached out to heal a cut on her cheek. Sally flinched at the movement, but soon settled and let Theo heal her.

“The council wants to crown me today.”

“The council can wait,” Dolley assured her.

“They won’t?”

“I’ll make them.”

Sally gave her a weak smile, leaning her head more on George’s shoulder and shutting her eyes. George rubbed her back as her words echoed in his mind. If Sally didn’t want to rule then the crown could be passed down to Aaron. Would his husband want it? Would Aaron become King of Tyst? What would that mean for them? It was a lot to think about, and it was something that George had never thought about before. Before he could get lost in his own head, he took his own advice and decided to deal with his thoughts at another time. The important thing right now was to take care of Aaron, Bellamy, and the injured guards. The future could wait a little longer.

“Dolley, clear out the throne room,” George ordered, taking charge of the room. They needed to get Aaron to a bed and clear out the castle before people started showing up. “Find someone who can help us take Aaron and Bellamy to beds. Make sure that any injured guards get treated, then alert the city and the rest of the kingdom about the King’s death.”

“Yes, sir,” Dolley replied, petting Sally’s hair then walking away. George watched her snap at the council to follow her before looking back at his husband. Tomorrow would bring the dawn of a new chapter in their lives. A chapter that Aaron and he would write together. George wasn’t sure where their future would take them, but he was looking forward to it all the same.
Chapter End Notes

Only one chapter left.
Two Months Later

“Do you remember what you need to say?” Sally asked as she paced back and forth in front of the large wooden door, her footsteps echoing off the stone walls. The guards, Percy and Grant if Aaron remembered right, shared a knowing look with each other, failing to hide their smiles as she passed them time and time again.

“We’ve been over this, Sally. I know what I need to say and when to say it. You’ve walked me through it enough times. Now please sit down. You’re making me nervous,” Aaron pleaded, reaching out to grab her wrist as she passed by and pulling her down on the bench next to him. She leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. Indigo shifted on Aaron’s shoulders, stretching her neck to place her head on top of Sally’s. His dragon had taken quite the liking to his sister.

Do you like her more then me? Aaron teased. He’d been asking the same question for the past two weeks and Indigo gave the same response every time.

Of course, Indigo replied. Aaron smiled and reached up to pet Indigo’s tail.

“I just can’t believe it’s really happening,” Sally confessed, her voice soft and full of fear. Aaron understood all too well. Even if they had months to prepare it wouldn’t be enough time to stop them from questioning their choice. Had they made the right decision? What would the consequences be? The past two months, which was all the time they could allow, had been long and tedious.

Their first order of business, spreading the news of King Timothy’s death, took nearly a week. Tyst was a vast kingdom and Aaron wanted to ensure that every citizen heard the news before they started to make any changes. While the King’s death had come as a surprise to the people of Tyst, no one moved against Sally or Aaron. The people didn’t see it as a coup, especially not after rumors of Timothy’s secret deed spread along with the news of his death. Benjamin and Caleb had even reported that, in most villages, people were holding grand celebrations instead of mourning. Aaron wrote an official letter to Frihet while Sally addressed Morker. They even notified the Northern Islands and swore to keep the Northern King updated as the crown was passed. Even after seeing Timothy’s body countless times and watching it body burn Aaron still woke up in the middle of the night. His uncle may be gone, but the horrible memories that plagued Aaron’s mind had yet to give up their hold. It’d been a long week, one that Aaron was glad to be done with. He prayed to the gods that he wouldn’t have to go through such a thing ever again.

Once everyone had been notified about Timothy’s death, Sally and Aaron issued a call for new council members. Normally, council members were only replaced when one member died, but Sally didn’t trust Timothy’s council. They had to have known about Timothy’s plan, and they stood by and
let it happen. Sally refused to let them stay and Aaron was more than happy to support her decision to cast them out.

Aaron proposed a new way of choosing members that Sally quickly agreed with. The eldest citizens, who believed they were ruining tradition, protested for a few days, but thankfully Aaron was able to settled their fears. He explained, not only to them but to everyone in the kingdom, that each of the nine members would now be elected by the people they were meant to represent. A farmer member for the farmers. A miner for the miners. A judge for the lawyers. Aaron and Sally wanted their people to have a voice in their court, and Aaron especially wanted those voices to their people's best interests at heart. It was a new idea, one that even George seemed unsure about at first, but the citizens quickly warmed up to it.

It didn't take long for the newly elected members to arrive. Aaron and Sally tested each member to ensure they were true of heart. Aaron peeked into their mind just enough to check if they were lying as Sally asked them question after question. Of course they warned them first about Aaron's gift. Regle was still a widely misunderstood magic; however, none of the members denied Aaron access to their thoughts after he swore an oath to protect their secrets and their freewill. He was relieved to find that all of them were true and they were welcomed as part of the council.

"Don't worry, your majesty," Grant spoke up. "The kingdom will support you no matter what." Sally looked over at him with surprise written across her face. Aaron smiled, rubbing his sister's back and nodding to the guard. Aaron had Alexander compose a paper explaining Timothy's use of brain worms, wishing to free his sister from her guilt. Her actions hadn't been her own and she shouldn't be blamed for the things she was forced to do. The paper lead to a change in how people acted around Sally, which she was still getting used to. She looked so surprised every time a guard wished her a good morning, a child ran towards her with flowers or when a maid offered her a wink. Sally hadn’t how to react at first, fearful that it was a trick, but she was getting better every day. After all, two month was not enough time to overcome years of pain.

"I...Thank you," Sally replied, giving Grant a small smile. He returned it with a small bow and a grin.

You should assign that guard to be part of Sally's personal detail, Indigo suggested as Aaron rubbed Sally's back to ease the tension in her shoulders.

And why would I do that?

Trust me. Just do it. He's a good man and she likes having him around.

I'll think about it.

"I have to ask you one last time," Sally whispered.

"Go ahead," Aaron encourage, already knowing the question.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, I'm sure. This is what I want."

"You know that after today, we won’t be able to take it back."

"I know," Aaron told her, taking her hands and squeezing them tightly, "Believe me, Sally. I know. But I want to do this. I'm happy with our decision, with my decision. As long as you support me, then I know that it'll all be okay. We're in this together. Always."
"Together," Sally echoed, squeezing back before letting go and throwing her arms around his neck. "I can't believe how grown up you are! You have to stop getting old!"

"I'm not old!"

**You are.**

"You're ancient!"

"George is ancient!"

"George is young at heart."

"I'm young at heart!"

"You are not!"

**You're not.**

"Sally!"

"Aaron!"

"Alright, that's enough you too," Yuma's voice cut them off, walking down the hall towards them with a stern look on her face. Sally and Aaron shared a look before they started laughing. Indigo licked Aaron’s cheek to show she had been kidding. Aaron had to push her away from his face before she had a chance to slobber all over him. It only added to their laughter. Yuma crossed her arms over her chest, shaking her head as she waited for them to calm down.

"Sorry, Yuma," Sally offered, composing herself first. She gave the older woman a bright smile, her eyes warm and happy. Aaron had written a letter to Yuma begging her to come and help them the minute he woke up after the battle. The woman arrived within two days and pulled him in for a tight hug. She’d been by his side ever since. Sally had taken a liking to the older woman the same way Aaron had. No matter how hard Aaron tried, it was impossible to ignore how Yuma reminded him of his mother, a woman he’d never known but still felt in his heart. Sally felt the same. She even confessed that she felt bad, or rotten, for wanting to be around Yuma solely for the way the older woman made her feel. Yuma herself quickly put a stop to that train of thought. Yuma wanted to be there for them, wanted to provide them safety and love. She’d done the same to George and would stop at nothing to protect Sally and Aaron the same way. Their little makeshift family was growing more and more each day.

"Are you both ready?” the older woman asked, looking at Sally first before her eyes turned to Aaron. 

“I’m ready,” Aaron assured her.

“I’m... not as ready as him, but I know we can do this,” Sally admitted. Yuma smiled and offered her hand. Sally quickly took it, standing up and following Yuma towards the door. After years of wearing black or grey, he was happy to see Sally in a light pink gown with golden trim. It made her look younger and free. His own outfit was his favorite dark blue color, a very similar shade to what George normally wore, and features their new crest over his heart. The outfit, while brand new, made Aaron feel safe and proud of everything he’d done. Aaron stood up as well, dusting off his long coat and straightening his shoulders.

It was time. Aaron nodded to the guards, who snapped to attention and opened the door. Sally glanced back over her shoulder at Aaron. She offered him a soft smile and a single nod before letting
Yuma guide her into the room. Aaron took a deep breath as he waited. The world was silence for a moment that stretched on for too long. Fear started to climb up into his throat and it was almost at the point of strangling him just as thunderous applause erupted, echoing down the halls. Aaron's fear disappeared and he melted with relief at the sound.

You can do this, Indigo assured him as he looked to Percy and Grant with a large grin, feeling more confident than ever before. Both guards nodded to show their own readiness.

Yes, I can, he agreed. Aaron raised his head high and walked into the room.

The throne room had been transformed within the last month. Sunlight shined through the wall to ceiling windows, reflecting off the golden statues that represented each of the nine council members. The cold, stone floor was now covered with deep blue carpet. Near the throne, the carpet depict the kingdom's history using black thread. The doors were opened, allowing the crowd of people to move in and out as they wished. Aaron had ordered that the door remain opened at all times to allow their people to come forth whenever they wish. He refused to keep them locked out. This throne room belonged to them more then it belonged to him or Sally, and in order to prove that to everything, he'd asked each of the nine groups to help him turn the room into a welcoming place.

The miners suggested gold for the statues, though Sally and Aaron would have been happy with stone or any metal they provided, and the smiths used it to create the nine statues. They included the tools of each group rather than portraits of individual people. The weavers helped sew the kingdom's history with assist from the scholars while the bakers and butchers had picked the blue color. Aaron had been surprised they didn't pick green or brown until their council representative reminded Aaron that his usually color of choice was always deep blue to match George and the bakers had wanted to capture that. There were potted plants by the door, courtesy of the farmers. They promised to change them with the season to keep the room fresh and lively. The guards were all given new armor designed by Maira with their group’s symbol displayed proudly. Aaron had worried about how to incorporate the sailors, but they worked alongside the lawyers to create a new throne. Gone were the bloody curtains and the whipping bench. Gone were all the horrible memories. No matter where'd one looked, there was nothing left of Timothy. It had all been replaced with the voices of the people.

The throne was similar to the one their parents and grandparents had sat in. Made of carved wood, it was wide enough to be comfortable while still being modest in size. The sailors had carved a ship on one side while the lawyers added a scale on the other. Adventure and wisdom. Two traits that they believed Aaron possessed. Walking towards the throne now felt like coming home all over again. Aaron climbed the small staircase that led up to the lower platform and turned back towards the room. His eyes landed on George first. His husband looked amazing in his new outfit. The deep red brought out his eyes and the black details combined the Washington family crest with the Burr coat of arms over his chest to match Aaron. It was the same symbol that adored the flags hanging behind the throne.

Alexander, John, and Bellamy stood next to George. Sally, who simply beat Aaron to it, offered Alexander a job as the royal potion master. John had also been offered the title of master creature handler. Aaron had been fearful that they would say no, as Theo and Eliza had, but thankfully they both agreed and they would be staying in the castle. Bellamy, would be named head guard, following in his mother's footsteps, was staying by Aaron's side. Theo and Eliza, who had both been offered their own positions, deciding to return to Frihet to continue running Eliza's hospital. Now they stood next to Sally and Yuma, but within a week they would be heading home. Aaron was going to miss Theo terribly, but he knew that she was making the right choice. She could do so much more back in Frihet at the hospital. King Lafayette and Hercules had come to the ceremony. The foreign king waved at Aaron, looking so giddy that he might fly away if it wasn’t for Hercules holding his hand. Aaron turned his eyes back to George and smiled before he took a seat on the
throne. His throne. Indigo climbed off his shoulders to take her place on top of the throne. Aaron placed his hands on the armrests and scanned the room as the people waited with baited breath. The high priestess from the local coven, Claudia, stepped forward with a crown in her hands.

"With the blessing of the gods, and of the people, do you Aaron Burr of the Burr family, Crowned Prince of the Kingdom of Tyst, and Second of his Name, accept this crown and the name of King? In doing so, do you promise and swear on your life to uphold the laws of Tyst and do what is best for the people who have placed you upon this throne?"

When Sally said she didn't want the crown, Aaron had been torn between his home in Frihet and his duty to his people. He'd been fearful of losing George, of losing Yuma and the others, but beyond all else, he was terrified to rule. For days he was conflicted about what to do; however, George refused to leave his side for more than a second and talked him through every single one of his fears. Aaron's idea of elected council members late one night, and while it was a scary new idea, his reasoning was based on what he'd seen Timothy do wrong. George pointed out how Aaron knew how to be a leader. He simply had to believe in himself. The more Aaron thought about it, the more he started to believe that George was right. Aaron knew what not to do, which was half the battle when it came to leading people. He knew he didn't want to be an out of touch leader, didn't want to ignore the people's concerns, and he wanted to expand his kingdom for the better. The best way to start was to give the people a voice, a voice that had Aaron's ear at all times. He felt more confident with the council members guiding him. Alexander, John, and Bellamy would also be there to help. The future was bright and Aaron was ready to face it head on.

"I, Aaron Burr of the Burr family, Crowned Prince of the Kingdom of Tyst, and Second of his Name, do accept this crown and the name of king with clear mind and spirit and by doing so promise and swear on my life to uphold the laws of Tyst and to do what is best for the people who have placed me upon this throne with the blessing of the gods and my people," Aaron answered, shutting his eyes as Claudia set the crown on his head. He'd expected it to be heavier.

"Long live the king!" Bellamy shouted.

"Long live the King!"

"Long live the king!" The crowd echoed him, repeating the words over and over again. Aaron opened his eyes again and searched for his sister first. Tears were streaming down her face, but she was also smiling proudly. Aaron swore that his cheeks were going to hurt tomorrow from all the smiling he was doing. He'd couldn't be happier with how everything was turning out. Claudia stepped back to take another crown from one of her assistants. She turned to the crowd and held the crown up. The crown had been Aaron's mother's, and it only felt right to pass it along.

"General George Washington, step forward," Claudia commanded. George obeyed, slowly approaching the steps before kneeling down in front of the priestess. Aaron held on tightly to his throne as his nerves started to get the better of him. This would be a defining moment for the world. "With the blessing of the gods, and of the people, do you, George Washington of the Washington family, General of the Kingdom of Frihet, accept this crown and the name of Prince Consort? In doing so, do you promise and swear on your life to uphold the laws of Tyst and do what is best for the people who have placed you upon this throne? And do you swear to advice and protect his royal majesty, King Aaron Burr, Second of his Name, until the day you take your last breath?"

""I, George Washington of the Washington family, General of the Kingdom of Frihet, do accept this crown and the name of Prince Consort with clear mind and spirit and by doing so promise and swear on my life to uphold the laws of Tyst and to do what is best for the people who have placed me upon this throne with the blessing of the gods and my people. I swear on my life that I will advice and
protect his royal majesty, King Aaron Burr, Second of his Name, until the day I take my last breath. And if I fail to uphold this vow and oath, let the gods strike me down the lightning as they see fit," George proclaimed, his voice steady and unwavering as he spoke the words. Claudia placed the crown on his head and he rose up from his knees. The last part of his speech was not part of what the practice. Aaron hoped the surprise didn't show on his face. He couldn't stop staring at his husband, his heart full of love and admiration.

*I knew you would like that part,* Indigo declared, sounding much too pleased with herself as the crowd cheered, Lafayette the loudest of them all.

*Did you have a part in that?*

*Maybe I did. Maybe I didn’t. You’ll never know.*

*George will tell me.***

*Maybe he….no he probably will.* Tyst and Frihet had been united in a new way like never before. They'd already drafted a treaty that would made trading, settling disputes, and marriage easier between the two kingdoms. George climbed the steps and took his place in the throne to Aaron's right. He offered for Aaron his hand hand, and tangled their fingers together as soon as Aaron took it. Claudia bowed to Aaron, then to George before stepping aside. Before Aaron could call forth the council members, one of them stepped forward and fell to his knees.

"I, Richard Montgomery, representative of the smiths, creators of weapons, tools, and the finest things in life, swear on my life to uphold the laws of Tyst and do what is best for the people who have given me this position. I am honored to serve at the pleasure of his royal majesty, King Aaron Burr, Second of his Name," the man declared, keeping his head bowed as he spoke. Aaron smiled. Montgomery, or Monty for short, was quickly becoming one of Aaron's favorite council members. The kind, smart leader had been the only candidate from the smiths and waved loved by his group.

"I hear your oath, Richard Montgomery and welcome you to my council. May you serve me and your people for many years to come," Aaron replied, tilting his head to show his respect. Monty climbed to his feet and gave Aaron a bright smile before moving out of the way for the next council member. The each gave a similar oath, highlight their group, what they stood for, and swearing to uphold the laws of Tyst. Aaron welcomed each member one by one until they had all been swore in. Then came Bellamy.

Like the guards, he'd been given a new set of armor but his featured a stripe of red and blue fabric that was pinned to his right shoulder, crossed over his chest and ended at his left hip. The colors marked him as head of the guards. It was hard for Aaron to keep a smile off his face as his friend knelt before him. Bellamy and he had been through so much together, but no matter how many trials and obstacles they went through, they were still friends. Aaron was grateful for Bellamy and everything he'd done.

"I, Jonathan Bellamy, swear on my life that I will serve and protect his royal majesty, King Aaron Burr, Second of his Name, until the day I take my last breath," Bellamy announced.

"I hear your oath, Jonathan Bellamy, and welcome you as my head guard. May you serve and protect me for many years to come," Aaron replied, gesturing for Bellamy to rise. They shared matching grins as Bellamy moved out of the way for Alexander. It felt weird to see the man kneeling before him, but Alexander rose with the same proud smile on his face and Aaron was able to relax as John took his place. The ceremony was still just beginning. There were countless people who swore oaths to him, and Aaron made sure to reply to each and every one. Some went as far as to swear their oath to both him and Sally, which warmed Aaron's heart that his sister was still being seen as the
princess she was. It was nearly noon by the time the last person swore their oath. Once they stepped
back, Aaron rose from his throne. The room went still. No one moved. No one spoke. It was as if
everyone was frozen. Such a react threw Aaron off.

You can do this. Indigo encouraged him as she moved back onto his shoulders. She pressed her nose
into his neck as her eyes scanned the room. Having her with him made him feel so much safer.
Indigo could see and hear a lot more than a human could, and it was easy for her to alert Aaron
without raising anyone’s suspicions. As ready as Aaron was, he still feared that someone would
protest the ceremony. He was still unsure how far and deep his uncle’s power reached.

Yes...Yes I can. He told, reaching up to pet Indigo's head as he smiled at the crowd.

“I'll admit,” Aaron told the room, “I’d never thought I’d be standing here before you. I always
imagined it would be my sister, Sally, who would take the throne; nevertheless, I am proud to wear
this crown and proud to serve my people. For too many years I watched my uncle torment my home
and people. He ruled with an iron fist that kept Tyst trapped in darkness. I want nothing more then to
heal the wounds my uncle caused. It is my hope that with the council by my side we will repair this
kingdom to its true glory, a home for people to live and thrive peacefully without fear or pain or
sorrow. That is why as my first order of business I wish to declare that magic as we know it shall no
longer be discouraged. We have all been given amazing gifts. There is no reason for us to not use
them. The laws of the past are no more. I encourage, I beg, my people to use their magic to build
their communities, to strengthen their homes and businesses, and to expand their minds. From there, our
great kingdom will be able to grow to new heights from the bottom up. The people are the future.
Kings and queens will come and go, but the people will always be around, and they should be given
every resource possible to maintain their happiness. By order of the King, let magic be free!”

The crowd went wild. People hug one another and jumped up and down in excitement as others
cheered and clapped. Aaron had never felt happier in his life. This was the start of a new story. One
that was happier and bright. This was only the first chapter, and Aaron couldn’t wait to see what
happened next. George suddenly rose from his throne, and grabbed Aaron’s hand to get his attention.
As soon as Aaron looked his way, George placed a kiss on his lips. Aaron shut his eyes and smiled
at the soft gesture, disappointed when George moved away too soon. Aaron reached out to stop him
before he could get too far away.

“I love you,” he whispered, looking into his husband’s eyes, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” George replied, “Always and forever.”

“Always and forever,” he echoed, pulling George in for a deeper kiss. Someone, probably
Alexander or John, whistled loudly, but Aaron didn’t care. He wasn’t going to hide his love for
George, or for his family. He was done hiding, done being scared. He broke the kiss and leaned his
head against George's chest as he took a moment to savor the moment.

It's like the end of a fairytale. Indigo joked, wrapping her tail around George's neck to help keep
him close.

Or the beginning of an epic tale, Aaron countered.

Why not both? a third voice, George’s voice, suggested.

Both is good too.
The End and the Beginning.

Chapter End Notes

There is something about marking a story as complete that is both exciting and bittersweet. I loved this story and I had so much fun writing it. Thank you to everyone who commented and gave kudos. It was great to share this with all of you and see your reactions. I hope you're satisfied with the ending! I debated again and again how to end this story before deciding that it was best to end it the way it start with a new beginning. I have a few ideas that might branch of from this story, but for now I'll be focusing on some other projects.

Thank you all again!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!