Pillars of This Home We Built

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/F, F/M, Gen, M/M, Multi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>P. T. Barnum, Phillip Carlyle, Anne Wheeler, Charity Barnum, Caroline Barnum, Helen Barnum, Tom Thumb, Mr. O'Malley, Original Child Character(s), Chang, Eng - Character, Lettie Lutz, W. D. Wheeler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Found Family, Friends to Lovers, Polyamory, Friendship, Period Typical Attitudes, Period-Typical Homophobia, Families of Choice, Brother-Sister Relationships, Strong Female Characters, in this house we love and respect Anne Wheeler and Charity Barnum, Circus Family, Slow Burn, Pining, our boy Phillip got it baaaad, Sibling Bonding, Eventual Happy Ending, Minor Character Death, Mild Hurt/Comfort, Eventual Smut, nothing explicit but it gets spicy, also just wanted to make this clear: none of the canon couples are splitting up, but we're exploring and adding extra layers to their relationships for sure, polyamory is tagged for a reason</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Pillars of This Home We Built**

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**Summary**

Barnum leans over and whispers conspiratorially into his ear, “Our lot is number thirteen. Are you a superstitious man, Phillip?”

“Truly.” Phillip intones, flattening out the auction pamphlet across his lap, “As the only bad luck in my life is you, Mr. Barnum.”

-or-

A story of love; in all its forms.

**Notes**
Step right on up folks to Kreeston and I's big ol' gay polyamorous circus fic. We have love! We have laughs! We have loving, supportive relationships!

Each of the couples listed above will be explored and integral to the plot.

We love this movie a lot and we're having a lot of fun with the universe we're creating, so please enjoy.

- K & E
Phillip Carlyle, upon his introduction to the circus, had found himself lacking in many ways: when Barnum dubbed him his apprentice, Phillip had thought him joking. His dancing and singing were stiff from lack of use, his fanfare and oration even more so. He certainly had no experience with sticking his hand in a lion’s mouth, and soaring high above the astonished gazes of the show’s patrons with his limbs anchored in silks was especially novel.

His true expertise, however, was in his ability to adapt. So, he learned. He learned how to stand on an elephant’s back, how to make a fat man fatter and a tall man taller, how to project his voice so loudly that Heaven itself could hear him from the back row. Anne taught him how to properly dangle from her delicate yet powerful grip, Lettie taught him the correct way to care for facial hair, and Barnum—

Well, Barnum taught him damn near everything else.

The most important thing he learned, quite early on in his alignment with this strange, marvelous world, was that whenever the ringmaster got a certain look in his eye, one that shined bright with unbridled glee, whatever idea that had spawned in the madman’s mind was going to result in a mountain of stress for Phillip.

He hadn’t recognized it the first night sitting in that bar; too busy being seduced by the man’s parlor tricks and low, promising tones. Hadn’t recognized it when he had been dragged across Queen Victoria’s throne room for an introduction to Jenny Lind.

It wasn’t until he became partners with the man that he truly became intimate with the expression. And now, several months after the fire, he enters the office of Phineas Taylor Barnum and finds the man sitting, hands steepled and that look in his eyes; a bright glitter in the muted, gray winter atmosphere.

The door swings closed behind him and he instantly holds up his hand and shakes it like the ground before an approaching train:

“The answer is no.”

Barnum opens his mouth, and Phillip wags a finger, “Ah-no.”

“Phillip-“

“-Stop.”

“It’s a good-“
“-Quit.”

“This would be an amaz-“

Phillip plugs his ears, juvenile in retrospect but sometimes it’s the only avenue when discussing business with Barnum, “Desist. I mean it, P.T., whatever it is that you’ve cooked up in that brain of yours, I don’t want to hear it. Nothing you can say will change my mind.”

Barnum, unperturbed, sits back and smiles.

“What if I were to tell you...”

The words that follow are irrelevant. Phillip knows it just as much, if not more, than the man in front of him. All that matters is in the end Phillip will lose and Barnum, naturally, will get his way.

-x-

“Tatterson & Sons declared bankruptcy last month.” Barnum explains later that morning, “The owner, Tatterson Sr., made some questionable business decisions before the recession and the company wasn’t able to recover.”

Phillip huffs out a laugh. “We wouldn’t know anything about questionable business decisions, now would we?”

Barnum bumps into his shoulder and pinches his side and Phillip sidesteps, the gravel crunching underneath his boots.

“As I was saying--the bank seized their assets and is in the process of auctioning them off.” Barnum peers down at the crudely drawn map given to him by the ancient secretary that met them at the front desk of the shipping yard. He hums and takes a sudden left into a walkway between two dingy warehouses.

“So what does Tatterson & Sons going under have to do with us running around in the cold.” Phillip asks after a few minutes of struggling to keep up with Barnum’s pace and haphazard direction.

Barnum doesn’t answer as he slows to a stop and shoves out a hand that Phillip collides with. He twists around the corner of the warehouse, pats Phillip on the chest twice and says, “Stay here for a moment.”

“What-”

Barnum darts around the corner and Phillip debates for a second whether to ignore him out of spite or to let the man have his eccentricities: a common dilemma that is, quite honestly, a fifty-fifty chance depending on the day.

Before he makes his choice, Barnum returns, his face alight with excitement. He reaches up and tugs the brim of Phillip’s hat down over his eyes. He protests, but Barnum shushes him.

“Trust me,” Barnum murmurs, “This needs a proper reveal.”

At that, Phillip feels the ends of his scarf being tugged as Barnum manhandles him forward. They walk for a minute more, and he’s just about ready to kick out at Barnum’s ankle in annoyance when
Barnum halts, feet sinking into the gravel, and taps on Phillip’s brim, “Now, look at her. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Phillip pushes up his hat and is momentarily blinded by the afternoon sun. He lifts his head and takes in what has got to be the largest locomotive that he's ever laid eyes on. Barnum has positioned him right before the pilot and Phillip has to take a step back to really see the tip of the smokestack. The entire thing is glossy black, a stark contrast with the dreary winter sky.

Barnum is nearly vibrating with glee as he darts around the pilot, his laugh catching the wind and echoing through the shipyard. Phillip moves around the opposite side, and passes the driving wheels, all three of which rise above his head and are connected by a six foot steel rod. From there, Phillip’s eyes follow the line of wooden cars, each looking to be around 60 feet long and 10 feet wide, stretching far down the track past his ability to see and disappearing into the forest's green horizon.

He brings his attention back to the cab in front of him and reaches out to touch the spoke of the ladder, his hand chilled by the frigid metal. He lifts himself up with one solid hop and finds himself in front of the engine controls. Before him are over a dozen gauges, levers and pulleys, each one tempting him to reach out and touch, to push and pull. One such pulley, hanging right above him, is the most persuasive. He reaches up and gives it a sharp tug.

Nothing happens. A steam trumpet, if the name provides any hints, needs steam to function. Phillip looks out from the window, and he thinks he can still hear the sound regardless.

He returns to the ground, vaulting off the first ladder rung and stumbling into his landing. He dusts his hands and sets them on his hips, leaning back on his heels once more to look at the massive beast in front of him. It really is remarkable. Phillip wonders if the creature has any clue as to what Barnum has planned for it.

“Phillip!” Barnum’s voice rings, and Phillip turns his head to the sound. Three cars down the line, Barnum is dangling out the side, arm waving like a flag in the wind. “Come over here! Let’s look around the inside!”

“What kind of locomotive company was this?” Phillip asks as he grasps Barnum’s forearm, pikes his heel into the hitch connecting the cars and allows the man to hoist him up.

“I believe,” Barnum says, opening the door for him, “They dealt mostly in cargo. This engine was supposed to be their first in a new line of passenger trains. I doubt they were able to use it, the market dipped right after they made their purchase. Wound up defaulting on their loan.”

The first car is ornate, with floral molding along the floor boards and wide windows that make the space, while a tad bit stuffy, feel bright. The room is furnished; Phillip makes out the shape of a bed, a dresser and a desk underneath white sheets.

“The owner’s cabin.” Barnum explains, “There are two more like it down that way. One for each of his sons.”

After the cabins, they enter what appears to be the galley. “Are all the furnishings and appliances included in the auction?” Phillip asks, looking around the area with interest. It features a fully stocked kitchen, with a gas-powered stove and a deep pump sink. Pots and pans hang from hooks and there’s a knife block attached to the wall, the handles of each blade covered in a fine layer of dust from months of not being used.

“Yes, I would assume so.” Barnum says, sticking his head in a cabinet above the stove. He pulls out
a saucepan and tests the weight of it in his hand, before setting it back inside and peering towards the back.

“The other engines have already been auctioned off to the sharks. This is the last one they’re selling.” Barnum’s voice is muffled. Phillip sets his hand down on the fine marble countertop at his hip and finds the slab covered in a small film of grime. He removes his hand and reaches into his pocket for his handkerchief, but at the opportunity of Barnum’s unguarded back, he quickly swipes his fingers across Barnum’s shoulder, leaving three white streaks on the fabric of his coat.

Barnum doesn’t notice. Phillip finds himself silently entertained through the next few cars.

The following cars are dining and seating cars, proceeding into first class, business, and economy cabins. Down they walk, hopping over the hitches between cars and shimming behind crates of supplies. Past the passenger cabins come the cargo cars: large empty boxes with wide sliding doors that are open for viewing to interested parties. A couple of open-aired platform cars break up the sequence here and there. Finally, nearly a mile from where they started, sits the caboose.

They come out at the back platform. Before them is miles of open track, blocked by a chest high fence. Phillip leans against the railing, and fixes his gaze on the track bed below. The morning air is sharp against his lungs and he breathes deep. He knows Barnum to be a showman, first and foremost: the train, the presentation and the timing of which it’s being presented are intentional. They’re preemptive strikes against whatever position Phillip could have against Barnum’s plan.

Business with Barnum is something of a battle. The man is reckless, idealistic, and often lost in the image of what something could be rather than what it is. Every aspect of him stands adjacent to how Phillip sees the world.

After a moment, he twists towards Barnum who’s perched patiently on the railing, a ringed finger tapping on top of his thigh in a steady, rhythmic beat. The cadence is not unlike a war drum, Phillip thinks.

“Alright. What are you thinking?” Phillip asks, and he feels off-kilter.

“A tour. Six months out of the year. We start in the spring after the ground has thawed and go on hiatus in the fall right before the first frost.” Barnum pats the railing, “This girl can carry three hundred people. If we gut out some of the trams we have enough space for everyone in the show, and we could even bring on some backstage hands to help with the production.”

“P.T. we just got our finances back in order after the first tour you took. The circus is doing well, we’re meeting our monthly quota and then some. Breaking into an unknown market is risky.”

“We’re meeting our quota, but the show’s numbers are dwindling. I know you’ve kept with the log. It’s a steady decline.” Barnum looks to the distance where a flock of birds, startled by some invisible threat, take flight from their roost in the trees, “If we don’t break into a new market now, the circus is going to die before we ever get the chance to. We can float the costs, before it gets worse. I saw those towns, Phillip. So many of those people have never seen something like what we do. There’s a need there and we can provide it.”

Phillip clasps his hands together, worrying at a frayed cuticle on his thumb. He thinks of the ledger on his desk, outlining the slow, cancerous death of a disinterested crowd. The show has always sold well; Anne and W.D.’s act alone draws a solid audience, but while the smiles in the tent might lie, the numbers don’t. Barnum has a point, and he’s sliding the blade of it between the space of Phillip’s ribs.
Barnum slides off the railing and steps closer, mirroring Phillip’s stance, their shoulders flush against each other. He dips his head and demands Phillip’s attention, “Phillip, you know this is the right move. It’s risky, yes. We’re in the business of risk, but I truly believe this is going to work.”

“Like you believed Jenny Lind would work?” The name acts as ice to the conversation and Barnum’s eyes lower. His shame runs deep and while Phillip isn’t the kind of man to hold grudges, he isn’t about to let Barnum’s recklessness destroy the home they share between them.

Barnum takes a shuddering breath, and Phillip wonders if he’s crossed a line, if he might have actually angered the man. He hasn’t yet seen that side of Barnum, not once in the time they’ve known each other. Barnum’s personality relies more on charm than intimidation to win their arguments.

Phillip watches Barnum warily. The man’s shoulders are hunched and there is something conflicted about the way he stands. Phillip sucks in a breath, lets it buoy in his throat, and waits.

Barnum finally exhales, his shoulders drooping as he reaches up and rubs the space below his ear, “I never apologized to you, did I?”

Phillip blinks, momentarily thrown by the shift in conversation. “P.T.—”

“No, I don’t believe I did.” Barnum nods to himself and straightens to his full height. His eyes track over Phillip’s face, and Phillip feels discomfort prickle the skin at the base of his skull at how intensely the man is looking at him.

“I am sorry. Really. Out of everyone who was trying to stop me from screwing up, you and Charity were the ones who yelled the loudest. And I didn’t listen. I never apologized for the stress and responsibility I left with you. I never thanked you for repairing the damage that I caused.”

“It’s alright.” Phillip responds, taken aback by the sudden sincerity.

“No, it’s not.” Barnum steps closer and Phillip’s skin warms at the invasion, “I’m sorry Phillip. I hope you can forgive me.”

Phillip cannot recall a time in his life where someone looked at him the way Barnum did, with such painful honesty sitting in every crevice of the man’s features. Barnum apologized with his whole body: every aspect of him was stretched open, a fragile vulnerability in his stance, as if Phillip had the power to deny him salvation if he so chose.

The notion makes him wildly uncomfortable. He feels his face heat and he knows he’s blushing. Phillip ducks his head into his folded arms, and mutters, “Stop looking like a kicked dog Barnum, there’s nothing to forgive.”

Barnum laughs softly, and Phillip feels the tension seep out of the air, something lighter left behind. Phillip hadn’t ever thought he needed an apology from Barnum, but as awkward as the moment was, Phillip finds himself smiling into the crook of his elbow.

“Regardless, I know you have your reservations.” Barnum continues after a moment, “This train goes to auction tomorrow afternoon and I can’t bid without you. Take this risk with me and I promise you, within my power, I will make this work.”

“What about Lettie? Anne and W.D.? Everybody? Shouldn’t they be in on this decision?”

“I’ve already spoken to them about it. Or rather… I’ve vaguely brought up the concept of us moving the location of the circus to somewhere new. I haven’t told them about the train yet.” Barnum smiles
fondly, “They seem to agree that it doesn’t matter to them where the show is, as long as they’re not separated. However, they did say that I’d have to convince you before they supported the decision.”

Phillip chuckles, “Obviously, I’m the favorite.”

“That has yet to be determined.”

Phillip tilts his head back and sighs. He’s weary, and the cold has started to seep into his clothes. Barnum steps back, silently giving him a little space to think. Barnum is skilled in that, Phillip’s realizes. Knowing exactly how much distance a person needs in a moment.

Ten minutes pass slowly. He thinks about every possible action, every risk, every reaction. His mind goes in circles, but in the pit of his stomach he knows what his decision is.

He turns towards Barnum and says, “The train is going to need a paint job, don’t you think? It’s a little drab for ‘The Greatest Show on Earth.”

Barnum’s smile is dazzling.

-x-

“Still,” Phillip begins around a mouthful of boiled potatoes as Barnum and he share a meal later that day in a tavern a couple miles up from the shipping yard, “How are we going to afford this?”

Barnum eats like a bird. It’s a little detail that will never cease to amuse Phillip. He takes small delicate bites and chews for what seems like a century before swallowing. Phillip thinks that his mother would be impressed by the table manners this man possesses. The only thing he does at the table that would be considered rude is read. Even now, a pair of reading spectacles are perched on the bridge of his nose as he thumbs through a novel beside his plate.

“Well,” Barnum folds a tab in his book and focuses his attention back on Phillip, “I have an investor.”

“An investor? Who?”

“Benjamin Hallet.”

Phillip shifts through his memories of New York high society and the gruff face that appears at the name has him snorting in disbelief, “Charity’s father? You’re joking.”

Barnum takes another small bite and Phillip can tell by the way his teeth clack together that the notion physically pains him. Phillip’s mouth drops, “How in the world did you swing that? If I remember correctly, Mr. Hallet is far from being your biggest fan.”

“I may have leveraged the possibility of visiting hours with my beautiful daughters for him to hear me out.”

“You used your own daughters to manipulate your father-in-law into being our investor.”

“I took advantage of an opportunity, like a good businessman.” Barnum taps his napkin delicately against his mouth, and then tacks on, “With my wife’s approval, of course.”
“And that worked? I’m sorry but Mr. Hallet, as I recall, is what you would call—”

“-the most soulless person to walk God’s green earth?”

“—in possession of a hard exterior.”

“Phillip, have you yet met a man who could say no to Caroline and Helen? Mr. Hallet spent a week in their presence and suddenly it’s like he’s a changed man.” He shakes his head, “And for the life of me, Caroline and Helen absolutely adore him back! They have a competition going in trying to make him laugh: something I would write off as impossible if I hadn’t actually witnessed them making him snort up his evening brandy just last week.”

Phillip imagines the scene: a stuffy social climber like Hallet laughing so hard that his drink spurts out of his nose, and it has him choking on his porkchop. He washes it down with a swig of beer as Barnum thumps him on the back.

“So we bid on the train. We still need supplies, a schedule. Permitting and flyers. That’s going to cost us. The animals alone eat up a hearty portion of our operating funds, quite literally.”

Barnum reaches into his satchel and hands Phillip a hefty, solid case. Phillip, curious, opens it to find a well-organized collection of permits for five different cities and twenty smaller towns with a rough estimation of dates and travel times. Below that is a budget outlining food and board, employee salaries, and even a detailed section for booze allowance.

“P.T., how long have you been planning this?”

“Since I hit the first stage with Jenny Lind.” Barnum admits, “I was thinking we would do a tour after I got back with the money I made from the show. After the fire and our transition to the tent, the idea turned into an actual plan rather quickly.”

“Wait a second, so I’m the last hurdle on this?”

“Well, yes.”

Phillip doesn’t know whether to be impressed or insulted.

“You wouldn’t have agreed if I hadn’t had all my ducks in a row first.”

Phillip glances through the budget, and finds himself even more astounded, “Did you hire an accountant to draft this budget? It’s rather detailed. Good lord, it even has an estimation for how much hay a horse is going to need for six months and the ranges of feed prices throughout the country.”

“Hmm? Oh, Charity did that. She’s always had the head for numbers. Even does all the budgeting at home. After I pulled that stunt with Jenny Lind she’s had our personal accounts in a vice grip.” He shrugs, “Can’t say I’m disappointed, I’ve always loathed arithmetic.”

Phillip looks through the rest of the proposed accounts, through the surveys of the land and railways. He combs over permit after permit. The more he reads the more solid he feels in this decision. Barnum has obviously labored over this plan. This isn’t a Jenny Lind, this isn’t a grab for fame. It’s an well thought-out expansion.

He looks to the man across from him. Barnum’s attention is back to his book, and he’s silently mouthing along to what he’s reading, his finger trailing lightly over the print. Phillip feels a strange warmth bloom in his chest. Like this choice of his is going to make a difference.
"A train?" Anne asks that evening. She pumps her legs lightly, sending her swinging as she sits perched on her hoop. Phillip catches her by the waist when she gets close enough and gives her a subtle push to send her flying back. A game of give and take. "Well I can’t say that’s what I was expecting, but I’m not surprised."

“He had it all planned, Anne. Like he was just waiting on my approval, and now that he has it it’s full steam ahead.”

Anne wrinkles her nose as he catches her, and he drops a small peck on the curve of it. Just because he can. “That was terrible.”

“Unintentional, I swear.”

“You’re lucky you’re handsome.”

He feels a grin cut across his face, and he’ll admit he’s a little dazed, “You think I’m handsome?”

She rolls her eyes and kicks him lightly in the thighs, “Take the show cross-country, huh. I’ve never traveled like that.” She spins silently for a few minutes and Phillip lets her. Sometimes, Anne goes far away from him, into her mind. Like she’s remembering something she’s forgotten. Phillip knows the places she goes he can’t follow, he just has to wait for her to swing back to him.

He distracts himself for the time being, removing his outer coat and rolling up the sleeves of his shirt. He takes a bit of chalk from the corner of the ring and pats his hands down with it.

Anne does most of her thinking in the air. In the time he’s known her, Phillip has found himself adopting that method as well. He’s new to the world of aerial arts, but he’s picked up a few tricks in his time spent with Anne. Even W.D., when he’s feeling generous, has shown Phillip exercises to help build the necessary strength in his forearms to be able to bare his weight while up in the silks.

He unhooks one of the pulleys and feels himself being lifted in the air, until he’s dangling a few feet off the ground.

He starts with a mild warm up, swinging his legs back and forth and building a slow momentum. He shifts his weight onto one arm and rolls his hips up around a section of the silks. On and on he twists, slowly stretching out various muscles. He leans backwards until he’s hanging upside down and sinking deep into a stretch that tugs at his back muscles. He winces at the tightness in his spine.

“You need to work on your flexibility.” Anne says, sensing his discomfort. Phillip rights himself and swings slowly back around to face her. She’s grounded this time, her hands on her hips as she looks up to him.

She motions for him to continue and as he leans back once more, she reaches up, grabs his legs, and inches them toward his chest. The action has him groaning. “Breathe through it.” she says softly.

He takes her advice and counts out the seconds.
“Good, just like that. Now slowly anchor your hip and slide down.” He does as she instructs and the silks catch on his sleeves.

“We need to get you better training clothes.” Anne comments, and Phillip shakes his head.

“I draw the line at that purple monstrosity that W.D. wears. That thing should be put down.”

“You’re just mad that I look so good, pretty boy.” Both Anne and Phillip turn their heads towards the entrance of the ring where W.D. is standing, dressed in a dark red suit and a hat perched on the crown of his head.

He approaches the couple, and Anne meets him with an intricate handshake that Phillip has seen tens of hundreds of times but can never follow.

W.D. levels him with a grin, “Well, look at you. We’ll have a trapeze artist outta you yet.”

“He’s not ring ready.” Anne pokes him in the side and Phillip loses the anchor he has in the silks, falling the short distance to the ground.

Flat on his back, one foot still caught in the air, he shoots the siblings an unimpressed look, “Uncalled for.”

“That pun was uncalled for.” Anne says.

Phillip unhooks himself and W.D. hoists him up. On his feet, he looks the man up and down, “What are you so dressed up for? Is...is that my cologne?” He leans in to sniff the air by W.D.’s neck and the man swats him away.

Anne peers around Phillip’s shoulder, doing a once over of her own, “I can’t remember the last time you wore *cufflinks*. Where have you been?”

W.D. winks, “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

Anne makes a face and Phillip laughs as W.D. waggles his eyebrows.

“So what’s this I hear about a train? Lettie was caught up in the dressing booth, packing her things and saying that she’s gonna treat the whole damn thing like an extended vacation, she was so excited.”

W.D. rests against Anne’s lyra hoop as Phillip recounts the day to him.

Phillip thinks about the bearded woman and shakes his head, “We’re not even close to leaving yet. We still have to go to auction for that train. Who told you guys?”

“Apparently Helen overheard Mr. Barnum talking with Mrs. Barnum about it. The entire damn circus knows. She’s in the clown tent now regaling everyone about how we’re ‘taking this show on the road’.”

Phillip rubs his temples, feeling the stress build in his shoulders, “It’s the middle of the night, she should be home.”

“You try telling her that. The girl could be an escape artist the way she sneaks out.”

Anne rubs his back and he leans into her hand, “You better go on and take her home. It’s late.”

Phillip nods and hands her the rope. She takes it with one hand, catches his face with the other and
gives him a soft kiss. It still steals his breath at times when she’s affectionate, and he tilts his head into it for a long moment until W.D. clears his throat.

Phillip smiles against her lips and separates with a quick kiss to the corner of her mouth. With a quick goodbye to W.D., he exits the tent, shrugging on his coat as he goes. The sun has long since set and the niping cold from this morning has lowered into bone-chilling temperatures. He exhales and watches as the moisture in his breath mists into a cloud.

He walks across the field and enters the clown tent. It’s a much smaller set up than the main one, and can be a hazard to anyone who wasn’t looking to get pranked. Before he’s even close to the door he can hear cheering and laughter.

Inside he finds the usual suspects: Jimmy and Boris are in the corner, still in facepaint from an earlier show. O’Malley is sitting with Chang and Eng as they play a round of poker, and Lucy is having her silver-white hair braided by Josephine. Everyone has been drinking.

“Phillip!” Charles cries, tugging at Phillip’s pant legs and handing him a flask, “What brings you here? Anne kick you into the pen with the rest of us dogs?”

Phillip takes the flask, knocks back a small shot and tries to hide his wince. He knows better than to question the burn and opts to just appreciate the way it warms his insides.

“I heard we had a runaway in our midst.” he says through the fire in his throat, handing the flask back down to Charles’ outstretched hand.

Charles laughs delightedly and gestures over to the table where O’Malley is watching over the round. Phillip looks closer and sees a mess of blonde hair peeking out from behind a mountain of chips.

“Helen is wiping the floor with them, I think O’Malley has a new protege. I’ve never seen the man look so goddamn proud.”

At that moment Helen stands up in her chair and slams down her cards, “Read ‘em and weep, boys.”

Chang and Eng grab at their respective hair and let out a pained noise as Helen rakes the cash into the fabric of her dress. O’Malley turns his head and Phillip swears he sees the man wipe away a tear growing at the corner of his eye.

“I feel like we might be encouraging bad behavior.” Phillip says, amused despite himself, and Charles cackles.

“Yeah, and she’s only eight. Just wait till she’s a teenager. Barnum is going to have the time of his life.” Charles waves him off and wobbles over to where the Lord of Leeds is playing a game of chess with O’Clancy, both men positioned comically around the small game board.

Phillip approaches the table, and Helen lets out a yelp when she sees him. She ducks underneath the table, her winnings clanging on the ground.

“Phillip!” Chang says, “Thank god!”

Eng clasps his hands together, his face pleading, “Please take her home, I’ve already lost a day’s wage.”

“Not my fault!” Helen cries out below, “You just stink at poker!”
Eng points at her, “You’re a card shark!”

O’Malley looks up at Phillip and tips his hat, “Helen, go home with Phillip. Let Chang and Eng have a chance to actually win a round.”

Helen lets out a whine in protest and Phillip shakes his head. “Come on, Helen. I’m sure your father is looking for you right about now.”

Helen lets out a deep, dramatic sigh and crawls out from her hiding spot. She makes sure to take her time gathering up all of her winnings and piles it into a coin purse that O’Malley holds out for her.

With her back straight and her nose tilted high towards the ceiling, she shuffles towards the tent entrance and Phillip laughs at how Chang and Eng glare at her retreating figure.

“Hang in there boys, I’m sure it was just beginner’s luck..”

“Shut up, Phillip.” The twins grumble and O’Malley snorts, “This is the fourth round.”

“Well then,” Phillip laughs, “I take that back. Poker is not your game, fellas.”

The two groan and slump down in their seats. Phillip grabs Helen’s coat off the back of her chair and nods to O’Malley, who is already collecting the cards and shuffling the deck for another round.

Phillip heads towards the entrance, following after Helen and finds her shaking in the cold, teeth chattering, just outside the tent.

Phillip holds out her coat, “Forget something?”

She slides into it and grins, “Can’t let ‘em see you weak, Phillip.”

“Oh yeah?” he plucks her from ground and swings her around onto his back, “You are way too young to be spouting things like that.”

Helen giggles and Phillip starts the trek towards the neighborhood that her family moved into after the fire. It’s a quiet neighborhood of high quality townhouses, about a twenty minute walk from the circus field.

He asks her about her day at school and Helen launches into a whirling tangent about her school subjects, and how she almost decked Johnathan Polaski in the face during lunch today because he said something mean to Caroline and almost made her cry. The tangent takes up most of the walk, with Phillip making proper sounds at key points in the story.

Fifteen minute later, she’s snoring into his ear and he smiles as he shifts her a little higher and enters the row of houses at the end of the block. In the distance, illuminated by the dim glow of streetlights, he sees a familiar shape approach.

Phillip waves.

“I believe this is yours.” He says lowly as Barnum draws closer. Barnum must have been preparing for bed; he’s wearing his night robe and has his boots haphazardly pulled over his sleep pants.

Barnum huffs, exasperated, “I told Charity that she went to the circus. Thank you.”

“No, thank you. You should have seen the way she was hustling a poker match. Very entertaining.” Phillip holds out the weighted sack of change from Helen’s match, “Chang and Eng are going to be eating porridge for a couple days.”
“We’ve banned poker from family game night. Helen is vicious. A man’s pride can only take so many hits.”

“Who taught her how to play?”

Barnum raises an eyebrow and Phillip nods, “Charity?”

“Told you, she’s got the head for numbers.”

At that moment, Helen mumbles into Phillip’s shoulder, “Daddy?”

“Yes, darling?” Barnum says, motioning for Phillip to transfer her over. Barnum lifts her onto one hip and her arms limply coil around his neck.

“I’m sorry I ran away.” She mumbles, not sorry at all.

“That’s alright honey, you can muck out the horse stables this weekend as punishment.”

Helen’s face scrunches up and she pouts, “I apologized.”

Barnum looks to Phillip, his eyes gleaming with amusement, “And I appreciate that, but it doesn’t change the fact that you snuck out. Your mother and I explicitly told you not to go to the circus. Just because you apologize doesn’t erase how worried your mother was, or that you made poor Phillip here walk in the cold to bring you home. So when you do something like this you have to accept responsibility, and face the consequences. Do you understand, peanut?”

“Yes, daddy.” Barnum kisses her hairline fondly, and she sets her sleepy eyes on Phillip, “Sorry for making you walk so far.”

Phillip hums and says, “Tell you what, I’ll take this--” he holds up her winnings, “As payment. I’m sure Chang and Eng will like to have it back.”

“Awww.” Helen cries.

Barnum shushes her and looks at Phillip, “I’m going to get her inside. Thank you again.”

Phillip waves him off and watches as Barnum climbs the stairs to the front door.

“P.T.” Phillip calls out as Barnum opens the door, the warm light of his foyer flooding into the night.

When Barnum looks to him, he grins, “Get a good night's sleep. We’re buying a train tomorrow.”

-x-

Phillip is filled with anticipation the entire walk home. The circus rises out of the ground before him, a bi-colored mountain breaking up the black horizon. He passes the clown tent and sees Charles smoking a cigarette.

“Get her home alright?” Charles asks when Phillip is close enough. He holds out his pack and offers Phillip a smoke. Phillip rejects it politely and shoves his hands deeper into the warmth of his pockets.
“Barnum was already outside when I walked up. I got the feeling he already knew she’d snuck out long before Charity did. Didn’t stop him from giving her the fun job of cleaning out the stables this weekend though.”

Charles laughs, smoke bobbing from his nose, “He’s a good dad. Let the kid have her fun, but remind her that a good time can cost you.” He lifts his foot and snuffs out the stub of his cigarette on the tread of his boot, “Wish my Pa had been half as good as P.T.”

Phillip nods and lets the sentiment disappear into the atmosphere. He thinks about Charles’ mother who is a constant figure; showing up every other day with a basket of treats or laundered clothes. She frets over her son like a hen, tugging at his clothes or asking after his health. Charles never seems to mind, despite her inability to see him as an adult.

Phillip has never once seen Charles’ father.

For people who choose the circus, parentage is a complicated subject. Phillip, despite his background, finds common ground in that.

O’Malley chooses that moment to poke his head out of the tent. “Aye, got her home did ya?”

Phillip reaches into his coat pocket and tosses the coin purse to the man, who catches it deftly. “Give that back to the twins, I’m sure they’re going to be needing it the way you run a table.”

O’Malley sniffs, “Should’a let her keep it. Those boys made the mistake of underestimating her. Serves ’em right, I say. By the way, we’re starting a new round if ya wanna get in on it.”

The man turns back inside and Charles nudges Phillip in the toe with his foot, “Come play a round, I promise I’ll go easy on you.”

“Don’t you go lying to me, Tom Thumb.” Phillip laughs, “I should get to bed.”

“Don’t make me kick you, come on.” Phillip hesitates, and Charles actually kicks him lightly in the ankle. He looks down at him and Charles, the competitive bastard, clucks at him like a chicken. Phillip narrows his eyes, “Alright, you’re on little man.”

Charles grins, “Get ready to lose, rich boy.” He pulls aside the tent flap, and the golden light swallows them both.

-x-
This house don't feel like home

Chapter by Ecliptic (SandandSeas), Kreeston

Chapter Notes

Hey @ everyone who has been commenting and liking this work over the past week, we just wanna say that it's been so completely amazing to see our first chapter be so well received. Everyone has been so sweet with their comments and we are absolutely thrilled.

Kreeston and I have been working on the outline for this story and you may notice that we upped the chapter count. (two words: pacing issues) and we should show you guys some of the crazy ass things we've had to google. (edit: did y'all know there's a class of locomotives called Union Pacific Big Boys??? Big boys!!!! that fucking tickled me - K)

@ the FBI agents tapping our computers: we're not sorry and we hope you're confused.

Quick warning, there is an instance of homophobia and family infighting in this chapter, so proceed with caution.

-K & E

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Phillip should have gone to bed.

He stumbles into Anne’s caravan a little after four in the morning. Exhausted, drunk, and with a decidedly lighter wallet. The moment he undresses and settles down next to her on her thin mattress, he finds himself staring at the ceiling completely unable to sleep.

Four hours pass in a blur of restless, unsatisfying dozing. The sun is just above the horizon when Anne decides she’s had enough of him and pushes him, without sympathy, off her bed.

“Go away and don’t come back until you’ve calmed down.” She grumbles, her hair the only thing peaking out of the mess of blankets she’s curled up in.

So, the morning is a wash. Phillip finds himself descending into a particularly foul mood. His head pounds as he makes his way to the auction warehouse sometime around noon, where he sees Barnum waiting for him at the entrance. He looks well-rested, jovial even, and it makes Phillip want to kick him in the shin.

Barnum takes in Phillip’s appearance and snorts, “Late night?”

“Shhh.” Phillip presses his palms into his eye sockets. Stars splatter across the inside of his eyelids and he feels nauseous, “Stop speaking.”

He pushes past a chuckling Barnum into the auction room and sighs in relief as the darker atmosphere alleviates the pounding behind his eyes.
The room is rather small, with five or six rows of plush sitting chairs lined up towards the front platform. Over half are already occupied with potential buyers. The bank is auctioning off a few different assets today, and the people milling around cast an energy that swirls like blood in the water.

Phillip signs them in at the welcome desk and Barnum finds two empty seats towards the back. They sit and watch as the rest of the open seats fill in. The room is buzzing with idle chatter, which quiets as the auctioneer takes his place behind the podium.

“That man looks like he’s about to keel over.” Barnum mutters and Phillip finds himself agreeing. The auctioneer is an elderly gentleman of nearly eighty, white haired with a whiskery beard. He has to grip the edge of his podium to stay upright, but his voice is surprisingly steady, though slightly raspy, “Welcome ladies and gentlemen. I hope you all had no trouble finding this room. We’ll now begin bidding on the first lot.”

Everyone shifts to attention in their chairs as an auction house assistant, a much younger and more able-bodied man, walks across the stage with a large sketch rendering of what looks to be a shipping vessel, “Showing here, lot one--”

Phillip hasn’t been to an auction in years, not since he was a young boy trailing after his father. He had forgotten how mind-numbingly dull the entire event could be. The clock in the corner ticks by at a torturously slow pace and Phillip feels his eyes glazing over, the hangover squeezing on his temples reminding him of its presence.

Barnum leans over and whispers conspiratorially into his ear, “Our lot is number thirteen. Are you a superstitious man, Phillip?”

“Truly.” Phillip intones, flattening out the auction pamphlet across his lap, “As the only bad luck in my life is you, Mr. Barnum.”

“You flatter me.” Barnum deadpans, and Phillip can’t help the small twitch that jumps at the corner of his mouth.

The bidding continues with Phillip struggling to pay attention. The room goes in and out of focus and with the auctioneer’s voice being so monotonous, he can’t control the way his eyes droop. He’s barely aware of himself listing over the side of his chair into Barnum’s shoulder somewhere around lot twelve appearing on stage.

Barnum catches him with a wide palm on his bicep and gives him a little shake. Phillip blinks and stifles a yawn that rises out of his chest.

“There she is.” Barnum motions to an auction assistant standing off to the side of the stage, holding the rendering of their train. Phillip sits forward on the edge of his chair, shaking away the remaining sleepiness with a roll of his shoulders.

“We now open bidding on the next item on our docket. Lot thirteen, ladies and gentlemen. A proper example of man’s exuberance for the modern machine. Brand new, recently manufactured locomotive of the 4-4-2 Atlantic variety. All furnishings and supplies included. We start the bidding at fifteen hundred. Do I have fifteen hundred?”

A balding man with a rather pronounced brow three rows up from them raises his paddle, the auctioneer nodding to him, “We have fifteen hundred, do I hear--fifteen fifty to the women in the back, do I hear sixteen hundred--”
The sharks were swarming. Phillip had hoped this wouldn’t be the case but he knew the notion was naïve. The train was in near perfect condition and anyone interested in the future of the American railway knew it to be a good investment.

Phillip glances to his left at Barnum, who looks lost in how intense the bidding has become. He raises his paddle at eighteen hundred and Phillip follows up a couple tiers later at twenty-one hundred.

And so it climbs.

Phillip and Barnum only have three thousand between them; a choking point they decided on beforehand.

The closer the price grows to their cap, the faster Phillip’s heart thumps in his chest.

The bidders fall the higher the price rises, until it’s only between them and one other bidder who has matched every offer.

At twenty-nine hundred, Phillip feels Barnum clutch his wrist. He shakes his head and sits back, crosses his arms, and scowls.

“We have twenty-nine at the box. Do I hear thirty? Again do I hear thirty? Going once… twice…."

“Forty!” A voice chimes from the back. The entirety of the room, which had been watching the match with interest, all swivel in their seats towards the sound.

Barnum cranes his head and Phillip feels the man’s hand smack sharply against his collarbone. He turns and finds their own Charity Barnum standing right behind the row in which they sat, her paddle raised high in the air.

“Forty! Forty to the lady in the back! Do I have forty-five?”

The room is silent. The man in the front shakes his head, yielding.

“Sold, to the lovely lady! You may submit payment in the office down the hall. Now ladies and gentlemen, to the final lot--”

Charity taps them both on the shoulder and motions for them to follow. Astonished, Phillip stands up immediately and hurries after her, Barnum at his heels.

Out in the hallway Barnum wastes no time in gathering his wife in his arms and twirling her around, to her delight, “Oh, Charity, that was marvelous!”

She laughs and pats his shoulder to set her down. Back down on the ground Phillip gets his chance to lean in and kiss her quickly on the cheek, “That really was well done.”

“Why thank you,” Charity smiles, adjusting her bonnet which was knocked askew in her husband’s exuberance, “But I have to say fellas, you both have terrible poker faces. I could tell the minute I walked in that you were working with limited funds just by how hard you were chewing your nails, Phin. That’s why that other gentlemen kept pushing the price.”

Barnum looks down at his torn nail beds and grins sheepishly at Phillip, “My tell.” he stage whispers.

“Bad luck, you are.” Phillip shakes his head wryly. He turns to Charity and offers her his arm, “Shall we?”
Charity takes it with a giggle.

Barnum rolls his eyes, and places a hand on Phillip’s shoulder and one at the small of his wife’s back and gives them both a small push forward.

In contrast with the languid pace of the auction, they are in and out of the payment office quicker than it takes Charity to sign her name. She writes a check for the sum plus the processing fee imposed by the auction house, which the accountant takes and in turn hands her the deed.

With that, the man waves them out of his office and calls in the next bidder for lot fourteen. Outside, Barnum reaches for the deed and Charity draws back, holding the parchment out of reach behind her head. She places a hand on his chest, “We need to talk. We all need to talk.”

-X-

They find themselves in the same tavern as the day before. The lunch rush is in full swing by the time they’re seated by a frazzled barmaid at a small table in the back corner of the establishment. Phillip moves to take the one seat across from the bench, intending to let the couple sit next to each other but Charity claims it with her coat over the back of the chair. She looks at him intently and motions for both of them to sit.

“I’m going to go get something to drink. Hang tight for a moment.” She turns and walks through the maze of tables and tavern-goers with ease.

“Can you move over a little bit?” Phillip mutters, his headache back in full force, pulsating every time a shrill voice cuts a hair louder than the rest of the noise. He’s wedged between Barnum and the dark oak paneling of the wall, their sides flush together in the small space. The backdrop of dining conversation rises and falls like the tide around them.

Barnum’s presence against his side is an uncomfortable heat that makes him feel dizzy.

“There’s nowhere to move to, just bare with it for a moment.” Barnum says. He’s messing with his wedding ring, twisting it clockwise and counterclockwise on his finger. Somewhere in the space, a child cries out, the foreshock of a possible tantrum. Phillip groans and lets his head drop into his waiting palm.

After a moment, he turns his head to peer through his fingers at the man next to him, “What does she want? Do you know?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t even know she was going to be at the auction. She was asking me about it yesterday but now that I think about it, she was oddly interested in the details.” Barnum shrugs, and Phillip feels the entire movement against him, “We’ll just have to wait for her to tell us what she’s scheming.”

“Well, I hope she makes this quick. My head is about to explode.”

“I have no sympathy for you.”

Phillip attempts to elbow him in the ribs but with how little space there is between them, the action is ineffective. Barnum responds by settling even closer against him, using his weight to squish Phillip into the wall.
“You’re crushing me.” Phillip says.

“Hmmm, am I?” Barnum hums, “Oh, look, here she comes.”

“Here we go boys,” Charity says as she sets down three silver tankards in front of them. Barnum takes his with a loving smile and Phillip rolls his eyes. He takes his own tankard and stares warily down into it. Inside a clear liquid swishes and, curious, he takes a sniff of the contents. To his absolute relief it’s just water. He sends Charity a grateful look.

“You look rough today, Mr. Carlyle.” She laughs.

“I’m fairly certain Tom Thumb is in worse shape than I am. We were drinking rather heavily last night.”

“Well, I ordered some soup for you. Something easy on the stomach. Can’t have you dying just yet, Phillip.”

He nods in agreement and takes a slow sip from his mug. The water is pleasantly cool against his throat and it eases the pressure behind his eyes slightly.

Barnum, already a quarter way done with his own drink, sets his down with purpose. He looks to his wife, who regards him calmly, “Alright, Charity. What’s this about?”

She leans back in her seat and clasps her hands daintily in front of her. To Phillip, something about the way she’s holding her shoulders gives him the sense that whatever Charity Barnum wants in this moment, she won’t back down until she gets it, “I have a proposition.”

She reaches into her purse and pulls out the deed from the auction house. She slides it between the three of them at the center of the table, “It’s rather simple. I have something you want. You have something I want. I think there is a deal to be made in that.”

Barnum glances to Phillip, and then back to her, “What is it that you want?”

Charity’s eyes are serious, “I want in.”

“In?” Phillip asks.

“I want in on the business. The show, the company’s future.”

“Charity, you’re already involved—” Barnum begins but Charity cuts him off:

“No, I am the wife of the owner. Quite frankly, I am tired of being just that. Before, when it was just us, I was content with only being there in the background since someone had to run the house while you were getting started, Phin. But now I’m no longer needed for that, we can afford additional help.”

“The girls—”

“Are old enough now that I don’t have to chase after them at every turn. Besides, I don’t want to be on the circus floor. Center stage has always been for you. I’m perfectly fine with working in the shadows. What I want is access to the business accounts. A cut of the shares. I have plans.”

“Plans?” Phillip chimes in.

“Expansion. A diversified portfolio. I want to steady out the venture. We have all our eggs in one basket, the show is bringing in quite a bit of revenue but our entire security is in that one income. All
it would take is one... mishap.” She looks pointedly at Barnum, who looks away, “To bring it all down.”

“In exchange for that, I will provide you what you need for this tour to work.” She taps the deed with her finger twice.

“Charity,” Barnum sits forward, “I’m not sure.”

“Well I am. You’re not the only one with a stake in this. I want to do my part. I want to have a part to play.”

Barnum and her regard each other for a moment, and he then directs his attention to Phillip, “What do you think?”

Phillip looks at her. At the way her mouth is set with firm determination. He’s seen that look on more than one successful businessman.

He chews on the skin of his cheek, before saying, “I’ve looked over her accounts, P.T. as you have. They’re solid.” He pauses and turns to her, the question having been at the back of his mind for some time, “Where did you learn to do that, by the way?”

Charity pushes a lock of hair back behind her ear, “My father, while he was strict when I was growing up—”

Barnum snorts into his drink and Charity reaches over to pinch his hand in retaliation, “He only ever wanted what was best for me. The school he sent me to was fairly progressive, more focused on a practical education than just etiquette. It had a large library filled with all kinds of subjects.”

“Sending letters to my father was never easy. After I found a book on economics I discovered that it was a lot easier to talk to him about interest rates and stocks then it was about art or dancing. So I studied it in my spare time.”

Charity laughs suddenly, struck by a memory, “I suspect the other girls found me rather bland to talk to. So there wasn’t a lot to distract me from the subject.”

Phillip smiles at the woman across from him. He’s becoming more impressed by her every day, it seems.

“You’ve never told me that story.” Barnum murmurs quietly. She shifts her eyes to him and says, “You never asked.”

Phillip looks between them and feels like he’s intruding on a delicate moment. The way they regard each other is richer than any conversation he thinks could be had verbally. He drums his fingers anxiously on the tabletop and waits.

“Besides,” Charity says, dragging her gaze back to Phillip, “You both will have a lot going on with the tour. Wouldn’t it be better to have someone familiar handling the accounts?”

Phillip looks to Barnum and shrugs, “She has a point.”

Barnum stares down at the deed, and then to his wife who raises her eyebrows so pointedly at him that it startles a laugh out of the man, “I’ve been bested, and honestly I’ve never been happier to concede. Alright Charity, you’re in.”

Charity, as satisfied as someone whose plan has gone exactly the way it was intended, lifts her
tankard, massive in her small hands and holds it out to the center of the table in toast, “Boys, I look forward to doing business with you.”

-X-

The following days pass in a flurry of activity. With Charity at the helm of managing the expenses, the weight of getting the show ready for travel, along with managing the acts and carrying out their usual schedule for the show already in progress, falls on Barnum and Phillip. Phillip finds himself so busy that even finding time to eat is nigh impossible, let alone keep track of the date.

Christmas slips in, shrouded in a blanket of new fallen snow.

“I don’t want to go.” Phillip mumbles as Anne straightens his tie, folding the stiff collar of his shirt down over the fabric, “I don’t want to see them.”

“They’re your family,” Anne simply says, her fingers fiddling with the buttons of his shirt. Her caravan is a mess around them; colorful fabrics of dresses and costumes strewn across the space with no regard for walking room. She has a stack of books towering precariously on her nightstand and her vanity is full of vials and containers, all lined up like little soldiers before the mirror.

Phillip stares at her, still dressed in the costume she wore in the ring, with a floral robe sitting on her shoulders. The warm glow of the setting sun bleeds through her curtains and highlights the curve of her cheeks.

He reaches up to grasp her hands, “The circus is my family. You’re my family. They’re just my parents.”

Anne smiles, and Phillip appreciates the color that spreads across the bridge of her nose.

She runs her hands along his suit vest, tugging out a stray wrinkle, “You know that isn’t true. You miss them.”

She steps back and reaches for his cufflinks, which sit amongst her perfumes. She raises his wrist and screws the first elegant gold piece into place.

Phillip looks past her out the caravan window, and despite them being the only people in the room, he can’t help how low his voice sounds when he admits, “I can’t talk to them like before.”

She moves to his next wrist, seemingly focused in her task, but Phillip has known her long enough to know by the way her head is tilted towards him that he has her full attention. An unjudging audience.

“The way they look at me, Anne. It’s like they’ve never been so disappointed in their entire lives. The idea of sitting through a dinner with them while they tear into what I love, who I love-- I’d rather just skip it all. Be here for the party, with you.”

She grins and leans into him, “It’ll be quite the feast. O’Clancy’s going to be cooking and I haven’t had his salmon pie in ages.”

“See, even more of a reason to not go.”

“Phillip,” She says firmly, hands at his wrists, “There will be plenty of time for you to have
Christmas with us. Go, spend an hour with your parents, show them how happy you are despite them. Eat that steak drizzled with liquid gold or whatever it is those high society folks eat. Then come home to us.”

He groans, head hanging in defeat, “It’s going to be absolutely miserable.”

“I know, baby. I know.” She reaches around him and grabs his overcoat that’s draped over the chair and holds it out for him to slip into, “Is your brother going to be there?”

“Probably,” He says as he shrugs it on, “He’s on break from his school in Virginia until after the new year.”

Phillip adjusts his cuffs under his coat sleeve, “He’ll be insufferable, as usual.”

“Must run in the family.” Anne jokes, and at his furrowed brow she kisses his cheek and gives him a gentle shove towards the door, “Go on. We’ll all be here when you return.”

He stands to a salute, face resolute and performs an about-face with exaggeration. Her laughter follows him into the cold.

-X-

Night falls during the carriage ride to the outskirts of the city. Each minute that passes builds on Phillip’s shoulders until he’s stiff with apprehension. He rolls his neck to relieve the pressure.

The Carlyle estate is a pompous example of architecture, Phillip realizes, as his carriage rolls up to the front entrance. Expansive and ostentatious, designed with every intention of showing just how wealthy those who dwell inside it are.

Phillip is struck by how strange it is to be standing before it without any semblance of familiarity in his bones: the months he’s spent away have completely rewritten the way he looks at its walls. In the place of home, something cold and unwelcoming has taken hold.

Thinking of the warmth of Anne’s caravan, he steel his self and knocks twice on the large wooden door. A moment passes before the doorman opens it, his face the picture of detached professionalism.

He greets Phillip by offering to take his coat, and Phillip tries not to compare it to the smiles that would have greeted him if he were truly home.

He enters the dining room where his family is already seated. Phillip feels every nerve in his body begging him to escape when his father looks upon him and says icily, “Phillip.”

“Father, Mother,” Phillip glances to the clock--fifty-nine minutes to go-- and then to the final member sitting at the table, “Jacob.”

Jacob Carlyle, at the awkward age of not quite thirteen, hasn’t yet mastered mannerly stoicism, and openly sneers.

Phillip sits down across from him, next to his mother who regards him like he’s something foreign, a caged animal that she doesn’t know will bite. But she knows her role, so she says with little indication of the weight hovering over their heads, “I’m so glad you chose to join us, Phillip.”
Phillip doesn’t respond. Fifty-five minutes to go.

The first course is set before them, eaten in a deathly silence, and then taken away. Phillip keeps his eyes on the clock. He hopes the rest of the dinner will pass like this. Silence, while oppressing, is the preferable option in this scenario.

His father, by the weight of his gaze, has different plans.

“How is the business, Phillip?”

Phillip tenses, hand stilling where he was pushing his peas around his plate with his fork, “It’s--”

“Speak up, boy.” His father says sharply.

Phillip clears his throat and looks to the head of the table, “It’s good. Fine.”

“Father says it’s full of freaks. That the ringmaster is a devil worshiper.” Jacob mocks, and his mother hushes him, “Jacob don’t--”

“Now, Grace, the boy isn’t wrong.” Mr. Carlyle says, reaching over to pat Jacob’s head in approval. Jacob smirks across the table at Phillip, “It is a den of freaks. Explain to us, Phillip. How is it running around with the scum of the city?”

“I--” Phillip says, his foot tapping anxiously underneath the table.

“Dear, let’s just have a nice dinner--”

“No, I want to hear what he has to say. Tell me, Phillip. How is it? Have you gotten sick of the degeneracy?”

“Stop.” Phillip finally grits out, anger coiling in the pit of his stomach.

His father senses the weakness, and latches onto it, “Perhaps you’ve gotten used to it. That man you do business with probably has you joining in, huh? Infecting this city with that sickness he calls a show--”

The clock chimes a dissonant sound, and Phillip can no longer stand it. He turns to his mother and quietly murmurs to her shocked expression, “I’m going to go.”

“Phillip--”

Phillip stands, wipes his mouth with his napkin and drops it across his unfinished meal and makes for the door. His father slams his hands down on the table, the dishware rattling with the force of it, “Don’t you dare run away from me!”

Phillip pauses even though he shouldn’t, his feet sticking to the ground. He feels like a child the way his hands shake at his sides.

“Such insolence. I gave you everything and yet you choose to dirty yourself with that place. With that woman --”

“Don’t you dare say another word about her.” Phillip interjects, twisting violently on his heel, “You will not disrespect her in front of me.”

“Disrespect? You want to talk to me about disrespect? As you drag our family’s reputation into the muck with you? For the life of me, what is it about her that you can’t see sense?!”
“You--” Phillip begins but his father’s eyes widen, a realization painting his features, “Or maybe it isn’t just her--”

“Jasper, please. Don’t do this in front of Jacob--” His mother grabs her husband’s hand, and he shakes it off.

His father laughs and it’s a high, manic sound, “--it’s the ringmaster as well!”

Phillip tenses at the words, blood boiling beneath his skin. His hands jitter at his sides, the shaking having moved up his arms and into his shoulders. He curls his fingers into his palms, nails digging sharply into his skin, but he can’t respond. His mouth won’t open.

His stunned silence is damning.

His father looks him up and down once more, and Phillip sees in his eyes a deep, unyielding disgust, “That’s it isn’t it, you’ve become one of them; some kind of sodomite.”

Phillip gapes at him in disbelief. He knows without a doubt that the man is baiting him, trying to draw him into a fight that Phillip will never win. He finds his voice buried somewhere beneath his anger, “I’m not doing this with you. Believe what you want, I’m leaving.”

“You will not!” His father roars. He charges up from his seat and suddenly he’s in Phillip’s face, dragging him in by the lapels of his suit and spitting, “I will not have my son running around with some menagerie of whores and freaks. I will not leave my fortune to a degenerate!”

For a moment, no one moves. Jacob is clutching the tablecloth near his plate so tightly his knuckles are white. His eyes are wide, watching the scene with rapt attention. His mother is crying silently, her hand clasped tightly over her mouth.

His father breathes heavily against him.

This close, Phillip can do nothing but stare into the man’s face, at the fury that sits in every crevice of his expression. How is it possible for a man with a heart still beating in his chest to look so decayed?

He realizes in that moment that his father has nothing to hold over him. All his anger, his threats, all of it is just the posturing of an old man who knows that he’s lost his control. Phillip thinks about what this man offers; an inheritance that he’s survived without for months and the suffocating weight of his reputation. It’s a colorless, distant world to him.

Burn it down, for all the good it’s done him.

He feels the fight go out of him in a rush, leaving in its place a deep weariness. He meets his father’s anger, slowly removes the fists from his jacket, and steps away, “You have given me nothing but misery. Do what you want. It doesn’t matter to me.”

His father’s hands chase after him, trying to drag him back, trying to reclaim control. The entire time he’s howling, “You leave and you are dead to me! You hear me?! Dead!”

Phillip rushes into the foyer, doesn’t even bother pausing to grab his overcoat and hat, and breaks out into the snow.

His mother catches him by the arm as he has a foot into his carriage. She’s without her coat, just her dinner shawl pulled tightly around her shoulders.

“Phillip! Phillip don’t leave, please.” Her hands are cold on his wrist, and he resists the urge to wrap
them up with his own.

“Let me go. I’ve been insulted enough tonight.”

“He worries, Phillip. He loves you and you are breaking his heart. Doesn’t that matter to you?”

“It used to,” Phillip grits out, “But not anymore. I’m done.”

“Phillip—” His mother starts and Phillip shakes his head, cutting her off.

She releases his arm and wraps hers under her, like she’s trying to hold herself up. The thought makes his heart ache. “Listen to me, Phillip. We can’t accept this. That world, those people... it’s not meant for us.”

Phillip grips tighter at the threshold of the carriage, “Mother, I can’t be like you anymore. I don’t want any part of this. Please, try to understand.”

His mother looks to the side, pushing an errant graying curl behind her ear. When she looks back to him, her eyes pleading, he wants nothing more than to hug her like he was once able, without this ocean between them.

She lets out a shuddering breath, and says, “I… will talk to him about the inheritance. We leave in a few days for England and we won’t return until well into the summer. Run around with your... **circus.**” She says the word like its sticking to her teeth, “Get it out of your system and we’ll work out the rest when we return.”

She reaches out to grip his hand again in hers, “How does that sound?”

He looks into her eyes, finding only the utter denial she has for the situation. Her dismissal of him is sharper and more painful than anything his father has ever said.

He gently removes her hold on his wrist and turns away from her, into the carriage.

“Goodbye, mother.”

His mother opens her mouth to say something, but he cuts her off with the slamming of the carriage door. He’s barely seated when the carriage jolts into movement, carrying him away from this disaster of an evening. He collapses against the door and swallows hard against the lump in his throat.

Despite himself, he glances out the window at what he’s leaving behind. Past his mother trembling in the snow, up into the entrance of the house, his eyes land on Jacob standing in the threshold.

Braced against the front door, his face utterly devoid of emotion.

-X-

He hears the party before he sees it: a drum beat followed by the screech of a fiddle, laughter and the chorus of a drinking song. The smell of smoked meat seasoned with garlic and clove sits heady on Phillip’s tongue as he rounds the street corner and enters the pub.

The first thought that strikes him is that Chang and Eng must have been busy.
From the rafters sway dozens of paper lanterns, a mixture of red and white rice paper glowing softly with a golden flame. Looking at the them and the duel colored rows they create, Phillip feels as though they somehow brought the big top into the room with them.

He squeezes through the crowded doorway, shaking snowflakes from his hair, and at his entrance the entire party turns and greets him with a rowdy cheer.

Dog Boy, who’s given name is Walter and who everyone more lovingly calls Pup, does a running leap towards him, wrapping him up in a fury embrace.

Phillip laughs against the mouthful of hair as the boy nuzzles into his cheek, drunk as can be. There are suddenly multiple hands clapping him on the shoulder and giving him sideways hugs.

He moves through the mass of people slowly, accepting each greeting with a smile and somewhere in the midst of it all he’s handed a drink. He spots Anne through the gathering, sitting with W.D. and Lettie near the corner bar by the piano. Lettie looks to be in the middle of a story that has both siblings bent over with laughter.

He makes his way over to them and Lettie is the first to spot him. She raises her drink, cheeks pink from either the warmth of the room or the alcohol. Perhaps both.

“Mr. Carlyle!” she cheers, “Get over here.”

He steps into the trio’s space, first dropping a kiss to Lettie’s head, bypassing W.D. who sits between them to do the same with Anne.

W.D. frowns in his direction, “Where’s my kiss, pretty boy? I’m offended.”

Phillip laughs into Anne’s hair before turning to W.D. With as much exuberance as possible, Phillip seizes him by the ears and drags him in to lay down the loudest, wettest kiss he can manage on W.D.’s cheek.

W.D., as good natured a man as any, leans back with a pleased expression. Lettie lets out a rolling laugh and holds out her glass to Phillip, “Dear, while you’re right there being sweet on W.D., fill me up.”

“Yes ma’am.” Phillip takes the tankard from her grasp and leans over the bar to fill it from the tap. The bartender nods to him down the line.

He passes it back over to Lettie, who is now caught up in a conversation with Josephine. Phillip settles down into an empty stool beside Anne, and she turns to greet him with a smile that soothes his soul. Her mouth slips into a puzzled frown as her eyes trail over his shirt, wet and transparent from the snow, and she says, “Where’s your coat? You must be freezing.”

He takes a sip of his drink, “I'll warm up soon. Don’t worry about it.”

She looks him over and Phillip tries to fix his expression into something more reassuring. Anne leans in closer to him, her hand reaching up to lay on his jaw. Ever so slightly, she tilts his head towards her, “You okay? You look a little shaken.”

“I’m fine.”

Even to him his voice sounds empty.

Anne bites her lip, hesitant before asking, “How was dinner?”
He shakes his head, the motion heavy.

Her expression is a mixture of sad and understanding, and he shrugs against it, “It went as well as I expected, honestly.”

Her hands find his and she gives them a small squeeze, “Well, no matter. You’re back where you belong now.”

“Yeah,” He says, looking at the chaos that surrounds him, wild and welcoming. “I am.”

Chapter End Notes

That’s it for this week, we hope you survived this emotional chapter. The next installation should be posted before 2/10/18 if the college gods have any love for us mere mortals.

{Last chapter's title inspiration: That Green Gentleman by Panic! at the disco
This chapter's title inspiration: Unsteady by X-Ambassadors}
December melts into January without much fanfare. The hollow feeling that had been sitting in Phillip’s chest since the dinner with his family is gradually buried under more pressing matters.

Plans for their departure are being made and solidified faster than Phillip can feasibly keep up with. Left alone with management of the show as Barnum all but vanishes into the thankless job of renovation, time becomes nothing more than the relentless tide of late nights rolling into early mornings.

March meets him, the deadline hiding in its depths, ready to devour him come April.

It’s two weeks before they’re scheduled to depart that Phillip finds a moment to sneak out to the rail yard to see what Barnum has done with the train. The weather is pleasant as he moves through the scattered lines of locomotives corralled in the space, a stack of mail wedged under his arm. Under a cloudless sky, the midday sun heats the surface of his jacket; a sign that the last vestiges of winter are being overtaken by the upcoming spring.

“Let see, where would we be?” Phillip wonders aloud to a Union Pacific that cuts through his path. He hops over the hitch and glances up and down the lines of compartment cars. He knows Barnum is here today, having talked to Charity early that morning over breakfast with her and the girls.

It shouldn’t surprise him, considering the kind of person he knows Barnum to be, but Phillip is woefully unprepared when he steps out from behind the pilot of a smaller locomotive and is assaulted by the sight that meets him.

“Well.” Phillip says, cupping a hand over his eyes to block out the sun as he gazes upon the train, “I doubt anybody will be asking who we are.”

The locomotive is no longer the same shade of coal-black: swaths of red and gold cover the trim pieces and the pilot. Slowly being added are murals of all the animals and acts: lions, bulls, trapeze artists, the bearded woman, the dog boy. Everyone is painted into the side of what will be their new home. Across the siding of the first car, in gigantic, swirling font, reads:

P.T. BARNUM’S CIRCUS
Phillip pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath, tasting nothing but the fresh paint that coats the air. He takes a few seconds to center himself before gazing back upon Barnum’s work. He has to admit, it’ll catch the attention of anyone who dares to look.

Dragging his attention away from the train, Phillip taps his shoulder with the scroll of parchment in his hand. His main reason for coming here today was to get Barnum’s signature on a vendor contract.

He decides to try the first car that has its side-doors open. He steps up on the lowered plank and peers into the room. The cabin is empty, the only evidence of Barnum’s presence is his coat draped over the bedpost, his hat sitting on top of it.

He leans back and looks down the line of cars, drumming his fingers along the wall in thought. Maybe he should try the galley? Or one of the supply cars further down the line? Barnum had mentioned something about overseeing preparation for the menagerie of animals set to be traveling with them.

As he moves to drop down from the gangplank, he spots a figure standing on the roof of a train car several compartments down from where he stands. Back against the sun, the silhouette is vaguely the right shape to be the man he’s looking for.

Phillip swings himself around the corner onto the platform hitch and from there climbs up to the roof. High up off the ground, he’s level with the rest of the locomotives in the rail yard. He takes a small moment to appreciate the horizon that stretches out before him, beckoning and impatient.

Phillip starts the process of leaping across one compartment to another, careful of the curved, riveted nature of his path. As he draws closer to Barnum, he realizes that the man is standing over one of the break wheels, his hands on his hips and his face pensive as he stares down at it.

So absorbed is he in his thoughts, he doesn’t even seem to hear Phillip’s clunking footfalls as he lands on the car.

“What have you done to this train?” Phillip decides to lead with. There’s something about the way Barnum’s eyes jump to his, startled and unsteady, that throws Phillip off.

The expression dissolves within seconds, the remnants of his thoughts being chased off by a wide grin. He opens his arms wide and leans back on his heel, “How does it look? Have you been inside yet?”

“The inside is fine,” Phillip responds “- it’s the outside that’s the eyesore.”

Barnum shakes his hand, dismissive, “Phillip, when will you develop your eye for art?”

“Probably when I see some.”

Barnum huffs out a laugh. Phillip smiles at the sound and looks past the man towards the line of compartments ahead of them, “What are you doing up here anyway?”

Barnum tilts his head, a small smile still on his lips, “I was just remembering.”

“Anything you’re willing to share?”

“Used to ride one of these when I was younger.” Barnum says, tapping the toe of his boot on the
metal roof, “I worked as a brakeman for most of my teenage years.”

Curiosity fully piqued, Phillip looks to him, “For some reason, I can’t imagine you as a teenager. What was it like back then?”

“It was a…more difficult time.” Barnum says vaguely, and he turns to Phillip, “What brings you here today? I hope you didn’t come just to criticize my artistic vision.”

The shift in conversation leaves Phillip with more questions. The way Barnum’s hands clench at his sides before fully relaxing and the strain behind his eyes warns Phillip that it wouldn’t be wise to pry.

Deciding to let the man have his privacy, he instead uncurls the scroll in his hands and presents it with flourish, “We need your signature on the new merchandise line.”

“Well then.” Barnum says, skimming the contract with interest. He slides pass Phillip and lowers himself to the gravel bed below. Phillip peers over the edge and Barnum waves him down, “Why don’t we talk about it in our office?”

The office is a renovated cabin that sits between what will eventually be their private quarters. Two writing desks have been placed at separate corners of the space, with a long bookcase that sits like a bridge between them. Barnum’s already filled most of the shelves with novels from his private library. Phillip scans the binds of the vast collection, finding a strange, esoteric balance of genres and subjects. Astronomy, mythos, arithmetic, historical accounts and literary stories crowded together between bookends and leather bound journals.

Phillip tugs out one of the books and leafs through the pages. Barnum leans around him and hums in approval at the title, “That’s a wonderful story.”

“What’s it about?”

“Read it, I think you’ll like it. Funnily enough, you share a name with the main character.” Barnum drops himself down at his desk and taps his chin, “I wonder, should I start calling you Pip?”

Phillip winces at the nickname, “Please, I’d rather you didn’t.”


“Yeah? What if I start calling you Phineas?”

Barnum visibly shudders and he starts laughing, “Oh no. First off, there should be more reverence in your voice when you say my name. But I see your point.”

“I thought you would.”

Barnum shakes his head and turns back towards his desk. Flattening out the parchment, he pulls his reading spectacles from his breast pocket and begins his inspection of the contract.

While he reads, Phillip busies himself at his own desk. He drops the book and the stack of mail that he brought with him onto the surface and starts to shift through the parcels. Most of them are bills, potential advertisers and the like. He starts to sort them out. The bills need to go to Charity. Since she took over the business accounts, Phillip finds that everything is much more organized; they haven’t had an overdue notice in months.

There are a couple of flyers for various businesses in the New York area, Phillip tosses them to the side without much thought. Letters addressed to Barnum get stacked to the front. Once the man is
done looking over the contract, he’ll pass them along for him to review.

The last letter is addressed to him, sitting at the bottom. The envelope is of thicker parchment paper, and Phillip's full name is displayed in a neat typeface across the center line. He looks at the return address and recognizes the name of one of his father’s attorneys.

He hasn’t thought about his parents in months, and in this moment, he’d much rather keep it that way.

“Are you going to open it?” Barnum says in his ear, having silently knelt behind his chair, and Phillip jolts against the breath that moves across his cheek.

Phillip glares at Barnum and the man gestures at the letter, “What is it?”

“Most likely news of my impending disownment.” Phillip says, and he’s surprised how little the words affect him. “I had a bit of a row with my parent’s over Christmas.” Phillip glances sideways to Barnum, who is staring hard at the envelop, “Your name was mentioned a few times if I recall correctly.”

Barnum grins, and it’s all teeth, “Parents tend to not like me very much.”

“No good reason for that, I’m certain.” Phillip laughs.

Barnum pushes himself up, hand still on the back of Phillip’s chair and his eyes serious on Phillip’s face, “Joking aside, are you okay? Your inheritance…”

Phillip fiddles with the envelop in his hands and runs his tongue over his teeth in thought, “I think I’m starting to be. Okay with it that is. I know I made the right choice. It’s not the money that gets to me but…”

“You wish things could have gone differently.”

Phillip breathes out and hates how shaky it sounds in the quiet space. He tilts his head away from Barnum’s gaze and nods.

Barnum doesn’t say anything more, but he sets his hand on Phillip’s shoulder, his fingers just barely caressing Phillip’s collarbone, and leaves it there: steadying, noninvasive support.

“Besides-” Phillip says after a beat, shrugging. Barnum’s hand falls from his shoulder and the residual warmth is a phantom weight. He resists the urge to rub at it.

Phillip stares down at the letter before reaching over to Barnum’s book and sliding the envelope in between the pages. All his reputation, all his wealth, downsized to a flimsy bookmark.

The thought makes him laugh, and he pushes the book into the top drawer of his desk, “I doubt there is anything in there that I want to read.”

Phillip pulls himself out of his chair and turns and finds Barnum much closer than he expects. He rears back, the back of his calves thumping into his chair, throwing him off balance. Barnum reaches out and catches him by the elbow.

Barnum’s eyes are a soft brown, Phillip realizes. Nearly golden as they catch the light seeping in from the window.

The fact alone is nothing remarkable. Phillip had noticed it that night in the bar, so many months ago,
when Barnum had dragged him in close to hand him the first shot glass. That memory is faded from

time and drink, but he remembers a certain type of intensity in the man’s gaze. Right now, he’s

struck by the same feeling, that he’s being let in on a secret as they track over his face and maybe
Phillip is imagining it, but he swears he can feel a slight pull on his forearm, drawing him closer.

The world narrows down to just the two of them; a moment perched in a confessional.

Phillip is reminded of the look that had been on Barnum’s face when he stood on the roof of the train
and wonders if he asked about it now, would Barnum answer him.

The second grows taut and snaps. Barnum eyes dart to the side as he releases his hold and steps

away towards the open swing-door, “Come on, let me show you the rest of the renovations.”

Phillip blinks, as if coming out of a daze, and feels his heartbeat quicken in his chest, filling him with

hair-triggered energy. He rolls his shoulders to shake it out and moves to follow Barnum, “Are you

sure you want my uncultured opinion on your masterpiece?”

“On the contrary, the more you dislike it the more I know I’m on the right track.”

Barnum watches gleefully as his words land and Phillip face twists into begrudging amusement. He

pushes past Barnum, “That was bad. Terrible even.”

Barnum’s laugh echoes behind him, loud and unapologetic.

-X-

Phillip’s first memory of boarding a train is an early one. He was maybe six or seven, holding his

mother’s hand as she lead them through the crowd. She wore her best jewelry that day as most

women did when they went to the station, and the precious stones glinted in the sun.

The harsh whine of the whistle reverberated in his chest and Phillip could hardly see past the forest

of legs around him. But he could feel how the earth moved for the machine, the ground shook from

it, the wind parted for it, and the way it screeched to a stop ever so slowly, the sound ringing in his

ears.

Phillip had gotten on that train with his mother. He doesn’t remember where they had gone or why

they were going in the first place, but he remembers the feeling of the train rolling over tracks below

and being mesmerized by how quickly the world spun by outside the window.

Years had passed so silently after that, Phillip having crossed miles and miles by railway. He’s

hasn’t yet been able to recapture that sense of awe, of unadulterated excitement, where the

destination was not nearly as important as the journey.

The morning of the departure he arrives to the rail yard, small satchel of possessions thrown over his

shoulder, and he feels something warm come alive in his chest at the sight of their train, bright and

alive with movement as circus folk and train staff alike bustle in and out of the cars like ants in a

mound. The smokestack is shrouded in a thick, blooming cloud of smoke and the smell of burning

coal sits heavy in the air. Distantly, he hears the voice of the lead conductor barking out orders to

those below his station.

That feeling of excitement, long since lost in the mundanity of adulthood, envelopes Phillip and he’s
He approaches the train, and immediately spots Charity and her daughters standing near the office train car. Caroline and Helen are playing tag, ducking in and out of the train cars and over the hitches in their attempts to catch each other. The train workers dodge them good-naturedly, lifting their crates and bags high over their heads as the girls weave in and out between them. Charity is off to the side, ledger book in hand, jotting down notes as she talks with the train master.

“Phillip!” Helen calls as soon as Phillip draws close enough, stopping short on Caroline who runs into her. They both rush up to him and attach themselves at his hip.

“Hello ladies,” Phillip says, dropping his belongings on the ground in order to free up his hands to pluck Helen off the ground and run a hand through Caroline’s hair, “Aren’t you supposed to be in school right about now?”

“They refused to go!” Charity answers, having finished her conversation. She sets a hand on her hip and shuts the contents of her ledger book with a sharp snap, “It was a disaster getting out of the house this morning.”

“We wanted to see you and Daddy off,” Caroline retorts, grinning up at Phillip, who taps his finger on the curve of her nose, “All of you are going to be gone for months. School will be there tomorrow.”

“Oh really?” Phillip says as Helen giggles in his ear. He glances up to Charity who rolls her eyes, “I can’t argue with that logic.”

Charity laughs, “Yes, neither could I. Both of them have acquired their father’s reasoning skills. You try saying no to all three of them.”

He takes a long look at the two young girls beside him and with practiced knowledge, they smile sugar sweet at him. He clutches his heart and throws his head back as if wounded, “Impossible. Can’t be done!”

Helen and Caroline grin at each other and Charity shakes her head at their antics, “Alright you two, why don’t you go find your father for us?”

“Yes ma’am.” Caroline says, turning on her heel and dashing off. Phillip sets Helen down and she chases after her sister, both of them disappearing down the line.

Phillip picks up his luggage and tosses it up on the gangplank near the door before moving to stand to Charity’s side. She lets out a sigh, a stray curl catching the force of her breath and flying over to the side of her face. She pushes it back and regards him fondly, “Sleep well, Mr. Carlyle?”

“Barley, I’ll admit.” Phillip answers honestly, “How about you? You seem like you’ve had an eventful morning.”

She nods, her shoulders slumping, and it lends to the exhaustion in her face, “Caroline and Helen seem chipper right now, but last night was difficult. It took me hours to get them to bed and then Phin was awake the whole night! Doing that little pacing thing he does.”

Charity walks her fingers across the air, and Phillip can see in his head the exact anxious pace the man in question has when deep in thought.

“Tell me,” Phillip says, looking off to the distance to where he can see Helen and Caroline with their father, having found him in one of the cars. Barnum has Helen on his back and Caroline clinging to
his leg and the sight of him trying to walk with their combined weight is comical, “Did he manage to
dig a trench into your floorboards by morning?”

Charity’s mouth quirks slightly, amused, “He came pretty close, I threatened him with bodily harm
sometime around three a.m. and that deterred him for a few hours. He was like this when he bought
the museum the first time, and I didn’t sleep for weeks after that.”

“He does it before every show.” Phillip laughs, “He doesn’t even realize it.”

“He doesn’t!” Charity gasps, “He’s in absolute denial about it.”

Barnum approaches them then, having disengaged his daughters from his person, and the way he
looks between them with a small frown has both of them laughing.

“I’m not sure I like this,” Barnum grumbles, “My wife and my business partner conspiring together.”

“Business partners.” Phillip stresses before tacking on, “You would be wrong to underestimate us,
Mr. Barnum.”

“Of course,” Barnum steps to Charity’s side and drops a kiss to her temple, “How could I be so
foolish?”

“Easily.” Phillip responds as Helen and Caroline slots themselves back against his side, their hands
coming up to nestle in his empty palms. He glances down at them, “Very easily, wouldn’t you say
girls?”

They both look at their father for a long moment and he returns their gaze, smiling warmly and
raising his eyebrows.

“Yep.” Helen says.

“Very, very easily.” Caroline confirms with a serious nod.

Barnum’s face falls and the girls laugh. Charity smiles into her hand at his side.

“Turncoats, the lot of you.” Barnum grouses

“Told you I’m the favorite.”

Barnum opens his mouth to retort but is interrupted as the piercing cry of the steam trumpet splits the
atmosphere. The sound seems to startle him, and he jolts harshly against Charity’s side. She looks to
him, concern etched into her features.

The conductor, a leathery middle-aged man named Graves who Barnum had hired a few weeks
earlier, leans out the cab and calls over the dull roar of the furnace, “She’s ready whenever you are,
Mr. Barnum.”

Barnum waves, pale-faced and jittery, at the man as he dips back out of sight into the cab.

“Sounds like that’s our cue.” Barnum says, his voice a little too sharp.

“That it is.” Phillip responds slowly, thrown off by the sudden distance in Barnum’s stare. He
glances over to Charity in confusion.

Charity shakes her head at him, the motion small. He watches as she sets her hand along Barnum’s
shoulder and the action seems to center him.
Barnum’s eyes shut tightly and he rubs at his temples. His gaze is more grounded when he opens them again, “Excuse me, I’ve had too many late nights it seems.”

He directs his attention down to his daughters who are watching him with wide eyes, and his voice is low when he says, “Say goodbye to Phillip, girls. It’s time.”

Caroline and Helen’s hands tighten around his, and Phillip isn’t prepared for the way Caroline’s bottom lip quivers and how Helen is staring down at her shoes, her hair a thick blond curtain over her expression.

Phillip understands now what Charity had said about her rough night. Having someone so small looking this distraught at the thought of you leaving, Phillip is finding it difficult to face it himself.

He bends down on to one knee, not caring the damage the gravel and dust would do to his clothes and looks into their watery eyes and speaks quietly, just to them, “Hey, it’s alright. It’s just until school finishes, remember?”

They don’t answer him, but they wind their arms around his shoulders and cling to him like it’s their last chance.

“We’re going to miss you.” Caroline hiccups into his ear and Helen nods, the motion wet against his neck. Phillip feels his eyes prick at the sentiment and he hugs them as tightly as he can.

How strange it is, to have someone miss you.

They eventually let him go with red eyes and running noses. They turn away from him and run straight in their father’s waiting arms. Phillip stands to his full height and Charity meets him next. Stepping into his space, she wraps him up in a surprisingly strong embrace, “Be careful out there,” she says before adding, “Take care of him for me, alright?”

“I will.” Phillip responds, wrapping his arms around her waist and he’s struck by how true the statement feels. For this family, it seems, he would do anything.

Charity steps back and smiles warmly at him and knocks her head towards the train, “Get going. You both have a long journey ahead and it’s getting late.”

“Yes ma’am.” He says and Charity smiles.

Stepping on to the gangplank and picking up his luggage, he passes Barnum who nods to him. Caroline and Helen’s heads are buried deep into the fabric of his jacket as they weep, “I’ll be up in a moment.”

“Take your time.” Phillip responds.

Inside the train car, Phillip drops his bags on the nearest available surface, which happens to be a cedar chest pushed up under the window. He takes a deep breath and he wipes his eyes.

Outside, he can see Barnum’s family where he left them. Caroline and Helen are crying more intensely, their arms tightly wound around their father’s waist as Barnum speaks inaudibly to them. Charity moves forward and there’s something about them that has Phillip’s heart twisting in his chest. The way Barnum removes an arm from Caroline’s shoulders to usher Charity into his embrace. The way they all stand there, huddled and shaking, as a family.

Phillip looks away.
Intent on giving the family as much privacy as he can, Phillip heads towards the main seating area of the train. Upon entering the first car, Phillip sees Lucy, Samson and Julie sitting at one of the tables, the light of the morning sun reflecting off their collective white hair, and they seem to be deep in a discussion.

Lucy waves at him as he passes.

Charles is sitting at the back of the car at one of these tables, perched on a crate box on top of the bench so that he has a level writing hand on his parchment paper. Concentrated on his task, tongue peeking out between his teeth, Phillip has to tap on his hand to gain his attention, “What are you writing?”

Charles moves to cover his project with the bulk of his small frame, his skin dyed red by Phillip’s prying, “Just a letter.”

“Oh, to who?” Phillip is curious by the man’s reaction, and bows over the table to get a better look at the letterhead.

Charles swats at him, “Get out of here.”

Phillip holds up his hands in surrender, “Okay, okay. Sorry to interrupt.”

Charles shakes his head and folds up the parchment paper, careful and neat, and slides it into his coat pocket, “No, sorry for biting your head off, it’s just private, yeah?” Charles gestures across the table to the empty bench, “Sit down. Is this horse about ready to move? I’m getting antsy waiting.”

“Almost, Barnum’s finishing up with the rest of the orders.”

“When I saw him earlier he was doing that stupid walk he does when he’s nervous. You know the one? I’m surprised he hasn’t spontaneously combusted with how wound up he is.”

Phillip snorts. Everyone in this circus has got Barnum figured it out, it seems. “Yeah, I do. Charity’s keeping a lid on it, I think.”

“God’s work, that woman does. I swear Barnum could make a nun swear.”

“She is quite good at it. I assume years of wrangling a man like P.T. would make her adept at keeping a level head.” Phillip crosses his arms and leans back, looking out the window at the stationary landscape

“You could learn a thing or two from her.” Charles says, “Barnum is going to give you a run for your money these next few months. Especially without her to calm him down.”

“No doubt. He’s going to drive me crazy.”

“I’m sensing a ‘yet’ somewhere in that sentence.”

“It’s more exciting that way”

“You’re a loon, Phillip.” Charles grins, “Makes sense that you’d end up here with the rest of us.”
Phillip does a dramatic bow, undercut by his sitting position and the table in front of him. The motion has its affect and Charles laughs.

The whistle blows once more, albeit less intense as it was right outside the locomotive, and there’s a sharp screech that follows. Slowly, the landscape starts to slide, inch by inch, toward the ledge of the window.

“There we go. Finally.” Charles leans towards the window, nose barely brushing the glass, “You know, I never thought I’d get out of this town.” He says after a quiet second. He isn’t looking at Phillip, but Phillip gets the feeling that he isn’t really seeing the landscape in front of him either.

“Did you want to leave?”

“Every goddamn day.” Charles says to his reflection in the window, “I didn’t feel rooted to anything, other than Ma of course, and we could barely afford rent after Pa left. We had no money to go anywhere else either. It’s a terrible feeling, not being able to leave a place that you’re basically dying in trying to stay.”

“I think I understand you there.”

Charles looks at him then, and the corner of his mouth quirks. There’s something bittersweet about his expression and Phillip shifts in his seat under his gaze, “Yeah, I reckon you do, don’t you.”

Charles slides himself out from the bench and straightens his jacket, his hands resting at the lapels of his suit, “I’m going to go see if I can track down W.D., he has my good writing pen and I want to get this finished.” He pats his heart where his letter sits hidden, “I’ll see you at dinner, alright?”

Phillip nods and Charles shuffles off.

Phillip turns his gaze outward. The train has picked up speed and the rolling landscape is mesmerizing. He tilts his head towards the sun, feels the warmth dripping through the clouds and through the window pane, that bloom of warmth still spreading from its place in his chest.

He sits there, for a long time.

-X-

It was a day’s travel to their first destination, and the anticipation of it imbues the train with muted excitement. Having grown used to the constant movement of the show, most of the performers were already itching to be back in the ring.

Phillip could sympathize. After his conversation with Charles, Phillip finds himself, for the first time in months, with absolutely nothing to do.

There were no contracts to sign, no shows to lead, and Barnum had taken himself to his quarters immediately after departure, stating that he was going to rest for a spell. Phillip, looking into the man’s pallid face, suspected that he’d been honest in his statement about not sleeping well the past few weeks, and thus did not stop him.

With no hope of entertainment from his business partner, and no work to do, Phillip is left with nothing else but the fifty odd cars before him and what feels like a century of free time.
He enters the galley first, originally in search of a snack to quiet his empty stomach. He finds O’Clancy at the sink, the top of his head barely grazing the compartment roof, whistling a tune as he expertly peels a sack of potatoes.

Phillip peaks over the stove and finds that O’Clancy already has what looks to be a broth simmering, onions and carrots caught in the swirling undertow.

“What’re you cooking, O’Clancy?” Phillip eventually asks, moving to lean against the counter closest to the sink. Even at his full height, he barely grazes the man’s elbow.

“**Soljanka**, mother’s recipe. I pick up meat from butcher this morning. We eat for dinner.” O’Clancy looks down to Phillip and tilts his head, “Hungry?”

“I’m starving.” Phillip laughs, “It smells really good in here.”

O’Clancy holds out his knife and half-peeled potato to Phillip. Curious, Phillip takes it from him and O’Clancy makes a motion to continue peeling.

Phillip watches with interest as the man moves over to the side and grabs two eggs from the basket near the stove. He pulls out a pan from the cupboard above and sets it to the opposite side of the broth.

He heats the pan with a pad of butter and cracks the eggs into it. For a minute there is nothing but silence, broken up with the sound of crackling heat and the slicing motion of Phillip’s knife.

Phillip gets absorbed into his task. His potatoes are rough looking in comparison to O’Clancy’s, who has somehow managed to slice as close to the surface as is humanly possible. He’s on the last potato when a plate is set off to his side.

It’s a sandwich, fixed with the two fried eggs and a slice of a tomato. O’Clancy even cut up an apple into thin, bite-sized slices. Simple, but to Phillip’s eyes it’s a feast.

He looks up at the man who pushes the plate closer to him, “Eat.”

“Thank you.” Phillip says, oddly touched.

“No man should be hungry.” O’Clancy says, reaching into the bowl of peeled potatoes and picking up one of Phillip’s attempts, “You need practice.”

“I’m sure I do. I haven’t spent much time in the kitchen.” Phillip says, picking up his sandwich and taking a large bite. The eggs are cooked perfectly, slightly runny with a touch of salt.

“This is delicious.”

“It not much. I know only simple dish.” O’Clancy says, rubbing the back of his neck.

“No, it’s perfect. Thank you.”

O’Clancy smiles, and it’s sweet in its hesitance. He steps over to the opposite counter and starts to unwrap the parchment paper that covers the cut of beef that he intends to use for his soup. Phillip watches as he picks up and unsheathes a boning knife from the block and begins slicing into it with practiced strokes.

“How did you learn to cook?” Phillip asks after a while, as O’Clancy is dropping the beef into the broth.
“Mamochka, she taught me. I had many siblings. She was…not well?”

“She was ill?” Phillip supplies and O’Clancy nods, “She was tired. I cook most for my family.”

“Well,” Phillip says, polishing off the rest of his meal and feeling pleasantly full, “She must’ve been an amazing cook.”

O’Clancy smiles as he stirs into his broth; clockwise, counter-clockwise and repeating, “She was. I learn all I know from her.”

Phillip leans further into the counter, and watches the man work for a moment more before asking, “Can I help you with anything else?”

O’Clancy looks surprised at the offer and he glances around the galley, “Hm. Wash vegetables.” He says eventually, pointing at a basket situated in the corner.

Phillip ends up helping in the kitchen for the rest of the afternoon. They work in relative silence, with O’Clancy humming a soft song that sounds like it's miles away from where they stand.

-X-

Dawn is barely breaking when they pull off the main railway on the outskirts of Baltimore. Phillip wakes up in the silver light of his cabin with Anne plastered to his back, her arm thrown over his waist and her hair tickling his neck.

She is snoring into his ear and Phillip can only smile.

It takes him a couple delicate moments to remove himself from bed, setting Anne’s limbs back over to her portion of his bed and wrapping the blankets more securely around her. She says something incomprehensible as he kisses her forehead, the sentence lost in the haze of sleep.

He dresses without much regard to fashion, opting for an outfit more suited for the day of work ahead and slides through the connecting doors from his compartment to the office.

Barnum is already awake, sitting at his desk underneath the open window. He has his reading spectacles on again and is holding a book angled slightly to catch the light. The smell of coffee permeates the air and Phillip spies a cup beside Barnum’s wrist.

He walks over to the man and reaches around him to steal a sip from it and Barnum, anticipating Phillip’s thievery, merely turns the page of his novel, “Good morning.”

“How long have you been up?”

“Just the last hour or so.” He replies, marking his spot and setting it down. Barnum turns to him and snatches his cup back from Phillip’s hands right before he could take another sip, “There’s more in the galley, get your own.”

“Too far.” Phillip yawns, “What’s on the agenda today?”

“You and I will be heading into town, I want to put out an ad for the show in the local paper. O’Malley will stay behind and oversee the construction of the tents.”
“Do you think just one advertisement will be enough?”

Barnum lets out a long-suffering sigh, “Phillip, it’s like you don’t know me at all.”

“What do you mean?”

Barnum shrugs on his jacket and opens the door, holding it open for Phillip with his hand resting at his heart, “We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us.”

Chapter End Notes

That's it for this chapter! Next one should be posted hopefully by 2/24/18, assuming shit doesn't hit the fan for either of us.

[This chapter title is inspired by 'Love is Mystical' by Cold War Kids]
[What book did Barnum lend to Phillip? Can you guess?]
The grass of the open field is wet with morning dew, and Phillip’s boots are instantly coated with muddy water as he hops down from the hitch. The locomotive gurgles and hisses as it settles against the track and the sound draws its inhabitants out of their beds.

Siding doors are thrown open and nearly two dozen men spill out onto the field, cinching their belts tighter and adjusting their suspender straps. Most of the workers are of Barnum’s employment, and have been with the circus since the beginning. They immediately jump into the process of opening the supply cars. Others are new blood, having been hired in the months prior. Those are easiest to spot, sticking out of the ground, clueless and frozen in the dirt.

Barnum tugs on his arm and motions for Phillip to follow him. They make their way across the open lot, narrowly avoiding beams of wood and men with sledgehammers. The day has barely begun but Phillip sees the foundation of the cookhouse being constructed, men hammering down pegs and drawing the stark white canvas across the center pole.

O’Malley stands just outside this project, hand on his hip and coffee mug held beneath his mustache. Upon spotting Barnum and Phillip, he nods in greeting, “You’re up rather early, Mr. Barnum.”

“How early enough it seems. Already hard at work, I see.”

O’Malley smiles into his drink and gestures to the currents of workers swirling around him, “At the rate these boys are working, we’ll have the big top up in less than two days, maybe even one if the good weather holds.”

Barnum claps his hands together, expression pleased, “Perfect! Everything is on schedule. Keep an eye on things while Phillip and I head into town.”
O’Malley lifts his mug in understanding, “My lads will meet you there, I think you’ll like what they’ve done with the place.”

Phillip glances between the two men in confusion. He opens his mouth to ask O’Malley what he means, but Barnum grabs him about the shoulder and whirls him around, his long stride carrying them both off towards the main road running adjacent to the railway.

“What did he mean by that?” Phillip manages to ask, shaking Barnum’s hand off. Barnum doesn’t seem to hear him as he reaches into his coat pocket to pull out his pocket-watch before quickening his pace to a degree that Phillip struggles to match.

“P.T., what did O’Malley mean by ‘liking what they’ve done with the place?’” Phillip ventures again, sharper this time.

Barnum doesn’t so much as look to him when he says, “Don’t worry about that right now. Keep up, Phillip. It’s a long walk into town and we have a meeting with the editor of *The Sun* at ten.”

Phillip snaps his mouth shut, and lets Barnum lead the way.

-X-

Baltimore is a seatown, and that moniker saturates itself in every saltwater-stained building and person.

The pull of the ocean can be felt down to the bones, a sense of something open and deep that acts as a siren’s song to those who hear. Phillip can feel it in the salty breeze that blows through the town. It sticks to the clothing, to the tongue, and it brings forth memories of a summer holiday when he was younger:

Its nostalgic, a great deal happier after being sunburned and forgotten. Phillip thinks, unprompted, of his parents. How they had played in the sand with him, each dressed in their Sunday-best but with no one around to judge. Pants and skirts pulled high above their calves and shoes missing as they strolled along the wave-beaten beach. He only ever saw his father hold his mother’s hand on the private dunes of that sandy shore.

He chases it away, as he’s done with most thoughts of his parents lately and focuses his attention to the expanse of Barnum’s back as they enter into the northern portion of the city. Barnum weaves through intersection after intersection with the confidence of a man who has visited these streets before and it’s around the third building they pass that Phillip starts to notice.

It starts with flyers, the painted eyes of Anne and W.D. following them through alleyways. The Lord of Leeds greets them at a lightpost. Tom Thumb at the side of a trolley. The closer they move towards the heart of the city, the more he hears it whispered on the wind, *the circus is in town* it seems to say.

Barnum’s face shows no sign of surprise and he marches on without comment.

Something digs its way into Phillip’s gut, and he darts around Barnum, forcing the man to pause in front of a poster of himself. Phillip taps his finger on the advertisement, and tries to even out his tone
to not sound outright accusatory, “When did you do this?”

“I had O’Malley send a party out about two weeks ago.” Barnum glances once more at his pocket-watch, snaps it shut, and moves around Phillip to continue down the path. Phillip frowns at the back of the man’s head.

“That’s all well and good but you couldn’t have given me a little forewarning?” Phillip grouses as he quickly steps to Barnum’s side. Barnum doesn’t look to him, but his shoulders hitch up, and his head bows down sheepishly, “I wanted it to be a surprise?”

“You forgot to tell me, didn’t you?”

“We were busy, can you blame me?”

There’s a dismissive note that fuses to Barnum’s words, and Phillip doesn’t know why it floods him with frustration, “Why are we in town then? You’ve got advertising covered.”

“I want to make sure everyone within spitting distance of Baltimore knows we’re here. The ad in the paper is going to be for advanced ticket sales and showings”

Barnum’s eyes slide over to his then, and Phillip should probably be concerned with how easily his ire melts against the man’s gaze, “I told you I was going to make this work. I’ve got it all planned out.”

“Forethought? From you? Say it isn’t so.”

“What? You didn’t think I spent all my time these last few months agonizing over paint swatches, did you?”

“Considering your choice of a color scheme, I should hope not.”

Barnum’s laugh is boisterous as he turns the corner at the end of the street, nearly running over a woman and her son. He bows his head to her, tipping his hat in apology, “Sorry ma’am. Wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“Quite alright there, sir.” She says, and her son peeks out behind her skirts. She looks at Barnum for a moment before her face shifts into recognition, “You’re that Barnum fella everyone’s been going on about. I’ve been seeing your face on posters all over town lately.”

“That would be me. Phineas Taylor Barnum at your service, ma’am, and this is my associate, Phillip Carlyle.”

“Pleasure.” Phillip nods to them both.

“Kathy Johnson, and this one is my son, David.” The small boy peers at them shyly.

“Hello there, David.” Barnum crouches down until he’s eye-level with the child, “Tell me, what is your favorite animal?”

David glances up to his mother, and at her nod, he looks to Barnum, “Elephants, sir.”

“Funny that! I happen to have a couple in my show.”

The boy’s eyes grow impossibly wide, and he steps out further from behind Mrs. Johnson’s legs, “Really?”
“Yes sir, three big bulls and a cow. We even have a calf traveling with us. Beautiful creatures, they are.”

Grabbing his mother’s skirt, David tugs at her, “Ma! Can we go see?”

“I don’t know honey, I’d have to talk to your father...”

Sensing Mrs. Johnson’s hesitance, Barnum stands upright, his form towering but inviting as he smiles down at her.

Phillip has been on the opposite end of that smile numerous times. It’s taken him the better part of a year to build a resistance to its charm, but Mrs. Johnson should not be so lucky. Her face colors at the intensity of Barnum’s gaze and she stares at him with rapt attention.

“Tell you what,” Barnum tips his head, lowers his voice in such a way that his captive audience leans further into his orbit, “Come out to the intersection of Fayette and Harrison tomorrow around noon and I guarantee that you-,” He reaches out to ruffle David’s hair, startling a giggle out of the boy, “-will see your elephant, free of charge.”

David gasps and Mrs. Johnson blinks, cheeks still red. She adjusts her shawl and looks upon Barnum with interest, “Perhaps we will, Mr. Barnum.”

“I hope that you do, ma’am. We’ll be seeing you.” He tips his hat to both of them once more, and nudges Phillip forward.

As soon as they are out of ear-shot, Phillip turns on Barnum and hisses, “What are you doing making a promise like that?”

Barnum adjusts his coat and sets his arm across Phillip’s back, “Has anyone told you that you worry too much?”

“You, repeatedly. Enough so that when you do say it, I know that I should start worrying more.”

Barnum pats his shoulder and shoves him forward. On the way, a few more people on the street point out to them, Barnum stopping to talk to every single one. The same promise extended: come to Fayette and Harrison tomorrow at noon.

-X-

The office of The Baltimore Sun is a three story, red-brick building with the bottom floor being a print shop. A bell connected to the door rings at their entrance and the air turns stuffy with ink and parchment.

“Hello, how can I help you gentleman?” A secretary asks and Barnum leans against her desk, “We’re here to see Mr. Adavik. Barnum and Carlyle.”

“Yes sir, one moment.”

Despite their long walk into town, the meeting with the editor, an inquisitive-looking gentleman with rounded spectacles, is fairly brief. Barnum argues the price of advertising space and it leads to a fond
round of bartering between the two men.

“Sir, I cannot settle for anything less than $32. With the prices of ink the way they are...”

“Do you have a family Mr. Adavik? How about I throw in a couple of tickets to the show for you and the missus?”

The man’s mustache twitches in interest and Phillip knows that Barnum has him, “Would they be good seats?”

“The best that I can provide you! Why, you’d be practically royalty.”

“I guess I could accept $27, but no lower!”

It’s lunchtime when they step out onto the street, Barnum folding his receipt into his pocket, smug with the victory of a good deal. They stop by a cart selling fruit and Barnum pays for two large apples and a bag of boiled peanuts, the bustle of a hungry populace swarming around them.

Barnum leads them down to the wharf and they eat their snacks perched on dock posts and watch as the ships glide through the harbor, the bag of peanuts being passed between them. The taste of fish and salt is strong so close to the water, and Phillip feels himself relax slightly. He cranes his neck back, and lets the sun warm his face.

Then Barnum starts to laugh.

It starts quietly, enough so that Phillip doesn’t even register it. Then it builds and builds until Barnum’s shoulders are practically shaking with it.

“What? What is it?” Phillip eventually asks, amused.

“Have I ever told you about my friend, John?”

“No, you haven’t. You have friends?”

“Har-har, you’re really not as funny as you think.”

Phillip dodges a peanut that is half-heartedly lobbed at him with a laugh. He turns more fully towards Barnum, crossing his legs out in front of him, “So who’s John?”

“He was a boy I knew back before my father settled down in New York. I’m originally from Connecticut, y’know.”

Phillip did not know that. The thought pulls down at the corners of his mouth.

Barnum’s gaze goes wistful, the memory enveloping him, “I haven’t thought about him in years. John was a local tyrant that all prudent mothers disapproved of and the rest of the boys either feared or liked, depending on the day.”

“Sounds like a character.”

“Oh, he was an absolute ass. He was a bully and a brute and he ruled over us with an iron rod and the threat of flogging for disobedience.”

“This is your friend we’re talking about, right?”

“Friend. Classmate, torturer, it didn’t matter. He was he entertaining. In a town as boring as Bethel, if
there was anything of interest taking place you could guarantee that John was at the center of it.”

Barnum takes off his hat and positions it on the curve of his knee, running his hand through his hair. He looks younger for a moment, with the wind coming off the water picking at the brown strands.

“One time we were skating at the churchyard pond--God, I must've been eight or nine- and John fell through a slab of thin ice and sank straight up to here,” Barnum taps his hand to right below his chin, “He kept trying to claw his way out but it would give way to his weight and he’d slide right back in.”

He starts breaking here, boy-like sniggering, and Phillip can’t help but laugh too.

“So, there we were, me and the rest of the boys standing off toward the edge of the pond while the poor bastard struggled. John saw us watching him and he started swearing up and down that if we did not help him he would give everyone of us a ‘thundering licking’ if he ever did get out. Well, none of us appreciated being threatened and we weren’t sure how to even go about helping without risking our own necks. We removed our hats, hummed a quick dirge and we just…”

Barnum shrugs, face not the least bit ashamed “--left him to his fate.”

Phillip’s jaw drops and a shocked laugh bubbles out of his chest, “You know my surprise at you having friends? I think I was in the right on that one, you’re a terrible friend.”

“I was a child! John Haight was not the type of person I was prepared to die for.”

“Well, what happened to him? I’m going to feel really bad about laughing if he met his end right there.”

“Oh no, he got out alright and he delivered on his promise. I think I still have bruises from that encounter.” Barnum laughs as he leans over his knees, bouncing the remains of his apple between open palms. Distantly, a flock of seagulls cry out as they take flight.

Barnum’s eyes trace the horizon, settling on a galleon drifting out to sea, “He signed on with the navy shortly after that. I saw him once a couple years back and he looked content with himself. Calmer, even, which is not a word I would have ever used to describe him. I don’t know, looking at all these ships reminded me of him.”

He stands then, fixing his hat back on his head and tosses his apple core into the water, “We should start heading towards town-center. We’re supposed to meet O’Malley’s boys there.”

Phillip stands and throws his own core after Barnum’s, the shallow splash on impact bidding them farewell.

-X-

O’Malley’s boys are a group made up of four or five greenhorns. All of them greet Barnum with nods as they loiter on the steps of the local post office, smoking cigarettes and picking at paint under their nails. Across their laps are stacks of poster scrolls.
Barnum starts talking with what looks to be the leader of the group and Phillip turns towards the rest of the lot, “How much more do you have to do?”

“Just the ticket booths left, Mr. Carlyle. We leave tomorrow for the next town, Mr. Barnum wants us to get ‘em all prepped for the show.”

Plans for the booths have, unsurprisingly, already been drawn out and locations chosen. It becomes blatantly obvious that Phillip is not needed as Barnum jumps into delegating the job. Even when trying to help with construction he is waved off by the boys.

“We’re alright Mr. Carlyle. You don’t need to concern yourself with this.”

Barnum doesn’t want to leave anything for him to worry about, it seems.

The feeling of uselessness doesn’t sit well in Phillip’s stomach as he is forced to the sidelines. By the time the sun is dipping low in the sky and construction is finishing up, that feeling has grown into thick, thorny irritation.

The boys say their goodbyes, giving both Barnum and Phillip a rowdy handshake each, before disappearing into the late afternoon crowd. Phillip’s mood simmers uncomfortably underneath his skin and he grinds his teeth with it.

They leave the city, Barnum on occasion glancing towards him like he’s going to question the sudden change in his partner’s demeanor.

He doesn’t, and they walk on for a better part of an hour without a single word being uttered.

They’re just passing the halfway mark of their journey, climbing the incline of a large hill when Phillip finally draws to stop. Barnum doesn’t notice at first, his feet taking him a couple more feet before he turns on Phillip, his face cautious under the saturated light of the setting sun, “Alright, what is it?”

Phillip licks his teeth and meets Barnum’s confused gaze, “We’re partners, right?”

Barnum’s brows furrow and he tilts his head, “Of course we are.”

“Then why don’t you treat me like it?”

Barnum looks bewildered and Phillip hates how even that annoys him. How can this man be so oblivious?

Barnum straightens his shoulders and focuses his attention on Phillip, “What do you mean I don’t treat you like it?”

“You make all these decisions and you don’t tell me anything until the last moment, when it’s convenient for you.”

“Phillip, that’s not--”

“The train.” Phillip holds out his hand, one finger.

“That was--”

“The accounts. Recruiting Benjamin Hallett as an investor.” Two more fingers. “Even today, I had no idea you had arranged for all of this.”
“Phillip, where is this coming from?”

“It’s because you keep doing it! You’re constantly take these risks and you leave me out of the equation. When you finally get around to telling me about anything it’s when you’re positive that I can’t say no to your schemes--”

“Schemes? What - why is this an issue right now?” Barnum interrupts, frustration flashing across his expression.

Phillip’s mouth drops, incredulous “Why is--Because it’s obvious you don’t want me to have a choice in the matter. What is it, P.T.? Do you not trust me?”

“Of course I do!” Barnum snaps and the sound reverberates through the valley. Phillip takes a step back.

Barnum reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose, and he sighs deeply, “Of course I do.”

He turns away from Phillip and they both dip into a weighted silence.

Phillip moves to Barnum’s side after a moment, both of them standing at the crest of the hill. In the distance, the village of white and red tents can be seen down in the valley, with lantern lights bobbing like fireflies in the open field.

Barnum speaks first, “I’m sorry if I’ve made it seem like I don’t value your input. I wanted to make sure everything went perfectly.”

“I don’t need you to do that. I need you to include me.”

Barnum crosses his arms, one hand raising to his mouth. He gnaws at the edge of his nails, his jaw flexing with the motion as he stares hard at the ground.

Phillip drums his fingers against his thigh in thought, before moving in closer. Barnum stands at nearly a head taller than him, but he seems small when he glances to Phillip, “I don’t like not knowing, P.T. If something goes wrong, I can’t help. I feel useless.” The last word reveals a little more than Phillip would like it to, and Barnum’s expression softens, “-and I don’t like that.”

“Yes, I think I can see why.” Barnum says, nodding “I’ll do better.”

Phillip lets out a breath, and the feeling in his chest dissipates, centering him, “Thank you. Now, what in the world is going on at Fayette and Harrison tomorrow? It’s been bothering me all day.”

Barnum smiles and it echoes the same relief that Phillip feels, “Let’s get back to the train and I’ll tell you everything I’ve got over dinner. No more surprises.”

“No more surprises.” Phillip repeats.

-X-

The streets of Harrison and Fayette are wide and long, and largely populated due to the placement of the post office and local museums, which is specifically the reason Barnum chose them.
The streets had to be big enough to fit an elephant, of course.

Barnum’s plan had been genius in its simplicity as he told it to Phillip over the glow of a gas-lantern.

“We bring the circus to them. Give them a taste of what they’re missing and I bet every nickel I own that they won’t be able to resist.”

The procession has Lettie at the front and her voice carries in the valley between buildings, drawing anyone who has a curious bone in their bodies outside onto the sidewalk. In the center of the street, among the sea of dull clothing, the colorful and sparkling costumes of the troupe act as lures, children clapping their hands and tugging on their parents’ clothing to drag them closer.

Lettie snaps and twirls, her voice backed by the rest of the troupe. Behind her are acrobats walking on their hands. Florence juggles her knives with her husband, Manuel, tossing them back and forth between one another as Pup flips through the blades. Clowns slide in and out of line, handing out candy and spritzing water at wide-eyed children.

At the back of it all, Anne stands on top of Bessie, the most docile of Barnum’s Circus elephants, and she waves to everyone, her Azalea-pink hair a beacon above the crowd.

Phillip feels the combined weight of their voices against his chest, and to the fascination of their curious audience, they call:

*Come one, come all.*

Moving through the street, Phillip becomes aware of Barnum’s ticket booths, strategically placed along their path, the bright gold of their signs drawing people in. He sees O’Malley at one of them, taking payment and passing out ticket vouchers as they pass.

Anne leans backwards on Bessie’s expansive back and anchors her hands in the stirrups, flipping delicately off of the cow and landing lightly next to Phillip.

“I feel weird.” She leans in to him to say, still waving to the crowd, “I’m not used to wearing this get-up outside of the tent.”

Her outfit is bright green like summer grass and she moves between Bessie and Phillip to tug discreetly on the length of her shorts.

“You look beautiful, as always. Though I understand what you’re saying, I feel a little strange myself.” Phillip adjusts the collar of his ringmaster coat.

The troupe pulls into a roundabout situated in front of the main courthouse and they spend a little over an hour entertaining the townspeople and giving children rides on Bessie.

“Mr. Carlyle!” Phillip turns at his name and scans the faces of the crowd until he recognizes Kathy Johnson standing on the sidewalk, “Mrs. Johnson, good afternoon. David.” He looks up to a stoic man standing behind them, “And Mr. Johnson, I presume.”

“Call me Elias.” He says gruffly, shaking Phillip’s hand, “Are you the one to blame for David talking my ear off about elephants all night?”

Phillip laughs, “That would be my business partner, P.T. Barnum. I do apologize about that, he gets ahead of himself sometimes.”
He glances down to David, who is mesmerized, hand loosely grasped in his mother’s as he gazes upon Bessie.

Phillip pats him on the head, “Would you like to ride her?”

“Really? Can I, Ma?”

“Is it safe?” Mrs. Johnson asks, looking at the cow worriedly.

“Perfectly safe, Bessie is the sweetest elephant you’ll ever meet.” Bessie at that moment reaches down with her large trunk and plucks Phillip’s hat clean off his head, dropping it on her own massive gray one. She opens her mouth and it’s as shit-eating a grin as an elephant can manage.

“If a little mischievous. Can I have that back please?”

The hat is returned to him, pushed down over his eyes by her trunk, “Thank you.”

“Extraordinary.” Elias Johnson says.

Anne helps David up on top of Bessie and Phillip has a worker guide them around the space. He turns to the couple and smiles, “I hope you’ll come out and see us. Our first showing is Thursday.”

Looking pass him, the couple watches their son laugh gleefully, the boy waving at them from high above. Mrs. Johnson glances to her husband and the man chuckles in resignation, “I don’t believe I have a choice in the matter, Mr. Carlyle. We best go buy our tickets, Kathy.”

O’Malley catches his attention as Mr. and Mrs. Johnson depart towards the ticket booth, the man signaling him from across the courtyard. Even at the distance between them Phillip has no problem making out the way the man’s mouth forms over the words:

*Sold out.*

---

The moments before the opening song always fill him with an electric energy. His fingers twitch along the staff of his cane and in the dark, hidden wings of the circus tent, his heart hangs suspended in his throat. He can see Barnum on the opposite side of the ring, the gold thread of his coat giving him away through the bleacher seating. It swims, back and forth, glinting between ankles and boots. Step, step, leap. Turn and repeat.

The house is filled to the brim. A young child somewhere in the crowd whines against the wait and there is a dull murmur among the patrons. A divided attention that just won’t do.

Phillip glances down his left side and sees Lettie, shaking out her hands and running an open palm along her beard. She meets his stare with one of her own, her eyes glowing in the low lighting.

He nods.
The curtains draw shut, the audience bathed in darkness. A hush falls over the crowd and the voices of the oddities crash in, the combined force of their stomping pushing their attention inward. A small voice calls out between the wave, a startled gasp. A question. All of them washed away by the next round.

Barnum’s voice is isolated, loud enough to command the room but low enough to keep interest. Patrons heads swivel in their seats, trying to locate the source. Barnum moves around the side, darting between the stadium seating and breaks out into the center ring, a quartet of show-horses on his heel.

The register of his voice is bombastic as it lands and Phillip, despite experiencing it time and time again, whoops in excitement. As does the crowd.

Phillip drags his attention with great difficulty away from Barnum to the audience. The man was a master at guiding eyes to exactly where he wanted them to be. While they watched the center ring, Anne and W.D. snuck in the rafters above, preparing to drop into their act at Barnum’s signal.

Every man, woman and child gasped at the right moment, leaned forward when Barnum’s voice dropped and sat back in glee when Lettie belted out her unreachable note. Every action met with an equal and enthralled reaction.

Phillip wrote plays for a living. Wrote plays of merit and prose to grand reviews. He had the affection of critics and a distinguished collection of New York socialites that bought his overpriced tickets and filled his theatres. Yet, he never was able to garner the response he desired from them. It wasn’t until he stepped foot into the ring that he encountered something more than a one-sided conversation with an audience.

He could never go back after that first night. Not after seeing the smiles he could create.

Barnum throws his cane hand high above his head and the spotlight erupts from somewhere above. Catching Anne’s silhouette sailing through the air as she flips into W.D.’s waiting arms.

Phillip can’t believe how smoothly everything falls into place. When he slides out of the darkness into the ring, he meets the gaze of every oddity and they grin breathlessly at him, chests heaving.

Barnum rotates towards him, the tails of his ringmaster coat sharpening the movement. He’s sweating from the heat of the lamps and he’s missing a button on his lapel, lost somewhere in the madness.

They meet in origin of the ring as the oddities twirl around them and Barnum moves in close, chest barely brushing Phillip’s own before he’s dodging out of the way. Stepping out of the limelight as everything narrows down to Phillip.

He opens his mouth, rams his cane into the dirt floor, and it’s perfection.

-x-X-x-

Baltimore is kind to them for the rest of the week, filling both their tents and their coffers generously as patrons return again and again.
Barnum never shows the same hand twice, always switching up acts and performances at a moment’s notice. Most surprisingly, however, is that he sticks to his word and consults Phillip with nearly every choice, allowing Phillip the time to think it over and add his own opinions, and Barnum in turn is receptive to every suggestion.

Phillip feels balanced for the first time in their partnership and the constant collaboration bleeds into the quality of the show. Barnum dreams the spectacle and Phillip makes it reality.

It brings in more of a crowd then they could have ever anticipated as people return for the variation, the streaks of color in their otherwise gray days. They draw others from the outskirts of the city, small villages miles away that hear of the circus’ arrival by word of mouth.

It’s the sixth sold-out attendance that has Barnum turning to Phillip center-stage, grinning wide and with such smugness that Phillip has to take his cane and jab the man in the shin on principle. Barnum coils over the limb, and the action draws a hearty laugh from the crowd.

Anne rescues him from Barnum’s retaliation, plucking him out of the way and swinging them out over the crowd.

When they touch ground at the show’s finale, they are met with thunderous applause.

The sun is barely setting when they usher out their final audience to the front-yard of the tent. O’Malley and his men are waiting to entice the crowd into last-chance carnival games or bull rides.

Phillip waves at children as they depart and as the curtains shut behind the last of the stragglers, he feels the week settle into every muscle of his body and he knocks at his shoulder where he feels a knot.

Phillip heads towards the opposite side of the tent, hopping over the barricade as he unbuttons his coat, his brain already onto the next task.

Everything small needed to be packed back into the train. The tents are to be struck down come tomorrow afternoon and the animals settled back into their cars. He should probably talk with the train master about tomorrow’s departure to the capital.

His head swims with it and he moves to open the tent flap-

Lettie pops her head through, and Phillip steps back in surprise, “Phillip!”

“What…where are you going?” She asks, stepping into his space and pointedly clutching the tent canvas tightly shut behind her. She’s still in her costume, flowers pinned in her hair and beard and her eyes shift to the side and back to him.

“Uh, that way?” Phillip points to the area behind her and she lets out a high-pitched giggle, “You can’t!”

Phillip raises his eyebrows, “I can’t?”

“No, I mean you can but you… shouldn’t?”

“What, did you let the lions loose? What’s going on?” Phillip raises onto his toes, trying to peer around her through the slight gap still left in the curtain.
“Nothing! Why would you assume something is going on?”

He gestures across her entire, panicked stance.

“I mean it’s just, um-

“What she means to say” Charles cuts in, pushing the flap up and crawling into the conversation, “Is that Anne was looking for you. She said that if we were to see you that we should send you her way.”

Charles glances up to Lettie who appears extremely relieved, “Ain’t that right, Letts?”

“Yes! Yes, she was looking for you.”

“Ookay?” Phillip looks between them, suspicious of their mirrored smiles, “Do you know where she went?

“I saw her heading towards the train. I think she wanted to change before dinner.” Charles says.

“Alright,” Phillip nods, moving to push through the entrance behind them, “Let me just check in with--”

“No!” Both Charles and Lettie throw out their arms, blocking him out.

Phillip crosses his arms and regards them both. Charles clears his throat, “She said she really wanted to talk with you. We’ll let Barnum know that you went to see her.”

Phillip holds up his hands in defense, “Alright, if it’s that urgent, I’ll go find her.” He turns away from them and pauses, “The lions aren’t out right?”

“Of course not. Josephine’s got it handled.” Lettie says and shoves him gently, “Go on, lover boy.”

They both watch him as he backs out of the entrance at the opposite end of the big top. Once outside, Phillip shakes his head. Never a dull day with these people.

He starts towards the train, crossing the front yard which still houses a fairly large crowd of people. He stops by one of the booths to help a group of children win a bag of candy by throwing darts at a balloon wall.

He makes it to his cabin ten minutes later and finds Anne standing in front of the mirror, slowly deconstructing her elaborate updo. She’s already removed her costume and it’s thrown over the plush chair in the corner. She’s dressed loosely in her silk robe, and her face is pinched.

She has a collection of pins held between her teeth and Phillip walks up behind her and holds out his palm below her chin. She glances at him gratefully in the mirror and proceeds to open her mouth, all the pins falling into his waiting hand.

“Thank you.” She says smiling at him, broken by a wince when she catches a knot that has tangled up with the pin at the back of her neck, “Oh ow, shit.”

“Okay stop! Stop! Let me help.” Phillip laughs. Taking her by the waist, he guides her over to the bed. He sets her down, takes a second to remove his ringmaster coat and boots, and sits behind her.

“I’m going to cut it off, I swear.” Anne grumbles as Phillip smacks her hands lightly out of the way.

“You know,” Phillip says, smirking against the back of her head, “You say that after every show.
Let me get the scissors, we’ll do it right now.”

He moves to stand up and she seizes him by the wrist, her face shocked, “Don’t you dare.”

“That’s what I thought.” Phillip settles back down and begins the arduous process of pin removal. A frown working its way onto his face, “How many do you have in here?”

“You try keeping a wig on through a two hour aerial act and then ask me that, Carlyle.”

He laughs, removing one from the crown of her head. This one seemed to be the axis of the entire style, and the bun unravels in his hands.

Anne folds over herself, her hands coming up to rub at her head, “Owowowowow.”

“Tender?” He teases and she reaches around her back to smack him blindly on the knee.

He tugs her back and weaves his fingers into her hair and digs them into her scalp in apology and she sighs against the pressure, leaning into it.

“Better?” He says quietly into her ear and she hums, “Better.”

They sit there in companionable silence, Phillip’s hand cradling the base of her skull while the other combs through the curls, plucking pins and stacking them into a pile on the nightstand.

Lettie and Charles’ faces appear to him in a sudden thought and he says, “What did you need by the way?”

“Hmmn? What?” She says, breathing light.

“Lettie and Charles said you wanted to talk to me?”

Anne rolls towards him and her face is telling in its confusion, “I...did?”

Phillip snaps his fingers and jumps up from the mattress, “I knew they were acting odd. What did they do to the backyard that they didn’t want me to see?”

“Oh!” She grabs him by the sleeve and pulls him back down, “Yes! That’s right, I forgot I said something to them.”

Phillip gives her his full attention, still quite not convinced, “What did you want?”

“I... wanted to spend time with you.”

“Oh?”

“Away from everyone else. Just you and me.”

Phillip tilts his head at her, “Why?”

“To be alone? Together?” She circles her hand, and Phillip couldn’t feel any more at a loss. He repeats the motion back at her.

“Oh my God, you--” She sucks in a breath and Phillip is unprepared the moment Anne tackles him into the mattress, pinning his wrists down above his head, her knees settling tight on either side of his hips. His head hits the pillow and he’s left blinking owlishly up at her.
Anne bites her lip, quirks her brow at him and realization comes to him like a prayer.

Phillip lets out a startled laugh and feels a delighted warmth creep through his body, “Are you trying to seduce me?”

“I believe so,” Anne drops herself lower and the friction against his hips is strategic, drawing a soft sound from him. She brushes her lips against his chin, whispers low, “But you’re being frustratingly obtuse about it.”

“My sincerest apologies,” Phillip grins as he feels her teeth graze the edge of his jaw, “What can I do to make up to you?”

“Well,” Anne punctuates the word with a sharper nip and Phillip shudders. Anne pulls her hold on his wrists further upwards until his hands are hitting the wrought-iron bars of the headboard, her lips hot against his ear, “You could keep your hands to yourself while I have some fun.”

Phillip wraps his fingers around the cool metal and he can feel her smile. She sits up, settles herself further back on the top of his thighs. One arm crossing across her waist and the other coming to tap thoughtfully at her chin, “Now, where should I start.”

“I can think of a place.” Phillip responds, lifting his thighs to nudge her towards the area begging for attention.

“Ah-ah, stay still. This is my show.” She slides her hands up his torso, languid as they wrap lightly around the base of his throat. They remain there for a long second, whether as a warning or a promise, Phillip doesn’t know but he can’t help how his body heats as he swallows against the weight of them.

Anne holds his gaze, gives the slightest pressure and his eyes shut, a moan escaping into the space between them.

“Interesting.” Anne says and Phillip feels his face flush, “We’ll have to revisit that, but first let me—” she pops the first button of his shirt, just below the collar and he exhales.

Anne works at his shirt at a torturously slow rate, every rustle of the fabric sending a burst of anticipation throughout him. By the time she reaches the border of his belt he’s already breathing heavy.

She unhooks the straps of his suspenders, “Up.”

He’s jittery as he sits up, and Anne removes his shirt, swiftly tossing it over her shoulder before pushing him right back down into the mattress and kissing him so deeply that his toes curl against the force of it.

He reaches up to drag her closer and she digs her nails into his shoulders, the pain doing nothing but make him gasp into her mouth, “Put them back.”

His hands return, obedient, to the headboard.

Anne bites his lip in approval and Phillip is dizzy under her attention. She licks into his mouth, and it’s wet and heavy and hot and he’s painfully, painfully aroused. He feels the seam of his trousers rub against his groin at every shift of her body and it has him bucking up against her, seeking contact.

Anne rises and he has to tighten his grip on the bars to stop himself from touching her as she removes
her robe and has it join his shirt on the floor. She looks down at him, late-afternoon sunlight
cressing the slight curves and angles of her body. He takes her in; from the hollow of her throat as
she rolls her head to the valley between her breasts and the defined lines of her stomach. She has a
smattering of freckles, criss-crossing scars and week-old bruises branded across her skin and knobby
knees that ground her, make her real. The sight is mesmerizing, even merciless in it’s onslaught.
Phillip’s mouth runs dry when her fingertips graze the notch of his belt buckle.

She undoes his belt and he lifts his hips to let her slip it out from the loops. His pants follow
unceremoniously after that, leaving him bare. She leans back on his thighs, the feeling of warmth
now married to the sensation of skin on skin, and views him openly without shame.

“You really are beautiful.” She says suddenly and her words drip like honey as she cups her palms
against the dips of his hips and Phillip relishes in the feeling of calluses, hardwon from years of aerial
work, scraping against the thin layer of skin pulled taut over the bone.

Then she wraps her hand around him, her palm an open fire on his nerves as she drags it upwards.
Phillip gasps, his hips canting off the mattress to grind against her fist.

“So impatient.” She chastises, but Phillip can hear the way her voice hitches across the syllables.

She pushes his hips back down and begins moving her hand slowly, methodically. She twists her
palm against the base, slides it across the head, wetting her hand with its slickness. Phillip is moaning
now, unable to keep his mouth closed as each passing of her hand has him coming undone.

Anne’s eyes are blown wide as she watches him unravel before her, her other hand coming to
explore the area between her thighs, and the room is filled with their combined breaths.

Phillip’s hands remain clutched above his head, the strength of his grip starting to show in the
protruding veins of his forearms. Sweat gathers at his brow and in the divots of his clavicle and Anne
leans over him, her hair slithering across his chest as she smiles down at him, “You’re doing so good.
Just a little more.”

She gives him a shallow kiss and positions herself right above him, takes him again in her hand and
guides him home. The minute she meets him, hip to hip, his hands lose their loyalty to the situation
and jolt towards her. He diverts them at the last possible second, sinks his teeth into the knuckles of
one hand and dropping the other to claw at the bedsheets.

“Good. Just like that.” Anne croons, and she begins to move.

It’s too much and not nearly enough and Phillip whimpers with it. Anne keeps him on that precipice.
If he chases too eagerly after release, she draws back, stills herself, doesn’t even breathe until he
calms down. If he isn’t reacting the right way, she works at him until he’s crying out.

She has him completely at her mercy, as she did the first time he ever saw her. The perspective was
different then but he’s found that he loves looking at her from this angle.

Phillip can feel how her hands have started to shake where they’re supported at his shoulders. How
her hips stutter as she grinds against him. Her mouth is red and raw from her teeth worrying at her
bottom lip; she’s in control but she’s not unaffected.

His breath is unstable, shallow inhales followed by deep exhales and his head is starting to swim. He
can’t even hear himself over the roar of his heartbeat when he begs, “Please, please Anne.”

She rocks against him a few more times, her moans as breathless as his before she slides her hand to
his heart and she lets out a broken, “Okay.”
His hands jump to her and he’s grabbing her by the back of her thighs and brings her forward, flipping them around so that he can use the new position of her hips to push deeper into her. His hands, now free at her command, roam the expanse of her shoulders, her chest and back and thighs. He leaves one wrapped up in her hair and the other finds its way between them, sinking into her folds as he brings her to absolution, fucking her through it until she’s trembling and gasping against his shoulder.

He pulls out right before he comes, and it paints the area between them. Phillip collapses against her, sweat-soaked and there's nothing but the aftershocks of their panting to fill the room.

Anne wraps her arms around his shoulders and kisses his forehead, and Phillip lifts himself onto his elbow to look down at her.

“And that, Mr. Carlyle,” She grins, poking him in the collarbone, “-is how you seduce someone.”

Phillip Carlyle would swear before any court of law, then and there, that he would happily die for this woman. He lets out a laugh, loose and content, and sets his forehead against hers, “Duly noted, Ms. Wheeler.”

-X-

Phillip wakes to Anne patting him lightly on the cheek, the room encased in the inky black of nighttime. His lungs inhale sharply against sudden consciousness and he looks around, dazed, “Wha’ time’ isit?”

“A little after 8.” She whispers, kissing him on the jaw, “Time to get up.”

He responds by pulling the sheets tighter around them and Anne giggles in his ear. She rolls away from him, out of his arms and takes all the warmth with her and he opens his eyes blearily to glare at her.

“Come on, up. We’re late.”

“Late?” Phillip says, sitting up against the headboard, “For what?”

Anne hums and busies herself at the wash-basin. Phillip watches, still in the cusp of sleep, as she wipes a wet cloth across her body. She dresses simply, choosing to wear trousers and one of his loose shirts, and pulls her hair, wild from their time in bed, halfway up out of her face. She finishes this with a quick spritz of her favorite perfume and Phillip inhales deeply, reveling in the citrusy, sweet scent.

She digs around in the drawer and tosses him a set of clothes, which smack him in the chest, his boots following shortly after, landing in the space between his legs on the mattress, “Hurry up, everyone is waiting.”

She slips out into the moonlight and Phillip is left, naked and alone.

He contemplates going back to sleep, but curiosity pulls him from the bed after a moment. He washes quickly, beats his hair into submission and dresses. Anne isn’t outside when he finally opens
the door, but he hears the distant chatter and it guides him through the dark.

He heads around the big top and finds his path lit by more of Chang and Eng’s lanterns. The backyard is no more suspect then how he left it this morning but his nerves warn him otherwise. He heads towards the cookhouse and the chatter strangely dies out the closer he draws. Cautiously, he moves the tent curtains to the side--

And is immediately greeted with a pie to the face.

There is responding gut-splitting laughter as Phillip swipes whipped cream from his eyes and he looks incredulously at the semi-circle of oddities and circus folk alike before him. Hands are weighed down by pie plates and near-bursting champagne bottles. Phillip blinks through the haze of cream as he trails his eyes across the scene, landing on Barnum and Anne, standing at the forefront of this mutiny.

“Hello Phillip.” Barnum greets and Phillip detects nothing but danger in his tone as the oddities slowly move around his flank to surround him, barricading the exit.

Barnum’s mouth is crooked, teeth gleaming in the lantern light, and he gives a violent shake to the bottle in his hands. The oddities step closer and he’s trapped on all sides. He looks imploringly to Anne and is met with betrayal as she bounces her pie plate on the tips of her fingers.

When Barnum speaks, it’s a circus-style sentencing, “Happy Birthday.”

He is bombarded. Pie plates are slammed into his face, chest and hair. Champagne rains down from above and by the end of the downpour he is soaked through, runny whipped-cream biting and sweet against his tongue.

Barnum steps even closer, overturning the rest of his bottle on top of Phillip’s head and Phillip sputters under the liquid.

“Ladies?” Barnum poses the question to the oddities. Anne, the closest to Barnum, moves in and drops a soft, chaste kiss to Phillip’s lips, smashing the rest of her pie plate into his temple as she does so. Lettie moves in next, beard scratching his chin as she takes him in by the cheeks. Josephine kisses his nose. Lucy his jaw and Julie his forehead. Florence, Clara, Ida and Minnie. Alice and Rose. Gertrude. Susie. They each kiss him soundly on the mouth. The group whistles and cheers and at the end of it, covered in lipstick and baptised in booze, Phillip is officially a christened carny.

-X-

The party is still in full swing, wine and cake keeping them late into the night, when Phillip slips out of the cookhouse and walks over to the large water trough just outside the main tent. He dips his hands into the dark water, disrupting the reflection of the moon, and begins attacking the tacky residue at his neck and jaw.

He eventually ends up just dunking his head into the water, the shock of the cold clearing his head of drink.

Barnum is there when he comes back up, holding a towel and a clean shirt out to Phillip, “I know I told you no more surprises, but I thought I could make an exception considering the occasion.”
“I completely forgot it was my birthday.” Phillip admits, taking the towel from Barnum and running it through his hair.

“Glad we could remind you.”

“Remind.” Phillip snorts, “I think I have whipped-cream in my shoes. Did you blow the entire booze allowance on the champagne?” Accepting the proffered shirt, Phillip unbuttons his own soaked one and tosses it at Barnum, hitting the man in the face with sweet satisfaction.

“Of course not, those were from my personal collection. Consider it a donation to a good cause.” Barnum drapes Phillip’s shirt over his shoulder and drags his eyes up and down Phillip’s form, grinning, “Drowned rat is a good look on you.”

Phillip rolls his eyes against the flush that paints his cheeks. He finishes buttoning the shirt and realizes that it’s one of Barnum’s. The fabric of it hangs long at Phillip’s waist, but it’s warm and dry so Phillip can’t complain. He continues rubbing the towel into his hair as he regards Barnum, “Thank you. This was probably the best birthday I’ve had in-- well, ever actually.”

“You should thank Anne. She wanted to do something special and I will never say no to an excuse to celebrate.”

“How very circus of you.” Phillip glances to Barnum’s side and finally notices the parcel tucked under the man’s arm.

“What’s that?”

“Hm? Oh this?” Barnum holds up the parcel and inspects it like he’s just discovering something, “What could it possibly be?”

“Without the sarcasm, thank you.”

Barnum smiles cheekily, holding out the parcel with the delicate twine-bow skywards, and gestures for Phillip to take it, “Open it.”

Phillip blinks, grabbing the parcel from the man’s grasp. He pulls at the twine and pushes away the parchment paper.

His throat swells at what he uncovers.

In his hands is a photograph plate, the moment captured being nearly a year old. The entire circus standing in front of the monochrome background of what was then the new big top. Charity had arranged for the moment to be commemorated.

Phillip reaches up to drag his fingers across the black and white faces. In the center of the group shot, his eyes are drawn to his own image, standing between Anne and Barnum. He has Helen on his hip and Charity, ever at Barnum’s side has Caroline positioned in front of her.

It’s beautifully rendered and Phillip can’t in good conscience accept such a treasure.

He snaps his head up and opens his mouth and Barnum’s points at him, “If you even think about giving that back to me, I will break it.”

“P.T. this is--”

“Something Charity and I wanted you to have. Accept it.”
The corner of his mouth is upturned but his eyes are serious. Phillip pulls the photograph close to his chest and he doesn’t know what to say, doesn’t know if he’s capable of saying anything around the lump in his throat and the swell in his chest.

“Thank you.” He settles on, eventually, and wonders if Barnum realizes how far his sincerity stretches beyond a simple photograph.

Barnum cups him by the jaw and gives a solid pat against the cheek, expression fond, “Everyone is waiting. Let’s give them back their guest of honor.”

They enter the cookhouse in the midst of a song. The center of the room has been cleared of dining tables to make room for dancing. Barnum guides him through the space, right to Anne’s side where she’s leaning against the post. Barnum pushes him forward and gives her a deep bow, “Well, I consider this a successful endeavor. I’ll leave it to you, Anne.”

He hooks a thumb towards Phillip and stage-whispers, “Make sure he dances with everyone in this room.”

Anne curtsies, using the tails of Phillip’s shirt in substitution for an actual gown, “Yes sir, Mr. Barnum.”

Barnum turns and takes the photograph from Phillip’s hands and tucks it against this side, “I’ll drop this off at your desk for you. Don’t have too much fun now.”

“Now that you’re leaving, I’ll be sure to.” Phillip huffs and Barnum winks, turning on his heel with a wave and bids his goodnight to each of the oddities as he takes his leave.

As soon as the man’s form disappears through the tent curtains, Phillip leans towards Anne and whispers in her ear, “You didn’t want to talk to me at all, did you?”

She takes a delicate sip from her flute with a slight, satisfied smile, “We couldn’t ruin the big reveal. I’m surprised we got away with it.”

“You almost didn’t, Lettie is a terrible liar.”

“Luckily you are... easily distracted.” Anne side-eyes him, and there is hunger in her gaze.

W.D. coughs violently somewhere behind them and Anne’s face goes completely red. She buries her nose into Phillip’s shoulder, and he laughs and grabs her about the waist and sets them spinning to music.

They meet the sun still on their feet and for the life of him, Phillip doesn’t know how things can get any better.

Chapter End Notes

(So the part about John Haight is actually true. P.T. Barnum details the boy in his autobiography and let me tell you this boy was a riot. I took some liberties with his antics - E)

Thank you for reading everybody! This chapter has been brought to you by our lovely sponsor, Why Sleep When We Can Just Suffer™. Next installment should be on 3/9/18.
Chapter title inspiration: How I Feel by Wax Tailor

(Music plays a large part in this fic, if you haven't caught on yet. Do the songs we choose adequately capture the aesthetic of each chapter? Let us know!)

-K&E
April disappears almost seamlessly as the circus falls into a routine. Often times, it’s a tireless cycle of nonstop work followed by slow, monotonous days eaten up by rolling landscape as the train transports them from town to town.

Phillip has never traveled like this before. Walking the streets of so many no name towns, he’s forced to adapt to the change. He no longer opts for his expensive suits, preferring work-trousers and cotton shirts on days when the circus is setting up, hasn’t touched his dress shoes in almost two months. Somewhere along the way he stopped caring if his jacket wasn’t pressed or if his hair wasn’t styled. The train itself becomes the center point of his world and its at it’s axis that he places the bulk of his attention. He discovers several peculiar facts about his passengers that only living in close quarters with someone for long stretches would reveal.

Anne is a quiet traveler, preferring to bury her nose in her books for most of the day. Phillip tries to spend that time with her writing or reading but his stomach churns after a while, so he eventually leaves her to find someone else to bother.

Typically he’ll end up with O’Clancy in the kitchen (his peeling skills are near perfect now) and the man, having finally grown comfortable with Phillip’s constant presence, entertains him with stories of his hometown outside of Moscow.

Other days, he’ll end up with Charles in the sitting cabins and they’ll discuss politics as Charles cigarettes burn the atmosphere, the filters sucked out of the open window.

“I’m telling you, Johnson doesn’t have a backbone! He’s obsessed with a piece of paper from a century ago. Hell, the war is pushing civil liberties to the forefront and he’s stuck so far up his ass trying to keep the status quo that Congress can’t stand him. He’s a sniveling, wretched coward and I
bet you a show’s salary that he’ll be impeached by the end of the decade.”

Phillip makes a game of throwing out laws and politics for Charles to get passionate about. Sometime they agree, but not always, and when that happens they always fall into the same trap of heavy, fact-projectile debate and it usually ends with one of them kicking the other in the shin or a hapless bystander beseeching them to please stop.

It’s the most fun Phillip has ever had talking national policy.

Pup does handstands when he’s bored, usually in the middle of any main-walkway. Eustace, otherwise known as the Lord of Leeds, is strikingly well-versed in Shakespeare, a fact that has Phillip picking his brain for hours on end. Josephine speaks four languages, and to Phillip’s butchered French, has made it her sole mission in life to get him back to fluency. Lettie loves to sew, her stitch work so delicate and detailed that Phillip makes a note to talk to Barnum about having Lettie design a new set of costumes for the show.

Phillip is surprised how easy it all is to talk to such a strange and diverse group of people. In his old life, he was always so tongue-tied around everyone he met. One wrong word could brand him a simpleton or a scoundrel. It would be picked over, gossiped about, and used against him and his reputation at any chance. If he didn’t speak, he was unfriendly, rude. A vicious circle that at one point had him wishing that he didn’t possess vocal cords so that he would have an adequate excuse to escape the weekly chopping block.

Here, everyone is genuine in their words. If he makes a mistake, oversteps with his curiosity, or anything of the like he’s met with understanding, and a gentle ribbing that is more fond than mocking. What’s most surprising is that these people are interested in him: they want his opinions, his stuttering French, his flavorless gravy, his constant, constant questions.

He realizes that he no longer cares for anything outside the orbit of this place. The more time he spends with his strange little family, the less he cares for the person he once was.

There is a subtle change that happens for Phillip, lost somewhere on the miles of track bed they leave in their wake. It doesn’t occur to him until he passes by a store window in some town in the blurred distinction between Pennsylvania and Maryland and what he sees forces him to pause. A reflection of a stranger, boyish and common-place with tanned skin far more speckled than he remembers and hair a shade or two blonder from long days in the sun.

What captures his attention the most, standing there on the street staring at himself, is that the image smiling back is happy. A certain kind of contentment that sits easy on the mouth and eyes.

It’s a good look for him, he decides, this happiness.

He grows closer to everyone, more so than he ever thought possible. Particularly Barnum, who occupies the largest portion of his time.

Phillip isn’t sure at what point Barnum crossed the line from eccentric business partner to possibly being one of Phillip’s closest friends. It sneaks up on them both and Phillip only fully realizes it when Barnum looks up at him over their shared paperwork one lazy afternoon and pokes him on the bridge of his nose with the end of his pen.

There were no words that followed, no context for the action. Barnum only smiles at his confused expression and returns to his letterhead.

Barnum might as well have climbed to the top of the moving train and screamed his declaration of
friendship, the way it curled happily in the space between Phillip’s ribs.

With the success of the show propelling them forward, Phillip is riding high. Soaring, even.

Then they enter Virginia.

-X-

Phillip will argue later that it all started with Lettie’s cough.

A small, inconspicuous thing. A quick, dry sound made into her handkerchief. Phillip first hears it on the train when they are pulling into a small town just past the border.

“You alright there, Letts?” He asks and she rolls her eyes at him, “Just a dry throat, dear. I’m going to have O’Clancy make me some of that lemon tea with honey. It’ll be better by tomorrow.”

Two days later, her voice is reduced to a scratchy rasp and Barnum quarantines her to her cabin with strict orders of bedrest.

By the third day her cold, while mild, has swept through the close quarters of the cabins and has dragged nearly every performer under. Stuffy noses and the sickly chorus of coughs and wheezes fill the night.

Barnum is claimed the night before their first scheduled show and it is with great agony that he postpones to the following week before confining himself to his cabin with a cough that rattles deep in his chest.

O’Clancy’s face is pinched through most of the week as he sets to the task of preparing easy to digest meals and vats of herbal tea that make rounds every other hour. With the bulk of the performers suffering under the effects, Phillip is condemned to a stale, unmoving few days.

W.D. is passed over, strangely enough, considering his roommate is Charles who ends up sicker than a dog, and this, along with an empty big top, presents Phillip with an opportunity. When he catches W.D. one afternoon in the hallway just outside the kitchen, he can feel his idea pounding against his teeth, propelled forward with boredom and the itch to be able to do anything other than stare at the wall, “Can you help me with something?”

-X-

The world is spinning and Phillip can’t breathe with his heart clogging his throat and blood roaring in his ears.

“How are you feeling!”

Phillip risks a glance over the edge of the platform and his legs start to quiver against the sight of the circus ring floor, a near twenty foot drop below, and W.D., looking entirely too small from this height.
“Phillip! Talk to me, man!”

“This is really, really high up.” Phillip calls back, squeaking out the last couple words. Gravity wobbles uncomfortably over his shoes.

“Yeah, that’s kind of the point. Hold up, I’m coming to you.”

Phillip shifts his heels back, retreating to the safety of the tent pillar behind him. W.D. hoists himself up onto the platform and the way he stands confidently right at the end, toes of his boots hanging out in the air without fear makes Phillip start to feel a little silly for the way he’s gripping the pillar so tightly that his knuckles have gone white.

“So…” W.D. says, drawing out the word, “How are we doing?”

Phillip squeezes his eyes shut and it does nothing for the see-sawing motion in his head, “I’m regretting every choice that has led me to this moment.”

“You know, when you said you were ready to learn more about the trapeze, I assumed you had prepared yourself for the height.”

“I’m fine in the ropes.” The statement comes out like a question and he hugs the pillar a little tighter when his knees threaten to give way under his weight, “I’ve come to realize this is a little more complicated.”

W.D. snorts loudly to his right, “That’s what I thought. Which-” his palm thumps once against Phillip’s chest, “-is why we’re going to start training down on the ground first.”

“Did…” Phillip heaves, “Did you make me come up here to prove a goddamn point?”

W.D.’s smile is blinding and he moves over to the ledge and lowers himself back down onto the ladder, “Come along, Pip.”

“I hate you.” Phillip grits out, “Loathe you.”

“Oh get down here, you big chicken.” Comes the response from below and Phillip lets out a strangled noise as he carefully climbs down to the safety of the ground. He stumbles at the last step and drops to his knees, kneading dirt and hay between his fingers and W.D. is laughing so hard his voice is breaking from the force of it.

Phillip’s pride drags him back to his feet and he delivers the most scathing scowl he can while his legs are still shaking from the adrenaline.

“Sorry, I’m sorry. Just…your face,” W.D. is thrown through another cycle of cackling and Phillip starts feeling embarrassment slink up his neck.

“You’re going to be sorry about your face in a minute if you don’t come off it.” Phillip grumbles under his breath and W.D. clutches his side, eyes wet with unshed tears, “Oooh, I can’t wait to tell Edgar and the girls about that. That was fantastic.”

“Walter.”

“Alright, I’m serious.” W.D. gives him an apologetic grin that eases Phillip irritation only a fraction, “Look, there’s only one way to learn trapeze and that’s by doing trapeze.”

Phillip gives him an unimpressed look and W.D. grins, “When me and Anne first got into it, we were
teenagers and the man who taught us had a makeshift rig set up over a pool. That’s how we learned and unfortunately that’s the only way I know how to teach it.”

“W.D.” Phillip says slowly, “I don’t know if you’ve realized this, but we don’t exactly have a pool.”

W.D. raises his hand, expression and stance teetering between offended and beseeching, “I know. I’m getting to that, you impatient-God, you’re worse than Anne. So instead of a pool, we’re going start you off down here on the ground with mattresses and build you up to the rig.”

Phillip lifts his chin towards the ceiling, sees how far up it is and feels his legs twitch once more with the sensation, “Maybe this is a bad idea.”

“Oh, it absolutely is a bad idea.” W.D. responds immediately, “But not impossible. I was scrawny as hell when I started, I could barely lift myself by my arms let alone catch Anne’s identically scrawny butt midair. That took training, and time, and a lot of falling down.”

“See, that right there, the falling part is what’s getting me.”

“You gotta let go of that if you want to do this.” W.D.’s smile is gone and it’s replaced by a stern frown, a look that has been a rare sight for Phillip. He used to receive it on the daily before W.D. and him became close, and now seeing it again, Phillip can recognize it as protective, “Phillip, what this requires in strength and agility is not as important as the mental challenge. It’s about timing and trust. Trust in yourself and in your partner not to drop you and to be there to catch you.”

W.D. shifts on his feet a little and looks towards the rig, “Do you understand that because I’m willing to teach you this means that I’m willing to trust you completely? I refuse to have you anywhere near the rig until you understand that it has to be mutual.”

W.D. kicks up some dirt with his heel, crosses his arms before untangling them and walking around Phillip who is still slack-jawed at the statement. He moves to the pillar and sets his open palm against the wood, and says with genuine emotion, “It’s going to be a lot of work and I’m going to run you into the ground but I guarantee you that if you put in the work, the day you make it in the air—” He gestures around him with a smile, “ -You’re never going to want to come down.”

Phillip stares at him for a moment before his eyes climb the sight of the pillar all the way to the ceiling. He thinks of Anne the first time he saw her, weightless and gliding and free and he aches for the chance to feel that.

W.D. stands there, expectant and patient and it eases the doubt that had built up inside of Phillip, and he lets out a breath, “Yeah. Yeah, okay. How do we start?”

There is a pleased look that crosses W.D.’s face, and he laughs before pointing off towards the side of the ring where a practice mat is laid out, “With sit-ups, pretty boy.”

-X-

On Saturday, O’Clancy is declared a miracle worker, having carefully nursed everyone back to health with nothing but pure determination and soup.

“It is nothing.” The man had said at breakfast the first morning that everyone felt good enough to eat out in the cookhouse, “My sisters were always sick. I am glad everyone feeling better.”
Everyone applauds him regardless, which causes a furious blush to bloom across his skin. Despite the uplifted spirits of the circus, something paces in the shadows. An energy that to Phillip feels like the entire universe breathing down his neck.

On Sunday they finally make it into town for the parade, and that energy follows them. Florence cuts herself on one of her knives. Pup skins a knee on an uneven path. Jimmy and Boris make more children cry than laugh. It’s a finely contained disaster that balloons into an all out disaster when Bessie, in the briefest of moments where no one was paying attention to her, fancies herself hungry, and sneaks off to find herself a snack.

The snack being almost the entirety of a local merchant’s fruit cart.

Thus, the parade is tragically cut short as Phillip spends half an hour being squawked at by a very, very unhappy merchant while O’Malley fills a pail with a bottle of champagne and Bessie happily dislodges herself from the wreckage of the cart to follow after the booze.

They trudge home afterwards, Phillip with a lighter wallet at the cost of reparations and with a bleak mood. Roger, walking next to Phillip, keeps pausing to rub at his third knee, brows furrowed and eyes pinned to the horizon.

At Phillip’s concerned look, he motions to the sky, “It’s going to rain.”

His statement is punctuated by a distant crash of thunder.

They are caught in the downpour nearly a mile from the train, and within the hour the entire valley is flooded, the ground becoming a minefield of mud and deceptively deep puddles. They are soaked through by the time they take shelter under the nearest tent and Phillip stares miserably across the way to where Barnum is standing in the threshold of his cabin. The lowered ramp is halfway flooded and he has his head craned to the sky and a hand held out to catch falling raindrops.

Barnum’s gaze drops to his and he shakes his head, dipping back out of sight into his cabin.

“We’re cursed.” Chang and Eng whisper to each other and Phillip can feel Barnum’s words from months earlier bounce around in his skull:

‘Are you a superstitious man, Phillip?’

-X-

The rain holds steady through the middle of the week, wreaking havoc on their sales without mercy. There are less than twenty people at any one of their shows, and Phillip feels pathetic as they perform before so few people. The oddities however look ecstatic at the attention, albeit small, that the audience gives them.

The sun finally shows itself on Thursday and with it comes a great and terrible heat. It burns up the atmosphere, and the rainwater leaves the ground to clog up the air with a level of humidity that’s asphyxiating. It’s both impossible to work and sleep through and it leaves an imprint on everyone’s moods.

It is that same foul mood that Phillip wakes up with, drenched in a pool of his own sweat on the final day. The concept of putting on clothes in this heat roils in his stomach. He pulls himself from the
sheets, the fabric clinging to his back and thighs in a way that has him wrinkling his nose.

Anne is fully nude to his left, having shucked her night-shift and blankets alike from her body sometime in the early hours and at his movement she opens her eyes and stabs him with a glare, as if the heat is somehow his fault.

He leaves her, wise with experience that picking a fight with her before she was fully awake had the potential to be fatal. He grumpily dresses in the loosest clothing that he can find before dragging himself to the cookhouse. Despite the short distance, he’s already glowing with a thin sheen of sweat by the time he sits down at the main table. The smell of bacon and grease is abrasive against Phillip’s senses and he pushes his tray to Pup who devours it without question.

This insulting heat doesn’t deter patrons as the rain did. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the circus was leaving the next morning or perhaps it was the discounted tickets that Barnum had advertised in a desperate attempt to get some resemblance of a profit out of this week; it did not matter. As the sun beats down heavily on their heads and with sweat dripping off their chins, the crowd arrives in droves.

At such high volume, the circus is overrun and everyone is scrambling to accommodate impatient families and crying children. Phillip has half a mind to escape the chaos and crawl back into bed, responsibilities be damned.

It takes nearly an hour to get the crowd seated, with children having to sit on their parent’s laps to make room for more people. Its cramped and muggy and Phillip can barely breathe with how stiff the air is inside the tent.

That energy is trapped with them. Phillip can feel it tickling the sweaty hairs at the base of his neck and it has him nervous. The oddities are sluggish as they collect themselves at the entrance of the big top, and Phillip stands at the front of the group and turns toward them, his ringmaster coat heavy on his frame.

It is to their bitter expressions that Phillip says, “Smiles, everyone.”

Like a switch being flipped, the moment they hit the ring they are freed from the oppressive mood. Charles trots around the ring with Bessie’s calf, Jojo, and it draws laughter from the otherwise uncomfortable expressions of the crowd.

That’s the magic of the show, Phillip realizes, even when they’re all miserable they can still create happiness.

It’s going so wonderfully that Phillip forgets about the energy, doesn’t even think about it’s presence until he’s sprinting through the ring, twirling and leaping and suddenly careening straight into it in the form of a child, standing right in his path.

Phillip pivots at the last second to avoid trampling over her and his legs fail to catch up to the sudden command. His ankle folds sharply, and the ground rises up to meet him.

The next thing he registers is that he’s flat on his back, staring up at the apex of the big top and there’s a trickle of blood slipping into the corner of his mouth.

Distantly, he thinks he hears the universe laugh.

-X-
Dear Phin,

If I ever have to speak to another mother of those Prima-donna brats, it will be too soon. I nearly lost my patience with the mother of Liah Dagnum, the blathering fool-

I’m sorry. Hello, dearest. How are you? You will have received this letter in May, obstacles barred. Are you eating well?

The girls will be finishing school in a week or two. We depart for Tennessee on the first. Caroline and Helen are beside themselves with excitement. We’ve missed you, as well as the circus. New York is utterly dull without the big top. Father, however, has been oddly chipper as of late. I wonder why?

How is everyone? Did you give Phillip our gift? The girls were so cross when they found out his birthday was in April. They made him something special and I decided it best for them to gift it to him in person instead of sending a parcel.

I know that I mentioned that we’ve missed you, but I must reiterate, we miss you. So much, I cannot wait to be with you again.

Always, with love,

Chairy, Helen, and Caroline.

“Mr. Barnum!” The letter falls from Barnum’s hands, his heart stammering in his chest as he snaps his head to the threshold of his cabin. O’Malley is braced at the doorway, face pale and brows furrowed.

“You better come quick, Phillip’s gone and hurt himself.”

Barnum is out of his chair before the man finishes his sentence. He pushes past O’Malley, breaking into a sprint that’ll give it’s opinion on his knees later, O’Malley right on his tail.

The sound of the show draws him around the big top and he sees Phillip hunched over on a crate, head in his hands and Barnum’s heart is pumping flighty adrenaline through his veins as he scans for any life-threatening injury. No limbs missing, no bones breaching skin. Phillip’s breathing is steady by the rise and fall of his chest.

“What happened?” Barnum reels back the panic in his voice, and the words come out condensed and sharp.

Phillip’s head swings upward and the plain of his forehead is covered in sticky, coagulated blood. It’s oozing down his brow bone and the side of his check and Barnum scans the hairline to find the well of a cut. Phillip eyes collide with his gaze and he looks away. Shame, Barnum notes, embarrassment.

“I tripped.”

“Tripped?” Barnum repeats, looking to O’Malley for clarification.

“Some tot weaseled her way out of her seat when her parents were distracted with the show. She got into the ring during a number and Phillip stumbled trying to avoid her. That gash is a friendly
greeting from one of the barricades.”

“I’m alright.” Phillip grumbles, and Barnum glances at him, mouth thinning.

“How’s the child? Is she hurt?”

O’Malley pushes his hat high on his brow to wipe at the sweat that had gathered there, “The girl’s fine. Lettie distracted the audience while Jebediah escorted her back to her seat.”

Barnum lets out a sigh of relief, the liability of an injured child is something that he did not need on his conscious, “What about the show? Who’s in the ring?”

“We moved the clown act up to regroup, but we need a ringmaster for the final number.”

“I’m fine, I can--” Phillip moves to stand and Barnum’s hand shoots out to pin him back down on the seat, “Stay.”

Phillip opens his mouth and Barnum squeezes his shoulder more harshly than warranted and it has him snapping his mouth shut.

“How long before the end of Boris and Jimmy’s act?”

O’Malley dips his head into the tent and looks back to Barnum, “Ten minutes?”

“Signal them, tell them to stall. I’ll finish the show.”

“Yessir.” O’Malley disappears quickly and Barnum faces Phillip, who is looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Let me see your head.”

“This is unnecessary. I’m really oka--ow!” Barnum digs his thumb into the divot of Phillip’s jaw and tilts it up towards the light. The gash is nasty looking, bleeding profusely, making a mess of Barnum’s fingers as he presses to the skin around the wound. Phillip winces and Barnum knows that the area is going to have a vivid bruise come morning, but thankfully the cut itself doesn’t look to be too deep.

Barnum reaches up to his neck and unknots his tie, sliding it out from his collar. He folds it into a square and sets the bulk of it against Phillip’s hair, applying a light pressure.

“It’s going to stain.” Phillip objects with the tone of a man admitting guilt to a horrible crime.

“It’ll wash out. Here, hold this, there’s blood everywhere.” He reaches down and picks up Phillip’s hand and sets it across the fabric. Phillip’s palms feel clammy and Barnum notes the pallor of his skin.

“You look pale. Have you eaten today?”

“I felt nauseous this morning.” Phillip says leaning back down over his knees. He lifts the cloth and looks at the growing red mark before setting it back down, “Then I got busy. Come on, stop bleeding already.”

“You should go into town and get that looked at.”

“I’m fine.”
“I’m sorry, I made that sound like a suggestion. You are going into town and you are going to let a doctor stitch that up.”

Phillip frowns and the only word that can adequately describe it is petulant. Childish.

Barnum laughs, shaking his head.

“Don’t laugh! I hate the doctor.”

“Come on, I’ll have Raleigh take you.”

Barnum raises Phillip up by the elbow with surprisingly little resistance. Raleigh, the stableman, is singing an off-key rendition of one of their numbers, a cigarette pinned between his fingers as he mucks out one of the animal cars. The smell is sticky and warm inside and it has Barnum cupping his nose as he steps through the doors.

“Raleigh, I need a favor!” He calls over the man’s song and Raleigh’s head swivels to him.

“Yes sir, Mr. Barnum. What can I do for ya?”

“I need you to take Phillip into town. You can use Tulip--Lord knows the girl would love the exercise--just be mindful of that front leg. We don’t need to have her throw another shoe.”

Raleigh supports himself on the pole of his pitchfork and perches his cigarette between his teeth before reaching into his overall pocket to dig out his handkerchief, mopping the nape of his neck with the cloth.

“I’m not gonna lie to ya, Mr. Barnum. I’m stinking to high heaven right now. I’ve been mucking out cars since morning, and I just got done with the bullpen. No self-respecting man with a working nose would want to be around me right now.”

“Never mind his nose, it’s his head I’m worried about.”

Raleigh blinks and bends around Barnum, down the plank to where Phillip is braced against the car, head bent and hands bloody.

“What’d’ya do, Mister?” Raleigh exclaims.

Phillip lets out a grunt and waves off the question.

“Can you get him to a physician for me? I would do it myself but I have a show that’s without a ringmaster.”

Raleigh nods, and snubs the lit end of his cigarette against the threshold, “Can’t have that, I’ll get ‘im there. Gimme five minutes to grab lil’ Tulip.”

“Thank you, I owe you a dri-- Phillip! Don’t you even think about it.”

Phillip stops in his tracks, barely a few feet away in the direction of the tent. Barnum hops down from the ramp and the action sends a jolt of pain up his knees. He rubs them through his pants legs under the guise of dusting the fabric, “Get back here.”

Phillip shuffles back over to Barnum’s side and watches on despondently as Raleigh leads Tulip, the youngest of their show-horses, down the ramp. Still costumed from her performance, the feather dances between her ears as Tulip tugs impatiently at her reigns and Raleigh stills her with a steady word.
“I’m perfectly capable of riding a horse, you know.” Phillip mutters as Raleigh saddles her up. Barnum reaches up, moving Phillip’s hand to check the wound, the bleeding having slowed considerably against the constant pressure, “Yes, but I need assurance that you’ll go and not just sneak back into the tent.”

Phillip doesn’t respond and Barnum takes that as his victory.

Raleigh hoists himself up, and directs Tulip over to them, stopping just off to Phillip’s right, “Alright, Mister. Let’s get you fixed up.”

Phillip sighs, and grabs Raleigh’s offered hand and positions himself up on the saddle. Settled, he looks down his nose at Barnum.

“Maybe if you’re really good, they’ll give you a lollipop.” Barnum jokes and it draws forth a smile and Phillip chuckles, “If they do, I’m not sharing with the likes of you.”

“Now that’s just cruel.”

“Will you share with me?” Raleigh interjects and Phillip claps a hand on the man’s shoulder, “As long as you give none to him, I’ll buy you an entire sack of ‘em.”

Raleigh, the traitor, reaches around and they shake hands.

“Stop stalling and get out of here.” Barnum thumps Tulip lightly on the back of her thigh and she jolts into a trot.

He waits until both of them are a speck in the distance before heading towards the tent, unbuttoning his cuffs and tugging his shirt loose from his trousers as he walks.

The costume tent is placed closest to the big top, for ease of quick-changes that most of the performers might go through within any act. It’s decently sized, marked by a red flag flapping wildly in the wind. As Barnum approaches the front of it, he is met with a clatter from within.

“Lettie? Is that you?” He calls, not wanting to startle the woman if she was changing, as the last time that had happened he had been greeted with a high heel to the face.

The noise stops, stark silent. Curious, Barnum opens the curtain and steps inside. The tent has three long racks of clothing running down the diameter of the space and Barnum scans the aisles, not seeing any one of his oddities.

“Strange, I thought I heard someone…” He remarks to the air. Barnum moves along the center rack to the section where the ringmaster outfits are. He locates his coat easily, the embellished ‘B’ on his cuff the first thing he spots. It’s clean and pressed, having just been laundered. He shucks off his shirt and pulls the crisp white one from the hanger. All the while his ears are strained, listening. Waiting.

A small rustle, followed by retreating footsteps, sounds off behind him as he’s tugging his sleeves up over his shoulders and he twists on his heel, darts down the section and seizes an arm of the fleeing intruder.

“Let me go!” The voice is prepubescent, buoying between deep and high.

A boy, barely a teenager when Barnum has the chance to look at him, claws at his grip. He’s lanky with skinny limbs that kick and lash out as he pivots and pulls. When he jerks his head up to glare at Barnum, his eyes are a swampy-hazel surrounded with freckles.
His scowl is impressive for someone so young. Barnum takes stock of the fine quality of the boy’s uniform; the hand-embroidered sigil on the breast pocket. A local schoolboy who snuck out to see the circus.

Barnum would grin if he didn’t have a role to play. He sets his mouth in the a hard, straight line and drops his voice into a thundering timber, “This area is off-limits.”

The boy stops struggling, face draining of color as he stares up at Barnum.

“Mr. Barnum! You in there?”

O’Malley’s question cuts through the boy’s fear and he breaks Barnum’s hold on his wrist with a sharp tug and a well-aimed kick to the shin. Barnum folds over and the boy scrambles away, dodging under O’Malley’s arm as he’s entering the tent and is gone in a blink.

“What in Almighty-- hey!”

“Let him go.” Barnum groans, gripping the area under his knee, “Damn, that smarts.”

“Who was that?” O’Malley asks, bewildered.

“I have no idea. Up security, we can’t have civilians running around the backyard unattended with the animals.”

“I’ll have Mo and Tim look into it, I don’t know how he got back here without-” Distantly, there is a roar of applause and O’Malley grimaces, “Never mind that now. We need you out there.”

Barnum finishes dressing in a hurry, doesn’t notice until he’s standing in front of a crowd two hundred strong that his buttons aren’t aligned properly or that he forgot his cane.

His knees are sore and his shinbone pulses uncomfortably under his trouser leg.

Barnum fixes a smile to his face, grits his teeth, and makes it work.

-X-

The show ends without much issue and Barnum does his due diligence in greeting the patrons as they shuffle out of their seats to the exit. Some of the children ask after Phillip and Barnum eases their worries with a stack of tickets to the game booths outside and they are distracted easily enough.

It isn’t until after dark that they finally close the gates to the front-yard and Barnum has never been more relieved to have a show end. The sentiment seems mutual among the circus folk and the cookhouse is filled with exhausted faces.

“Well,” Barnum says over the mild chatter as he enters the room and everyone turns to look at him, “I’m blacklisting this state, all in favor?”

“Aye.” Says the room and there is a collective ting of glassware to seal the pact.

Barnum decides to take his meal to his office, waving off Charles’ offer for poker night. Outside, men have begun the process of striking the tents, hours earlier than scheduled. Not even the lowest of the workers wished to stay and it showed in their restless movement. Barnum is met with one
decision too many on his way to the train. O’Malley stops him to talk shop, and while the numbers he reports are positive, Barnum is too exhausted to care at the moment.

He gets inside the office and finally sets himself down at his desk, his dinner tray set to the side and a two-fingers worth of whiskey in his hand. There’s a knot on the surface of his shin and he breathes out in the blessed silence.

He eats without tasting much.

He reaches down and picks up Charity’s letter from where it fell earlier and dusts it off before staring hard at the delicate, looping cursive. Tennessee is their next stop and Barnum aches to see his family.

There’s a knock on his door and Anne’s voice follows, “Mr. Barnum? Can I come in?”

Barnum folds the letter away and sits back in his seat, crossing a leg over his knee, “Yes.”

Anne’s hair is down for once. She's wearing a shapeless gown and her feet are bare, and in her hands is a stack of books, “I wanted to return these.”

“Finished already?” Barnum laughs, “Slow down or you’ll blow through my entire library before we reach Chicago.”

She smiles and moves over to the shelves, sliding them back into place with great care. Barnum watches her trail a finger across the titles, “Which one did you like the most?”

“The Count of Monte Cristo, I read through it in two days.”

Barnum whistles low, “Phillip takes months to read a book. He still has my copy of Great Expectations.”

“I think it’s being used as a paperweight right now.” Anne comments, eyes bright, “He’s just been so busy with the show and when we’re traveling he’s can barely sit down for more than five minutes before getting antsy, and when he does read he’s just… constantly asking questions!”

“Oh?” Barnum leans forward, “What do you mean?”

“He just can’t make it through a chapter without analyzing every word. I think that’s why he prefers writing. He knows exactly what’s going to happen, when it’s going to happen.”

“He doesn’t like surprises.” Barnum finishes, “He likes to control the outcome.”

“He drives me nuts with it!” Anne shakes her head, and sways on her feet as she looks across the shelves. “But it’s fun sometimes to watch him get so caught up in a story. When he does get around to it.”

She reaches out and plucks a book of poetry and a couple of medical texts, “Are you going to be picking up anything new at the next town?”

“I think I will when I stop in to pick up Charity and the girls, why? Do you have a request?”

She shifts on her feet, and her voice is small when she asks, “Do you mind if I come with you?”

It’s a bold request from her, and Barnum smiles warmly, “Of course, you can. I was going to take the girls shopping and get lunch before bringing them back to the train, you are very welcome to join us for that as well if you’d like.”
“Oh no, I-”

“Anne. I’m inviting you, and Phillip as well if he ever gets back from the doctor. He hates shopping, so it’ll be twice as much fun if you’re there to torture him with me.”

Barnum winks at her and she nods, a small smile forming on her lips, “I'm looking forward to it.”

“Wonderful! Also try that one.” He points towards the far left corner of the middle shelf.

“This one?”

“Yes, with the gold script. That’ll keep you up tonight, it's worth a thousand stories.”

She holds it close and her words are more than sincere, “Thank you, Mr. Barnum.”

“P.T., Anne. Or Phineas. Hell, I’ll even take Taylor, even though the last person to call me that was my mother.”

“Mr. Barnum, I-”

“At least in private, please.”

“Barnum?” She tries and Barnum drops his chin into his hand, “It’s a start.”

“Start of what?” Phillip shuts the door behind him with a clank, and Anne rushes to him, Barnum’s books dropping to Phillip’s desk on her way, “Let me see, I saw it from the rafters when you fell.”

She runs a finger along the raised edges of his stitches and lets out a sympathetic hiss.

“I’m alright, really.” Phillip reaches into his pocket and holds out, of all things, a lollipop, “I was a perfect patient. The doctor said the stitches were more to fend off the chance of infection and that they can come out in a day or two. Here.”

She takes the candy, eyes still on the cut, “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Never better, it looks worse than it is.”

She looks skeptical, and Barnum doesn’t blame her. Cleaned up, the gash is more than two inches in length, and the skin around it is starting to purple considerably. The black threading does nothing to aid the image.

“Anyway,” Phillip continues, leaning in to drop a kiss to her cheek, “I’m dog tired. I just need to talk to P.T. for a moment.”

Anne picks up her books and looks to Barnum, “See you tomorrow, M-”

“Anne.”

“Barnum. Thank you again for the books.”

“Of course. I can’t wait to hear your thoughts when you’re finished. It’s one of my favorites.”

“I’ll be there shortly.” Phillip says quietly to her and she slides her hand across his cheek and kisses him quickly on the jaw.

Anne waves at Barnum who wishes her a goodnight and the door shuts softly behind her. Phillip turns back towards Barnum and immediately tosses something into his lap, dropping down into his
chair adjacent from Barnum’s own.

“What’s this?” Barnum sets his drink down and looks down at the finely wrapped gift sitting before him.

“I’m sorry to inform you but your tie didn’t make it. It fought valiantly, though.”

Barnum lifts the lid from the box and sees the most horrendously patterned tie. A ghastly mustard yellow that hurts Barnum’s eyes just to look at it. Nestled in the fabric is a single lollipop and Barnum sets the entire offense onto his desk with a scoff.

“I would say thank you, but I think I’ve just been insulted.”

“Oh, you have.” Phillip grins and it crinkles the skin around his eyes with its mirth, “I heard you had some bad luck of your own today.”

“ Heard that from O’Malley, did you?”

“Word got around. How’s the leg?”

Barnum lifts his leg up and hooks the heel of his boot on the edge of his seat, rolls the cuff of his trousers above his calf and Phillip winces at the visible bump, “How did he even get into the backyard? We have men everywhere on the lot, they would have known to stop him.”

“He was quick.” Barnum says, fixing his pant leg and leaning back, “Stealthy too, if he snuck out of school to see the show. I’m just glad he chose the costume tent over the menagerie. If one of Josephine’s lions took a finger, I wouldn’t know what to do.”

Phillip slides down in his chair and knocks his head back with a groan, “I hate Virginia.”

“Yes, I’m not too fond of it either. We leave tomorrow thankfully.”

“Charity meets us at the next town, right? Helen and Caroline, too?”

Barnum smiles at the thought and Phillip rests his head against his hand, gaze observing, “You look excited.”

“It’s strange. I was gone for over half a year when I went on tour with Jenny, and that felt like an eternity.” Barnum grabs his drink and watches the liquid swish around the glass for a moment, “You’d think three months would be nothing by comparison, but it’s unbelievably hard to be without them for so long. I can only imagine the trouble Helen has gotten into while I’ve been away.”

Phillip chews on the inside of his cheek, staring at Barnum without focus and Barnum senses a question forming behind the expression. He regards the young man patiently and waits as the courage builds.

“Do you regret what happened?” Phillip eventually asks, “That whole fiasco?”

“Yes...and no.” Barnum answers, honestly, “I regret that it happened the way it did. But it was...necessary, I think. It made me realize what was more important than my greed. In a strange way, I’m grateful for it. If that makes sense.”

There sparks another foundation for Phillip’s curiosity. Barnum is endlessly entertained by how open Phillip’s facial expressions are, he’s becoming very adept in reading them.

Phillip leans forward, drops his voice despite the privacy of the space around them, “Just... with
Jenny? Did you... not to insinuate that you would ever- but the papers-

“Sleep with her?” Barnum supplies and Phillip sputters, “No, I didn’t.”

Phillip looks relieved, and Barnum’s stomach churns at the expression. “That’s good. I didn’t mean to make it sound like I thought you would do something like that, but--”

“I almost did.” Barnum admits and it’s barely above a whisper.

“What?”

“There was a moment.” He says slowly at first, words almost halting on his tongue. The following part leaves him in an uncontrollable rush, “We were alone and she gave me this look. There was this instance of an opportunity that I couldn’t help but consider. Then she leaned in and all I could think of was Charity. I was so disgusted with myself afterward that I would even for a second think about…”

“P.T., that’s…” Phillip trails off, and Barnum shakes his head, “Charity knows about it. If you were wondering.”

Phillip’s eyes widen in surprise, “You told her about that?”

“We talked about a lot while I was busy begging for forgiveness. Charity said that she didn’t care about thoughts as much as the choice to stay loyal.”

“Charity is… far more of an amazing woman than I would have ever guessed.”

“She is.” Barnum agrees wholeheartedly, “She is the only woman I have ever loved.”

There is a beat, and Barnum runs the tip of his finger around the rim of his glass, and maybe it’s the way that Phillip is looking at him, hand poised at his mouth and eyes attentive, that has Barnum thinking that Phillip would receive any secret without question, “Truth is that with Jenny...I wasn’t innocent. The fact that I chose not to do anything with her means... jack-shit honestly. I knew, Phillip, I knew how she felt. At least I sensed that her affection for me went deeper than what was appropriate.”

“That isn’t your fault. You’re a married man, she should have known better.”

Barnum lets out a laugh, and it’s far more cruel sounding than Phillip deserves, but Barnum couldn’t let him be so kind, “I took advantage of it. Without hesitation. A better man would have drawn the line far sooner. I played with it, blurred it for my own benefit. Her only mistake was falling for a scoundrel like me.”

Barnum feels shame creep down his neck and he drowns out the feeling with a long sip, “Not my finest moment.”

Phillip shifts in his seat, opens his mouth to say something, but no words are available to him.

“Charity...doesn’t know about that. Actually, you’re the only one I’ve told.”

The admission makes Phillip uncomfortable. Barnum can see it in how his fingers drum against his thigh, “I’ve wanted to work up to courage to tell her about it,” Barnum continues, “but I’ve decided to put all my energy into being better. For her and for the circus. Everything that Jenny did, canceling the tour, kissing me in front of the papers, I deserved it. God, I probably deserve much worse than that. I came home and,” He catches Phillip gaze, drags his eyes up to the crescent scar, barely there
in the dim lighting that hugs Phillip’s temple, a constant reminder of the fire, “I almost lost everything.”

Barnum drains the rest of his drink, “Jenny didn’t do any of that. I did.”

Barnum stands, feeling his knees creak against the movement. He’s suddenly very tired and decidedly too sober for this conversation, and the sad way Phillip is looking at him is making him want to escape to the safety of his quarters, “I think it’s time for bed.”

Phillip stands and takes a step closer, his brows lowered and his mouth bowing, jaw twitching with tension. Barnum almost reaches up to check the stitches of the wound but stifles the motion and lets his hand drop, “Goodnight, Phillip.”

He makes it to the threshold of his car when Phillip’s voice stops him, “No one blames you for the fire. You know that, right?”

Barnum stares hard at the door, hand poised on the lever. He pushes it open and gives Phillip a lackluster smile, “I know.”

His room is dark in a comforting way that soothes the stress behind his eyes. Cut off from Phillip’s gaze, Barnum lets his shoulders slump and his head hang low.

“I know.” He says again to the floorboards.

No one blames him, and maybe that’s the problem.

-X-

They leave early the next morning and Barnum wakes to welcome sight of the sun shining through his window as the train rocks back and forth over the tracks. He breathes out a sigh of relief.

He lounges for a few more minutes, slipping in and out of a doze that cradles him. When he finally rolls out of bed, the sun is fully out over the horizon.

He sneaks past Phillip and Anne’s quarters towards the kitchen and is greeted by O’Clancy as he enters the space, the man already hard at work prepping breakfast. There is already a plate with freshly-cut fruit and a tart dusted with powdered sugar set next to a coffee mug.

“O’Clancy, you are a blessing.” Barnum tells the tall man with feeling and O’Clancy curls over his cooking with a pleased expression. Barnum quickly grabs his coffee and breakfast and it tastes better than usual as he sips it on the way back to his cabin.

He wastes no time settling down at his desk and for a moment he just listens to the creaks and whines of the train. He reaches for his novel which has been denied attention during the craziness of the week and lays his eyes on the first sentence-

There is a crash, a clatter and indistinct yelling. Barnum closes his eyes, counts to ten before bookmarking his page and setting it down. He rises right as O’Malley and Raleigh slam open the door to his cabin and stumble into the room in a mess of limbs.

In their arms, kicking and snarling, is a familiar face and Barnum’s shin twinges at the sight of
freckles on ruddy cheeks.

“What do we have here?” Barnum asks, bemused as the boy struggles haplessly in O’Malley’s hold.

“Let go of me, you assholes!” The boy curses and Barnum leans his hip against the edge of his desk as he regards the scene in front of him, “Hello again, we’ve met before, I think.”

The boy looks as if he would spit at Barnum if he were any closer.

Raleigh adjusts his grip on the boy’s arms and he sniffs, “We found him in the pantry, Mr. Barnum. Digging through the stores like a rat.”

“I’m not a rat!” The boy bares his teeth and Barnum is entertained mildly by the two central incisors that dwarf the rest, rodent-like in their appearance.

“What should we do with him?” O’Malley asks. Barnum glances longingly at his novel and morning coffee and sighs heavily, waving his hand with low energy, “Let him go.”

“Sir?”

“Let him go.” Barnum reiterates, firmer and the two men instantly drop their prisoner who clambers to the ground. Barnum picks the boy up by the scruff of his jacket and swings him over to his chair and pushes him down into the seat. Giving him the most austere gaze he can possibly produce, the boy cowed.

Barnum directs his attention over to the two men and speaks quietly, “Go wake up Phillip, and find out how we got a stowaway on my train.”

The two men disperse with a nod and left alone, Barnum turns on the boy and takes three large, pounding steps, dragging Phillip’s chair with him as he sits himself down, nearly a foot from the boy.

“Oh,” Barnum says, ducking down and staring right into the boy’s eyes, “Once, I can pass off as a boy’s prank. Maybe your mates dared you to do it, maybe you were bored. I can understand that. However, sneaking into an off-limits area and jumping onto a train are two separate things. This second meeting makes me think you want something.”

The boy remains silent.

“So what is it? Hm? You a runaway? Thought you’d go and join the circus?”

The boy gives him a look that’s scathing and posh and Barnum immediately thinks ‘No, that’s not it at all.’

“Then what is it?” Barnum trails his eyes back down the boy’s jacket, “St. Andrews? Is that the school you were with?”

The boy is tight-lipped and Barnum would admire his fortitude if it wasn’t so aggravating. He observes his charge before deciding on a different approach. He reaches over and grabs the pastry off of his plate and holds it out to the boy, “Here, you’re hungry right? That’s why you were in the storeroom.”

The boy looks suspicious now, and Barnum can’t help but roll his eyes, “I will eat this if you don’t take it in three, two, on-” two small hands scramble to snatch it from Barnum and the boy sinks his teeth into it like a starving animal.
As the boy is inhaling Barnum’s breakfast, Barnum picks up his coffee and takes a second to breath in the scent, mind twisting around the possible courses of action.

He waits until the boy is licking his fingers of crumbs before setting down his drink and saying gently, “Son, I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me. How about your name? Can you at least give me that?”

The pastry looks to have garnered an inch of leeway within the conversation as the boy shifts in his seat, eyes giving way to the conflict behind them. Barnum waits patiently as the boy looks around the cabin, darting back to Barnum before his mouth opens, “My name is-”

The door opens behind Barnum and the boy’s face shuts, mouth snapping shut around his words and Barnum curses silently as Phillip’s steps to his side. His hair is a birds nest sticking every which way, and his expression goes from annoyed to incredulous as soon as his eyes land on the boy, “Jacob?!”

Jacob, as the boy’s sudden stiffness proves to be his name, is staring hard at the floor in front of him. Phillip moves closer and Barnum looks between the two and something about the similar curve of their noses and the prominence of their brows and eyelashes, the same coloring shared and it all clicks. He looks up to Phillip, whose glare is more telling than anything else, “A relation, I presume?”

“My brother.” Phillip grits, the shock giving way to a tense anger, “Who’s supposed to be in school right now.”

“The semester ended a week ago.” Jacob retorts sharply.

Phillip blinks before rubbing at his forehead, obviously forgetting the injury as he winces, “That’s right, it did. Then you’re supposed to be home. Do mother and father know you’re here?”

In the split second after Phillip’s sentence ends, Jacob’s face goes from petulant to enraged and he’s lunging out of his chair and tackling Phillip to the ground. Phillip hits the rug hard and Jacob scrambles over him and starts throwing heavy, uncoordinated punches that Phillip has to raise his arms up to defend against. It’s frenzied energy with no direction and Barnum can’t tell if Jacob’s screams are out of anger or pain as he wails on his brother.

The fight lasts only a few seconds before Barnum is stepping over the two and wrapping his arms around Jacob’s torso and dragging him away. Jacob gets one lucky hit in, slamming his fist into Phillip’s nose with enough force to flood the area of Phillip’s mouth with blood. Barnum hauls the boy up and puts him into a restrictive hold as the boy continues to curse and spit.

Phillip pushes himself up on one hand, the other coming to plug his nose and the look he levels Jacob with is terrifying, “What the hell!? Jacob!”

The boy pulls harshly against Barnum’s grip and Barnum is so distracted by the blood pouring out of Phillip’s nose that he doesn’t notice when the boy pauses in his hold and is even more unprepared for when his body goes deadweight, falling to floor with a sharp keen.

Then he begins to sob.

It’s the cry of a newborn baby and a dying man. Barnum is almost panicked by it as he scans the boy’s body for injury. It shocks Phillip more as he crawls quickly to Jacob’s side and begins running his hands across the boy’s back, “Jacob? What is it? Are you hurt?”

Jacob shoves Phillip to the side with a yell and Barnum sets his hands down on the boy’s shoulders
to stop him from jumping into another round.

“I hate you!” Jacob hisses, but it’s distorted as his voice catches, “How dare you not know!?”

There is a moment, unsaid and wretched, that Barnum sees himself in the boy’s grief. Young and left behind, standing at the foot of a grave.

He drops down onto his knees and brings the boy in close with a hand against the back of his neck. He risks a glance to Phillip and witnesses how the statement craters him.

“They’re gone, you bastard,” Jacob spits, “How could you not know that!?”

-X-

From the desk of King & Marksman Law Firm

March 12th, 1866.

Dear Mr. Phillip Carlyle,

It is with deepest sympathy that I write to you today on the topic of your father, Jasper T. Carlyle and his wife, Grace Bordeu Carlyle. As I’m sure you are aware, your parents went on holiday at the beginning of this year. They left the port of Manhattan aboard USS. Sabine on the morning of January 10th. Their voyage was slated to take the better part of the month, and they were set to arrive in England by mid-February.

As of my understanding, the port of London never received them. Presently, investigations are underway to locate the vessel which has been deemed lost at sea. However, I do not wish to get your hopes up as with matters such as these the chances of any survivors in an ocean as vast and endless as the Atlantic are unlikely. I am afraid to say that as of this moment, your parents have been declared missing with the assumption of death.

As caretakers of your father’s estate and accounts, we understand the weight that this news will have on your brother and you. When you are ready to discuss the details, please do not hesitate to call upon our firm.

Once more, my sincerest condolences,

[Signature]

(Robert King)
Chapter End Notes

T-t-t-t-that's all folks!

Look forward to the next chapter which should be posted some time before 4/6/18 if the universe is merciful.

Chapter title inspiration: Sing of the moon by The Collection (please listen to this song it has made me cry like four times -E)

EDIT 4/8/18: Hey guys, just putting this here with complete transparency. We've hit a bit of a snag with our combined schedules (college is an institution of torture, I stand by this) and there's some health and family and general life issues in the mix; so writing and editing this chapter has been slow going.

This next update is going to take a wee bit longer. Bare with us while we figure it out! Thank you all for your kind words and comments. POTHWB will return in May!

-K & E

(On the bright side, TGS comes out on Bluray Tuesday. I haven't bought a DVD in years but guess what's already preordered?-E)
Something that cannot die (I don't have to see you right now)

Chapter by Ecliptic (SandandSeas), Kreeston

Chapter Notes

Poking our heads out of our fallout shelter, aged 100 years: Well, in our defense we did say May.

Hello, everyone! It's been a hot minute. Life got real but we are happy to finally deliver this long awaited chapter. We appreciate everyone's kind comments and patience. We truly love this story and we never want to diminish quality to post faster so when chapters take a long time like this, its typically due to subject matter that is very important for us to express properly.

Anyway, here is chapter six! Enjoy!

(P.S. Slight emetophobia warning, mentioned only briefly)

-K&E

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It doesn’t make sense. The words settle on Phillip’s skin, coil around the column of his throat, and constrict painfully. Jacob’s voice climbs to a grating pitch as he swings a fist uselessly against Barnum’s hold on his shoulders and he’s screaming, a tangle of nonsensical sentences of ‘gone’ and ‘dead’ and Phillip doesn’t understand.

Jacob is lifted out of frame and Phillip is hyper-aware of the patterns of the rug and how it feels under his hand. He can tell that the train is curving around a bend by the way the floor shakes beneath him. His mouth is dry. It takes a thudding moment for Phillip to realize that Barnum has moved into his line of sight and that his mouth is forming over syllables that Phillip struggles to latch onto.

“What?” He says but it comes out weak, cotton-tongued.

Barnum’s eyes track across his face and Phillip doesn’t know where to look. The faint lines of age that map around the corners of his eyes and mouth, the paneling of the cabin wall, the curling ends of his hair, the deep red of the curtains, everything blends into a mess of colors and the room seems to tilt before reality slams back into sharp, unforgiving focus.

His parents are dead.

Barnum glances upwards. He’s saying something and Phillip feels the calluses of Anne’s palms on his neck as he’s being pulled forward, burying his face into the juncture of her shoulder and her perfume is something real to build upon.

He crashes back down, breath shuddering against her skin.

There are no tears. He can’t find it inside himself to cry.

-X-
He reads the letter. Prowls the length of his room and reads it again. Then a third and fourth time before he’s ripping it to shreds, the pieces fluttering delicately to the ground, betraying the weight of their content.

He wants to step on them, burn them to ashes, bury them underground. Whatever it would take to erase their presence from his world.

Anne is sitting on the bed, legs folded under her as she watches on in silence. She hasn’t spoken since she gathered him up and guided him back to their quarters. Phillip is both grateful and aggravated by her lack of words. He knows there is nothing she can say that would right this and its unfair of him to crave that from her, but somewhere under his skin he desperately wants her to try.

He digs his heel into the scraps of paper, stomping them down. Then he curses and kneels to the floor to gather them in his palm.

“Phillip.” Her voice is steady around his name and he curls his fingers into a fist, crushing the paper in his grasp.

“Months, Anne. They’ve been gone for months. I didn’t know, I haven’t even thought-” His voice hooks at the back of his throat, and he’s assaulted by the vivid memory of his parents, that night he rushed out of his childhood home. He left them, they had tried so hard to stop him, to make him listen and he just-

He’s shaking, open palms spasming against the floor, sending the remnants of the letter skittering away from him. Anne slides off the mattress and wraps her hand around his, the other coming to brush at his face with desperate sweeps, “I know you want to, Phillip. I know you are going to, but please listen to me; you can’t blame yourself for this. It’s not your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

They are pretty words. Tempting in the quiet of his stammering heartbeat. It’s the truth, he would have recognized it objectively if not for the ghost of his father’s gaze, disapproving and cutting, bearing down on him from all sides.

The pressure is too much, his body rejects it all and he curls in on himself, vomiting across the floor.

He distantly notes Anne recoiling out of the way, moving to his side and running her hands down his back. A mantra of ‘It’s okay. It’ll be okay ’ is whispered into his ear and she sings it for what feels like hours.

-X-

He’s in a sorry state after that. Face covered in dried blood and evidence of his sick caked across his chin. There is a void left afterwards, leaving him dizzy and he vaguely recalls Anne undressing him and taking a warm, damp cloth across his skin.

He’s laid down on the bed and Anne draws the curtains shut and tucks the blanket over his chest. The last thing he recalls of her in that moment is her lips, feather-light, on his forehead.

Sleep wouldn’t be the right term for what he does, as rest is absent and his dreams are of violent
ocean waves and shifting memories of his parents. His mother teaching him to count in French. His father and him hunting when he was thirteen. All of them, Jacob included, around the fire at Christmas. His mother in the snow, trembling as her fingers wrap tightly around his wrist. His father hands circling his throat-

He wakes up to vomit again, watery bile that is more air than substance, into a pail that Anne had placed at his bedside, and then dips back down to do it all over again.

-X-

The next time he opens his eyes, the room is swathed in darkness and his breath is decaying in the dry cavern of his mouth.

Anne is nowhere to be seen. Phillip blinks towards the ceiling, for a moment blissfully confused in his waking before it all returns to him like a punch to the gut. He winces against it, every muscle in his body protesting as he lifts himself up and swings his feet over the edge of the mattress.

The air is chilled, whipping the fabric of his nightclothes about him when he opens the connecting door and the moon sits high in the sky. He hops lead-footed over the hitch, guided by the sliver of light coming out from under the door.

Barnum is writing at his desk, and at Phillip’s entrance, he drops his pen and swiftly stands.

“How long have I been out?” Phillip asks to get ahead of whatever Barnum was fixing to say.

Barnum glances to the clock ticking quietly on the top of the bookshelf, “All day, fifteen hours at least. How are you feeling?”

Phillip does a gesture that involves one shoulder and a grimace and Barnum’s lips pull to the side in sad understanding, “Say no more.”

Phillip does his best to return the smile, but with little success, “Why aren’t you asleep?”

Barnum motions to the threshold between the office and his personal cabin beyond it, “I loaned my bed to your brother.” Barnum winces, “Truthfully, by ‘loaned’ I mean that he barricaded himself in there after...everything. I resigned myself to burning the midnight oil.”

At the mention of Jacob, Phillip’s stomach clenches and he resists the way bile rises in his sternum. He moves over to his chair, still next to Barnum’s desk and drops into it, “I need a drink.”

Barnum busies himself at Phillip request, dipping over to the standing cabinet that houses their shared private collection of spirits and decanters. Phillip buries his head in his hands and listens to the clinking glassware.

Barnum returns with two crystal drinking glasses and holds out one to him. Phillip takes it and swallows it down without looking.

“Oh,” He says when the liquid doesn’t burn like it’s supposed to, “Damn you.”

Barnum has the audacity to look apologetic, “Normally I would encourage drinking your sorrows away but I think Anne would actually skin me alive if I let you have anything other than water right now.”

“You say that like you’re scared of her.” Phillip takes another sip and slumps against the back of his chair. Barnum raises an eyebrow and it’s such a familiar response from him that Phillip is
momentarily comforted by it, “Aren’t you?”

Phillip snorts and it lightens the heaviness in his chest, “Little bit. Have you seen her?”

“I saw her at dinner, she’s sleeping in Lettie’s room right now.” Barnum sits down and sips from his own glass, “She stayed by your side all afternoon. You were really out of it.”

“I’m sorry,” Phillip says automatically, “For Jacob and all this, I-”

Barnum sets his glass down, the sound cutting Phillip off, “Do not apologize.”

His tone is commanding, leaving no room for a challenge, and Phillip rubs at his eyes, feeling the tiredness behind them, “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Barnum taps his fingers along the surface of his desk for a moment before saying, “How do you want to handle Jacob?”

Phillip groans, and he runs a rough hand through his hair, “God, I haven’t even- what am I going to do?”

“What do you have any other family he can stay with?”

“No,” Phillip responds miserably, “My parents were only children and all of our grandparents had passed on by the time I was a out of primary school. It’s just us.”

Barnum nods once and leans forward onto his knees, matching Phillip’s position, “So what are our options then?”

Phillip looks up to him, surprised, “Our?”

Barnum’s eyes crinkle at the edges, tense but with a resilient humor behind them, “If you think I was going to leave you to handle this mess on your own, you’ve got another thing coming, my friend.”

He throws it out so casually and it hits harder than Phillip expects, piercing through the suspensions he had carefully built to keep everything up. Without them, he crumbles down on himself, his vision filling as he bites into the skin of his thumb to curb the scream that threatens to escape.

He hears Barnum stand by the rustle of his clothing and then Barnum’s hand is against his shoulder.

“We’ll figure something out.” Barnum says quietly and Phillip can only shake his head in response. He bites harder, and neither of them say anything as he shudders, fighting against burning tears.

Minutes trickle by, marked by the ticking of the clock and eventually the hour chimes. Twelve bombastic tones that Phillip latches onto, rebuilding his walls with each hammering of the sound.

When the quiet ticking returns, Phillip raises his head, staring at the marks circling the fatty tissue of his palm, bright red and deep from his teeth.

“Better?” Barnum asks, squeezing his shoulder lightly before removing his hand.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” Phillip croaks, “Everything is so messed up.”

He stands, suddenly itching to move. He wishes that they were already at their destination so that he could be up in the rig. Twisting this problem in the air until he was breathless and worn. Being stuck on a moving train with it was suffocating.
Barnum doesn’t move, staying close in Phillip’s space as he speaks, “It’ll be a few days before we are in the next town. I don’t want to press you, but we do have to figure out what to do with your brother.”

Phillip closes his eyes and takes a deep breath to steady himself, “I don’t think he should stay. We should send him back to the school. My parents chose a fantastic boarding academy for him. He’ll do better there than on a roving train.”

“Are you sure?” Barnum questions, moving even closer. Phillip can feel the warmth radiating off of his skin and he’s struck with the inexplicable urge to bury his head into the hollow of the man’s shoulder, just for a moment.

“I can’t take care of him.” Phillip admits and Barnum’s eyes jump across his face, not quite pleased with his answer.

Barnum leans forward, “Phillip, I think-”

“I’m not going back.”

Barnum immediately steps back, drawing all the warmth with him as he does so and Phillip is left staring across the room at Jacob, who stands at the threshold. He’s wearing a set of borrowed pajamas and he’s swimming in the fabric, the collar of his shirt hanging off his shoulder. Jacob looks between them with narrowed eyes.

“Jacob, you should be in be-”

“I’m not going.” Jacob cuts him off, “If you send me back, I’ll run away again.”

Phillip looks to Barnum who is chewing on his fingernails in thought, before settling on saying, “This is not a good place for you to be.”

“No,” Jacob responds and his voice breaks with the anger of it, “You just don’t want me here.”

Phillip blinks, “That’s not-”

“Yes it is, you want to get rid of me so I don’t get in the way.” Jacob steps forward, the length of his sleep pants trailing the ground. The action should make him look younger than he is, but there is a weathered grit to his gaze.

Phillip feels frustration starting to mount as he runs his fingers across his scalp, “This isn’t some playground. It’s my place of work and I don’t think it would be wise to have you underfoot. You wouldn’t like it either, so it’s what’s best for everyone.”

“Best for you maybe, but you don’t know shit about me. You don’t get to decide what I should do when you’re the one who disappeared.”

“I didn’t disappear.-”

“-Yeah? What do you call it then? Because you sure as hell weren’t around.”

Barnum pushes in between them then, hands coming up to act as a wall to halt them from colliding. Jacob is grinding his teeth with audible force and Phillip can’t help the snide expression that rises to meet it.

“Okay. That’s quite enough of that.” Barnum says, eyeing Jacob who jerks out his reach with a
grunt, “Don’t touch me.”

He stalks out of the room, shutting the door with such force that the pictures on the wall rattle with threat of falling to the floor.

Phillip pushes away from Barnum’s opposite arm, letting out a sharp yell as he kicks at the side of his desk in frustration.

“He’s…” Barnum pauses in search of a proper term, before trying, “-a precocious one, isn’t he?”

Phillip groans, “See what I mean? He’s impossible to deal with.”

“You don’t seem very close.”

“He’s sixteen years younger than me.” Phillip explains, feeling more lost as he stands there in front of Barnum, “There’s not a lot to be close about. On top of that, he always wants to pick a fight.”

Phillip sighs, “At least that has’t changed.”

Barnum hums, staring at the door lost in thought, before saying, “Was he serious? About running away again?”

“He usually does whatever he wants. Mother never…” Phillip chokes on the sentence and instead says, “He’s stubborn enough to do it, I’m sure.”

“Let’s keep him on.”

“What?”

“I think we should let him stay. At least for the duration of the summer.”

“Are you crazy? P.T., that would be a disaster.”

“I don’t think so. Look, he obviously has something to prove to you. Let’s put him to work.”

Phillip barks out a laugh, “Work? Jacob doesn’t know the word.”

“He’s old enough to learn. After a couple weeks of mucking stables and hauling crates, he’ll be begging to go back to the academy.”

Phillip chews on that for a moment, turning it over in his head. The idea of Jacob doing any variation of manual labor is laughable, “I think it’s a bad idea. He’ll go out of his way to sabotage everything.”

“Sabotage.” Barnum repeats, rolling his eyes, “We are talking about a child here, right?”

Phillip frowns at the mockery, and digs his heels deeper into his stance, “I want to send him back to the academy. At least for the time being, I’ll figure out what to do after the tour ends. It’s what’s best for him.”

Barnum doesn’t look entirely convinced and it shows in his voice when he says, “Are you sure about that?”

He isn’t.

“I am.”

-X-
It takes longer than necessary for Phillip to convince Barnum to take his bed, stating that he’d been sleeping all day and it was the last thing he wanted to do. Barnum, skeptical, eventually relents and at the sound of his leaving, Phillip is met with the strange notion that he hasn’t been alone on the train in weeks.

In the rattling quiet of the office, Phillip begins to distract himself. First, he starts cleaning out his desk. Opening up every envelope that he has squirreled away in the drawers before tossing them into the wastebasket. He organizes the books, reviews accounts, and even begins planning a new act for the show.

It’s mindless work, forcing his attention into a narrow channel that allows him to shut everything else out for a precious couple of hours. The dim lighting is hard on his eyes and he’s thirsty, but he keeps working until he no longer needs the lamplight to see.

Despite his focus, Phillip is immediately alerted of Jacob’s presence the moment he enters the room. A tension settles in the air, all manner of peace being sucked out as Phillip stares harder down at his journal.

There’s a sound behind him of Jacob shuffling on his feet and then, “I’m hungry.”

Phillip takes note of the time before finally shifting his eyes over to where his brother is standing, “O’Clancy should have breakfast set out in the dining car.”

Jacob looks appalled at the notion, “Are you insane? I can’t go eat with... them.”

The word twists his mouth in an ugly way, and Phillip could be staring at his father with how much the resemblance makes itself known on Jacob’s face.

He rises, slamming his hands down on the surface of the desk and Jacob startles, arms raising in defense.

“Don’t eat then.” Phillip responds, clipping the words down with his teeth.

He doesn’t wait to see the type of reaction Jacob has, already shutting the door closed between them. Wind whips through the bridge between the cars, and Phillip breathes, matching the cadence of it to the sound of wheels dipping over the trackbed below him.

Fifteen seconds without fighting, a record. Mother would have been proud.

He pushes forward, moving quickly to get as far as possible from Jacob that can be allowed. His little world has been invaded, and Phillip doesn’t like the feeling of being caged in what was once his home.

Phillip constructs a carefree expression before entering the dining car. The dull roar of morning conversation is instantly muted as everyone turns to look at him.

He pushes up a smile and is glad that his voice at least sounds chipper when he says, “Morning, everyone.”

The greeting is volleyed back to him with varying levels of worry from the oddities, and he turns his back on their gazes and busies himself at the long table of dishes that O’Clancy has set out.

He makes himself a cup of coffee, bypassing the heavy meal of bacon, eggs and grits. His stomach
roils at the thought of eating and he’d rather not get sick in front of the entire circus.

He turns towards the back of the train where he spots Anne and Lettie, their heads bent together in conversation. When he approaches the table, Anne’s attention jumps to him and her eyes are sweet when she meets his gaze. Phillip’s instantly reminded of how she cradled him while he made a mess of the floor. The feeling of shame is prickly along his skin and he fights it off by lowering his eyes, “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” She responds, scooting down the bench to make room for him. When he sits down next to her, her open palm settles out on his knee. Comforting in such a way that has Phillip breathing a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry about yesterday.” He says to her, “I didn’t mean to lose control like that.”

Anne’s brows pull together, like being drawn by an invisible thread, “Phillip…”

“Oh, well this is interesting.” Lettie’s voice cuts between them. Looking across the table, he finds the back of Lettie’s head, as she is turned completely around in the booth.

He follows the line of her sight to the opposite end of the cabin where Jacob is standing stiffly against the doorway. Shoulders pulled back and chin jutted forward in a way that a thirteen year old would think to be intimidating. His eyes jerk back and forth across the faces watching him intently before shifting to the floor.

Funny, how among bearded women and three-legged men that Jacob feels like the only oddity in the room.

His brother takes two comically large steps towards the buffet table and plucks a dish from the stack. Every movement mechanical as he reaches into platters with tongs and proceeds to pile food high onto his plate.

When he turns, he glances down both rows of tables with a poorly masked expression of panic.

Phillip should be concerned about the sudden bit of glee that comes from his brother’s obvious discomfort. If he wants to stay, he better get used to this, being surrounded by the kind of people he so harshly despises.

His thoughts must show on his face, because Lettie’s eyes narrow, mouth falling into a frown. With a judging ‘tsk’, she rises, plucking her tea cup from the table and bounding down the center aisle.

Jacob’s discomfort melts into fear as Lettie comes to stop beside him. She takes her time cataloguing him: the unbrushed hair, the bruised knuckles and dirty uniform. She tilts her head to the side, busies herself with refilling her cup before setting her free hand down on Jacob’s shoulder.

Shock doesn’t come close to the look that crosses Jacob’s face. For a second, Phillip is sure that his brother will toss Lettie’s hand off of him, like he did with Barnum last night, but Jacob doesn’t do anything. He watches Lettie wide-eyed, grip tight on his plate.

Lettie pushes him forward with a light nudge. Guiding them down the aisle without command. Jacob shuffles, eyes trained down on the carpet below his feet.

Lettie comes up to their table, pauses before shifting on her heel to regard the rapt attention of the dining car, “Alright, ya’ll have been entertained enough I wager. Stop lollygagging and let the poor boy eat in peace.”
Jacob goes scarlett, mouth pulling into a pout as a harmony of laughter breaks the silence. Yielding, their audience returns to their meals, lively conversation filling the space along with the sound of silverware scraping across plates.

Lettie returns her sights back to Jacob, looking pointedly between the booth and him.

There is a moment where Jacob stares hard at the floor, ignoring her. Lettie, ever patient, simply taps her foot in waiting.

To Phillip’s endless surprise and utter horror, Jacob slides into the booth, moving to attach himself to the wall, body angled away from all of them as he starts to dig into his meal.

Lettie, pleased, sets herself down at the opposite end, giving Jacob ample room as Anne and Phillip exchange a look, before she says, “How long are we going to be in the next town?”

It’s a mundane topic, and Phillip appreciates Lettie’s attempt to alleviate the proverbial elephant in the room.

“Two weeks, right?” Anne says, fiddling with the cuff of her blouse, “Then we have three weeks in the capital.”

“That’s the plan.” Phillip confirms, already feeling drained by the conversation, “We’ll be picking up Charity and the girls at the next station. Charity and I will get together first thing to go over the accounts and make deposits. We need to refill supplies as well.”

“Barnum must be so excited,” Lettie remarks, running her finger around her teacup, “I don’t think he does well without Charity to hold him steady.”

“I agree. He’s looked worn lately. Also…“ Anne glances around her, before folding over the table, her voice dropping low so that they have to draw closer to hear her. Even Jacob leans in, though his eyes are still trained on his plate as if to pretend he wasn’t concerned with what she has to say, “Have you noticed he’s got a thing about the steamwhistle?”

Phillip chews on her words for second, brought back to their departure weeks ago as Lettie’s eyebrows raise, “What do you mean?”

Anne waves her hand in a circle, expression pinching, “He always looks… scared. No, that’s not it. Almost like… he’s in pain? It doesn’t happen often, I was just wondering if you guys have seen it.”

“You know, now that you mention it… I have. It’s really rather strange.” Lettie glances over to Phillip, “What about you Phillip? Any idea?”

The phrase, ‘speak of the devil’ is the only thing that crosses Phillip’s mind as P.T. Barnum’s shadow falls across the table, expression amused as he sips idly on his coffee, “Gossiping about your employer is bad form, my friends.”

Anne and Lettie slouch in their seats, faces equally red and it fishes a laugh from Phillip, nearly painful as it’s dragged out of his chest. He holds his palms up in surrender and feels almost normal when he says, “I am an innocent party in this, I swear.”

“If I doubted that statement any more, I’d be calling you a liar. Now,” Barnum says, eyes glittering “To answer your concerns, ladies. The whistle hurts my ears. Nothing more, nothing less.”

He says it easily enough, so easily that it registers itself strange in Phillip’s mind. He watches on as Barnum raises his hand casually to his mouth, as if to scratch at his chin. From Phillip’s angle he can
see as Barnum chews idly on the nail of his thumb. The action is quick, the man’s hand falling away to settle around his drink as he exchanges pleasantries with Lettie.

Phillip had known Barnum to be a wonderful liar for most of their acquaintance. Had he always been this easy to read?

Phillip frowns, forcing himself back to the conversation as Barnum slides his eyes diagonal across the table to Jacob, whose countenance had seemingly grown darker as he stabs at his near-empty plate, pushing around the abandoned grits with his fork.

Barnum chews on the inside of his cheek as he regards the boy, “Jacob.”

Jacob stiffens, chin dropping further into his chest. Conversation drains out of the atmosphere as the rest of the car looks on to the scene with renewed interest.

“You want to try that again?” There is an edge to Barnum’s voice, something that toes the line between paternal and commanding. Phillip, unprompted, straightens his back against it. Jacob does too.

His brother glances around; trapped within the booth, he has nowhere to go. He glares harder at Barnum, fidgeting in his seat as he mutters, throwing out a modicum more diplomatic, “Yes sir?”

“For the time being,” Barnum shifts his eyes to Phillip, and Phillip can sense something wrong by the way they dart away just as quickly, “You are allowed to remain on my train.”

The statement is met with quiet murmurs that roll through the dining car. Phillip feels his jaw hinge open in surprise, mirroring Jacob’s own expression.

Astonishment is quickly eroded into anger. Phillip stands from his seat and grabs Barnum by the forearm leaning in to hiss in his ear, “P.T. this isn’t what we discussed.”

Barnum ignores him, focused entirely on Jacob, “There are no free meals here. You stay, you work. If you have a problem with that, I will personally see you back to the academy. Are we understood?”

Jacob’s eyes narrow into slits, “I don’t have to do anything. You can’t make me do anything.”

“True,” Barnum volleys back, “By that logic, I don’t have to feed you, then.”

Jacob opens his mouth to retort, but snaps it shut upon thought. He glances across the table, meeting Phillip’s eyes for the first time since he sat down. A revelation comes slowly to him, and he bares his teeth in victory.

“Yeah?” Jacob says, entire demeanor shifting, “That’s fine by me.”

Barnum turns his attention onto Lettie, “Will you show Jacob to the workers bunks? O’Malley will meet you there to show him about.”

Lettie glances between Barnum and Phillip, frowning before sliding out of the booth. Jacob crawls calmly out after her. He passes Phillip, pushing him out of his way with a smug look. Phillip gapes as he watches his brother follow Lettie out of the dining car.

The room explodes into comment and within the clamor, Barnum dips his head to Anne, his eyes
steadily avoiding Phillip’s as he departs quickly, moving down the path towards the office.

“You…” Anne starts, taking in Phillip’s tense shoulders and deepening frown, “Didn’t talk about this, did you?”

“Oh no,” Phillip emphasizes with a crack of his jaw, “We did. Excuse me for a moment.”

Anne starts to say something but Phillip is already chasing after Barnum’s retreating back. He catches Barnum by the arm in an empty sitting car just before the kitchen. Dragging him back to face him and he can’t restrain his anger enough to not spit, “What the hell was that about?!”

Barnum straightens his back, draws up to full height, “Look, I just thought-”

“It doesn’t matter what you thought! I told you explicitly last night that I wanted to send him back to the school.”

“And what will that solve?” Barnum bites back, “You want to send an orphaned child away from the only remaining family he has, and for what reason? Because some silly little sibling squabble might make you uncomfortable?”

Phillip sputters, “That’s not the point-”

“Isn’t it?” Barnum throws his hands in the air, “Phillip, for god's sake, you’re an adult, act like one.”

“Oh that’s rich coming from you -”

“Now what’s that supposed to mean-?”

“You can’t stand not being the center of attention, this doesn’t involve you!”

“Doesn’t involve-” Barnum stutters, eyes narrowing, “Of course it involves me! It involves you doesn’t it?”

Phillip’s rage is tempered slightly by the coolness of Barnum’s words, and Barnum takes the chance to add, “You should have more sympathy for him.”

It’s the disappointment in Barnum’s eyes that has Phillip stepping back, turning his face away to avoid revealing how much it hurts to be on the receiving end of that gaze. Phillip grinds his teeth together; he won’t back down on this. He meets Barnum’s gaze head on and snaps, “It wasn’t your decision to make.”

Barnum’s face grows darker as his mouth thins into a dissatisfied line. He moves closer, his body invading Phillip’s space and Phillip resists the urge to back away, “At least I made a decision. I don’t care what issues you had in the past, he’s your brother, Phillip, and it’s your responsibility to care for him. Getting rid of him is just you running away from it. I’m not going to let you do that.”

Phillip sets his jaw, squares his feet and says, “I’m sending him back as soon as we’re settled in the next town. End of discussion.”

Barnum’s expression shutters, he breathes heavily through his nose, his eyes shutting and he collects himself, roughly, before turning away, “I never pegged you for a coward, Phillip.”

Phillip watches as Barnum exits the conversation with long, thumping strides. Leaving him alone with his rebuttal dying on his tongue.
Coward.

It leaves a nasty taste in his mouth, lingering long after their argument ends.

Barnum is right. He is being childish, but it’s difficult to be mature where Jacob’s concerned.

It...hurts to see him. Jacob has always looked so much like their mother, with the bright green eyes and fair, freckled skin. But his mouth-

His mouth had always been a gift from their father. Being in front of it never failed to make Phillip feel as if he wasn’t good enough.

Currently, Barnum’s gaze was having the same effect. It’s the fourth instance of Barnum brushing past him in the hallway without even a word that has Phillip hiding away like a child in his bedroom.

Every hour or so, someone will knock on his door. Lettie with tea. O’Clancy with dinner. Charles wanting to see if he’s up for a game of chess. It systemic. He starts to tell the time by their knocks.

He doesn’t sleep, not with his parents waiting for him in his dreams. Whenever he’s assaulted by memories of them, whether good or bad, it paralyzes him with exploding nerves, like he’s sat on a limb for far too long.

It’s hard to stand on.

Anne attempts to speak some semblance of sense into him. She throws out good, rational points of how he is helping nobody by hiding in his room. That he should talk to his brother. Should talk to Barnum.

“I should.” He agrees, lying prone in his bed, unshaven and in the same clothes as the previous day; a truly pathetic sight, “I will.”

Anne sighs from her spot standing over him, shaking her head, “But not yet, right?”

“I’m sorry,” he says, avoiding her gaze by staring at the ceiling, “I just--”

“No, I get it.” Anne smiles at him, leaning over to kiss him on the crown of his head, “You can continue being stupid. We’re not going anywhere.”

“I’m sorry.” He whispers again, for lack of anything better to offer her.

“I know, and I love you.” She leaves him then and it feels like mercy and it feels like punishment. At this point, it’s hard to tell the difference.

-X-

Four days pass and Phillip is miserable for every single one of them.

With nothing better to do, Phillip finally reads the book that Barnum lent to him all those months ago. It angers him that Barnum was right; he did end up liking it, finding the story oddly comforting considering his current plight.

Little orphan Pip. Maybe the name fits him better than he thought.

On the fifth day, the train pulls into their next destination and Phillip nearly throws himself out the
train-car in desperation to be free of the static atmosphere.

The valley that they docked in is nestled between lush, mountainous hills. Over the ridge, six or seven miles down the way, peeking out between these hills lays the scrawl of the nearby township.

The valley is framed by the natural wall of a towering forest, the canopy dense and dark. A direct contrast to the warm, bright tones of where they were to strike up the lot.

Phillip slaps a smile on his face and applies himself to the days work, putting himself to the construction of the tents alongside the rest of the workers. Being underneath the rising big top canvas, he laughs freely with the men as they make jokes at his expense. He could stay forever in the cradle of this task, with the sun calling forth sweat to his brow and dirt wedged up under his fingernails.

The cookhouse summons the men from their work around noontime, the meal-bell tolling through the space. Phillip ignores it in favor of splashing about in the trough, pulling the sweat and grime from his neck with cool water.

Barnum’s visage wades into the water’s surface and Phillip sighs, disrupting the image with cupped hands and splashing his face once more. With fat droplets dripping down his face, he turns and regards Barnum, “We doing this now?”

Barnum’s mouth quirks to the side, wry, “You want to pencil it in another day?”

“I’m all booked up through the end of the month for apologies, sorry.”

Barnum laughs, and Phillip’s missed the sound. Barnum’s laugh is distinct, robust. Phillip could identify it in a crowd of hundreds just by the way it fills the air.

He smiles for it, just a little.

Barnum simpers down, shaking his head, “I’m afraid I don’t have a very good apology to give. I’m deeply sorry for upsetting you, but I don’t think I’m wrong.”

He looks at Phillip then, eyes tracking along his jaw where he knows that he has a coarse scruff that he hasn’t had the energy to shave down. Phillip knows that Barnum can see the exhaustion in the dark circles under his eyes. He doesn’t have the fight in him to hide it anymore, “It looks to me that you agree with that.”

Phillip sighs, rubbing his hand down the side of his face and flicking water from his fingers, “I know you meant well, but you took my choice away from me.”

“That wasn’t my intention.” Barnum says, fervently, “Please, can we try this?”

Phillip looks at him, “Why? You barely know him. There’s something more to this, isn’t there?”

Barnum shifts his weight, swaying in discomfort, “I--” he lets out a breath, scrambling for words, “I just--”

While Barnum wades through his reasoning, agitation overtakes Phillip’s hard won good mood. He tugs anxiously at his shirt, pulling the sweat-soaked fabric away from his frame to usher in some air. Barnum’s eyes follow the movement before settling back on his face.

“I’ve known boys like your brother.” Barnum admits, “Boys who’ve been dealt a bad hand. I was one of those boys, Phillip. I nearly--”
“Nearly what?” Phillip questions.

“It shouldn’t be this way. I don’t want him to face something he shouldn’t have to. Not by himself.”

Phillip is defeated by that, by Barnum’s pleading expression.

“He’s going to cause trouble.” Phillip mutters, “I just know it.”

“Phillip?”

Phillip shoves his hand through his hair, mindful of the still tender skin of his brow, “Aright! Alright, fine. Stop looking at me like that, I yield. If the big top goes up in flames, I’m blaming you.”

A grin blooms across Barnum’s face, slow and wonderful, “Nothing is going to happen. Especially with O’Malley overseeing his employment.”

“Remind me to buy the man a drink. Or twenty. You just handed him the hardest job on the lot.”

“Please, how much damage can a kid do?”

“Your daughter is Helen Barnum and yet you ask that question.”

Barnum snorts and Phillip has missed this. The easiness of their banter. Much of it still feels a little hollow but at least they’re speaking again.

Barnum shoves his hands in his pockets, leaning back and forth on his heels in question, “Speaking of Helen, am I forgiven enough that you’ll stand to accompany me into town? I know Charity and the girls would love to see you.”

Phillip blinks, having forgotten about the Barnum girls’ arrival in its entirety. He scratches at his scruff, and nods, “Let me make myself presentable? Meet you in an hour?”

Barnum’s eyes drip down his form, “I don’t know, I’m liking the beard.” He pats Phillip on the shoulder, hand lingering on the back of his neck for a beat too long before releasing him, “I’ll let Anne know that we’ve stopped ‘being silly’. She wanted to see what the bookstore offers since she’s read through nearly three quarters of my library.”

“That reminds me, I have your book. I really enjoyed it.”

Barnum’s eyebrows raise, “You actually finished it before the year was out?”

“Shut up.” Phillip colors slightly, kicking at the dirt, “I takes me a long time to read stories like that.”

“You’re welcome to anything else in my collection. Feel free to grab anything that interests you. There’s no rush.”

“I will, thanks.” Phillip scrubs at his opposite forearm, skin feeling warm from being in the sun for too long. He chews on the inside of his cheek before saying, “I’m sorry too, by the way. You were trying to help and I overreacted.”


Phillip gives him a blank stare, “I’m trying to apologize here.”

Barnum’s gaze goes soft, and the smile he gives Phillip has him feeling warm in an entirely different way, “I know. Go and get ready, I’ll meet you at the caboose.”
He steps back from Phillip, turns away with a whistle and Phillip watches him go, heart thumping oddly.

-X-

Phillip is barely stepping onto the station platform when Caroline and Helen Barnum launch themselves into his arms, tackling him to the ground, “Phillip!”

He suffers kisses from both of them and it fills him with delighted laughter, “Girls!”

“Don’t mind me, I’m just your father.” Barnum says, stepping over the mass of his children.

“I’m the favorite!” Phillip yells to remind him through the curtain of blonde and brunette hair.

Anne laughs, stepping up on the platform, her bright yellow skirts swishing about her ankles as she stands over them, “Ladies, I could grow to be a jealous woman.”

“Anne!” Caroline dislodges herself from Phillip’s side to slot herself in under Anne’s arm. She’s shocked for a moment, before dropping her hand down around Caroline’s shoulder, giving a small squeeze, “Hello, Caroline.”

“Did you miss us!?” Helen says against Phillip’s cheek. Phillip pushes himself up, lifting Helen onto his hip and stepping out of the stairwell way. Anne guides Caroline to the side with him and Phillip grins to the both of them, “How could I not!? What is the circus without Helen and Caroline Barnum running amok?”

“Boring.” Helen says, seriously, “I wanna play poker. Mama won’t let me win.”

“I’m sure Chang and Eng would be excited for a rematch. Where is your mother?”

“Oh! We...left her on the train.”

“Ran out on me, rather!” Charity’s voice cuts through the crowd. Phillip turns his gaze towards the direction of the sound and sees Charity walking with Barnum, who is pushing a luggage cart to her left, “What have I said about running off without me, girls?”

“We should wait for you so we don’t get lost.” Caroline and Helen repeat, as if this information is well known to all parties involved.

Charity huffs out a laugh, pushing back a stray blond curl under her cap, “Phillip, Anne. I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you both. Anne, that is a beautiful dress.”

Anne colors, nodding demurely, “Likewise, Mrs. Barnum.”

“Anne, please. Call me Charity.”

“Yeah, that’s a losing horse, darling.” Barnum says leaning over the edge of the trolley, laughing as Anne goes even redder.

Charity shakes her head, “I’ll see to it yet. Call me whatever makes you comfortable, Anne. I just think Mrs. Barnum is so formal between friends.”

Anne nods, smiling to herself, “I’ll try my best Mrs. Bar--Charity.”

Charity grins, clapping her hands together, turning towards her husband, “See! Told you! Pay up.”
Barnum looks pained, reaching into his coin-purse and dropping a silver dollar into his wife’s waiting palm, “Anne, you wound me. I thought we were friends.”

Anne smooths out her skirt primly, “I don’t know what you could mean, Mr. Barnum.”

“Now that was on purpose.” Barnum retorts.

“Daddy,” Helen says, wiggling down from Phillip’s arms and pointing at her father, “I’m hungry, can we get food now?”

Barnum sighs, leaning further over the trolley, “How sad is it that my daughters only notice me when they want something.”

Helen rushes to his side, throwing her arms around his torso, Caroline giggles from her place beside Anne. Barnum grins, clutching his daughter close, “That’s more like it. Alright! Let’s get supper.”

They end up at a pub a few miles into the city. Phillip settles into the corner between Anne and Charity, while Barnum heads the table. Helen and Caroline sit opposite of them and begin playing with the silverware, to the utter chagrin of their mother.

Supper consists of pork and veggies, with freshly baked bread rolls with melted butter. Phillip takes the first bite while deep in a discussion with Caroline about her recent recital and his stomach whines at the taste. He hadn’t had a full meal in close to a week and suddenly he is ravenous, tearing into his meal with barely concealed vigor.

He senses the weight of Charity’s eyes on him, assessing. He forces himself to slow down with sips of his drink and shoots her a smile that he knows doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

Charity frowns slightly and Phillip tunes back into Helen’s attempt to beg her father for one of the lions to take home at the end of the summer.

Phillip knew Charity to have a razor sharp perception of people, so it didn’t much surprise him when she settles against his side over an hour later as he’s perusing the shelves of the local bookshop.

“Something is off with you today.” She says, stabbing straight to the point. Phillip glances to the end of the shop at where Anne and Barnum are debating over a novel. The animated expressions upon both of their faces cause him to smile and he slides the book he’s holding back into its space on the shelf, “Is there?”

Charity moves with him, her fingers trailing the spines as she responds “Am I wrong?”

Phillip pauses at the end of the row and watches Helen and Caroline chase each other outside, the wonders of the bookshop holding little interest to them, “No. You’re not. I suspect that you’re rarely wrong, though.”

“A lesson my husband still struggles to remember.”

Phillip snorts, before he settles against the reading nook that overlooks the street. Charity sits down next to him. He’s quiet for a spell, simply staring through the window and appreciating the way Charity folds her hands together with a patience that speaks to her character.

“P.T. is going to tell you later, I’m sure.” He begins, “Maybe I should let him tell you.”

“Would that be easier?”
“Nothing is easy lately.”

Charity tilts her head to the side, “Phillip?”
“My parents died.” Phillip throws out and Charity’s eyes grow large, her hand coming to settle over her mouth in shock.

“Lost at sea, the letter said.” Phillip continues, “Technically, they have been gone for months but suddenly I’m an orphan and a guardian all at once.”

“Phillip, I don’t know what to--you have a brother. I remember Phinn mentioning that.”

“His name is Jacob. You’ll get to meet him today since he’s decided to torture me and join our circus.” Phillip leans back against the window, feels the sun-warmed glass against his hair, “It’s complicated.”

Charity has always treated him with the utmost kindness. It is that same kindness that burns like a brand when she sets her gloved hand on his forearm and says, “We’re here for you.”

Phillip is tired of tears living in his eyes. He’s tired of not sleeping at night. He’s tired of the careful, delicate way everyone is regarding him.

It feels like he’s been defined by tragedy and at the end of it, there will be nothing left of him that he recognizes.

Charity is grappling with what to say next, and Phillip is so utterly relieved when Helen’s voice barrels through the open door, followed shortly by her running form as she throws herself into Phillip’s side, “Philliiiiipp! Caroline and me are playing cops and robbers and now she says she wants to be the robber and you know very well that I can’t be a cop, they don’t get to have any fun and you are so much better at being a cop so can you please, please come play with us-” She lifts her eyes up, suddenly aware of the serious air that clings to the space between her mother and Phillip, “Are you okay?”

Phillip knows he’ll have to deal with it all soon. Knows that the longer he waits, the more it fills the volume of everything around him, creeping up to drown him. But he still has a little room left to breathe. If he can just put it off for a second, a moment, to cling onto that easy happiness from before, he’s willing to do anything.

Besides, there is a little girl wanting to play with him and right now, nothing is more important.

“Of course not.” Phillip rubs at his eyes, before rising slowly, his shadow creeping across Helen’s frame as she looks on in horror. With great dramatic flair he points at her, accusing, “Not when criminals like the Barnum girls are free! Helen B. Barnum, freeze in the name of the law! You are under arrest!”

Helen’s face lights up and she takes off, cackling evilly, “You’ll never catch me, copper!”

He chases after her, jumping over the threshold and Charity lets him go.

-X-

Chapter End Notes
There we are folks, chapter six. Thank you so much again for your patience with us these past few months. Gods as our witness, we will try to get the next installment out in June. Have a good one, y'all!

This chapter's title was inspired by Mt. Washington by Local Natives.

******

Phillip: I’m sending him back as soon as we’re settled in the next town. End of discussion.

Barnum: https://media.giphy.com/media/l3q2K5jinAlChoCLS/giphy.gif

-K
I will stay if you dare (let my anger take me there)

Chapter by Kreeston, SandandSeas

Chapter Notes

Hi.

It was a thought that had come to him upon waking. A thought that, while new, felt much like the old tree in the backyard: solid, as if it had been seeded long ago in his mind, but hadn’t ever born fruit until this day.

The more he sat with this thought, the more he needed to voice it. So, he dropped his toy soldiers mid-battle and wandered throughout the house in search of his mother.

He finds her downstairs in the sunroom, sitting beneath the light of the open window, a bouquet of threaded flowers taking shape on her embroidery loop. He pauses at the threshold, drumming his fingers against the door. He thinks of his toy soldiers abandoned in his room above, with their straight wooden backs and painted expressions of bravery. Imagines himself as battle-ready and marches up to his mother and asks, “Why does father like Phillip more than me?”

His mother ties a knot in her stitch, tugging the thread taut and snipping it with a pair of sewing scissors. His question is met with an absent-minded frown, as if her focus was being pulled in opposite directions, “Your father loves you, Jacob.”

That wasn’t what he asked. He leans against her, sticking his head in front of her nose so that she’s looking at him, “But does he like me?”

His mother sighs in a way that makes him feel immensely guilty for interrupting her, “What is this about?”

Jacob drops his gaze, mutters, “He took Phillip to Chicago.”

His mother’s eyebrows furrow, “Yes?”

“He always takes Phillip with him when he travels!” Jacob complains, frustration simmering at her confusion. For him it seems so painfully obvious, “He never takes me. I asked if I could go this time, and he said he didn’t need me.”

“Oh love.” His mother smiles, reaching out to part his hair with soft hands, before drawing him up onto the loveseat next to her.

“Why doesn’t he want me?” Jacob asks, words scrunching up under the threat of tears.

She tugs him closer against her side, her skin smelling of cream and peppermint and it relaxes him, “Your father is just trying to prepare Phillip, that’s all.”
"For what?"

"Well, as the eldest, Phillip is your father's heir. He will inherit everything your father has worked so hard to build. It's a lot of responsibility for Phillip, you understand? Phillip is our family's legacy."

He mouths the word to himself, unsure of the meaning but feeling the heaviness of it on his tongue just the same, "Am I going to be a legacy too?"

She laughs softly, shaking her head, "Oh no, dear. It doesn't quite work that way."

"But-" he starts, the 'what about me?' getting stuck in his throat.

"Don’t worry about it, Jacob." His mother drops a kiss to his forehead and returns her gaze to her needle, "We don’t expect that for you."

"I."

"Jacob," She stresses his name in a way that leaves no room for rebuttal, "Stop with the silly questions."

He hangs his head and leaves her to her sewing, wondering all the while why questions were only silly when it was him asking them.

---------------------------X--------------------------------------------

"Step quickly, Jacob."

The mountains rise solemnly in the distance and his fingers ache for the charcoal pencil in his knapsack. He would shade along the western edge of the snowy peaks with the edge of it to create the illusion of depth. But the green of the mountain woodland is jewel-toned in the heat of summer, if only he had brought his oils-

His father’s open palm slaps hard against the crown of his head, painful enough to snap his attention from the horizon.

His father’s glare is sharp and Jacob drops his gaze and rubs at the tender spot of his scalp. His father turns away after a second, “I apologize for him. His mother is far too lenient with him.”

“Most women are with their youngest.” Headmaster Beckwith nods sagely, hands clasped dutifully behind his back, “I’ve seen many boys like yours, sir. Worry not, he’ll come into his own here at St. Andrews.”

“I have faith in your institution, Mr. Beckwith. Phillip did well under it’s tutelage and I hope it’ll have the same effect on Jacob.”

“Of course, sir. And must I say that young Phillip was a premium example of the importance of rigorous academia. How is he, pray-tell? A young man as capable as he must have graduated to marvelous ventures.”
“Ah, yes.” His father says, “He’s focusing on his studies at the moment before we begin to transition him into the company.”

Jacob doesn’t quite roll his eyes at his father’s bragging, but it’s a close thing. Instead he focuses on the architecture of the chapel steeple in the distance and thinks how India-ink would work so finely in capturing the raven sitting at the tip of the cross.

Jacob realizes then, that he thinks about drawing more than he actually gets to draw.

They enter the main campus hall, the crunch of grass and twigs giving way to the tap of shoes against marble tile. The atrium they enter is large, expensive in presentation.

Headmaster Beckwith walks them through the building, pointing out lecture halls and libraries. Decisions are being made over Jacob’s head, such as which classes would be appropriate from him and which would not be (“He already has an unhealthy penchant for scribbling in a sketchbook. Art electives are out of the question. Phillip took a high-level calculus course that I want Jacob to be placed in.”) and Jacob feels as if a tunnel is gradually closing around him, making it hard to breathe.

They end the tour at the threshold of the dormitory. The room is communal, ten beds divided between the two walls, each with a desk and a set of drawers between them. The room is empty save for them and Jacob wonders what his roommates will be like.

“As you ordered, his luggage has already been delivered and sorted.” Headmaster Beckwith gives Jacob a smile that is kind, “Mr. Jacob, your items are at the bed closest to the back window there.”

Jacob nods, politely, mind already on the small chest of art supplies he was able to bring at the base of his trunk. Headmaster Beckwith turns to his father, “I’ll give you some privacy to say goodbye, sir.”

“Ah, that will be unnecessary.” His father responds, coughing into his hand as he pulls his pocket-watch from his waistcoat, “I have a train to catch, so I’ll make this quick.”

His father looks down to him, and Jacob drops his eyes to his father’s shoes. Shuffling in his brand new shoes, freshly obtained from the local cobbler. He can see his reflection in the leathery toe.

“Jacob,” His father says, and a hand comes down onto his shoulder. Encompasses the knobby bone of it and it’s enough to draw his gaze back up to his father’s face.

“I’m certain you will do well here, son.” His father says, and while he doesn’t smile, something thaws, ever so slightly in his expression. There are deep lines bordering the sides of his mouth, stark laughter lines that hint at a different time in his father’s past. Jacob wonders how often his father used to laugh before he was born.

“I won’t disappoint you.” Jacob says and his father frowns, his fingers slowly curling away from Jacob’s shoulder.

“See that you don’t.” His father murmurs, “Write your mother. She worries.”

His father turns and exits the room without a backward glance, Headmaster Beckwith scrambling to accompany him down the hallway. Jacob listens to the heavy, departing footsteps and exhales.

Out the window, the raven still perched on the cross, spreads its wings and leaps skyward, disappearing from sight.
There’s a picture that hangs in the hallway between the kitchen and foyer. Phillip is sixteen, with freckled skin and a frown that he’s never grown out of. He cradles Jacob in his arms, posture stiff with discomfort. Jacob is nothing more than an infant drowning in white, frilly fabric.

He would sit in front of the picture in the early morning, long before the rest of the house was awake and search for evidence that explained the reason why Phillip felt more like a stranger than a brother.

He crafted a story in his mind, Maybe--this story would start, always with a maybe--he was abandoned at the threshold of the Carlyle estate. A newborn babe left in the middle of a stormy night. There would be a note, ink bleeding from rainwater, pinned to his blanket that explained why a mother would leave her child.

He imagines that it was a servant that found him, perhaps Mrs. Connelly who always snuck him extra biscuits before dinner with a fond look of a woman who never was able to sire her own children. He would be brought into the warmth of the home, dripping water across the floor as he cried and cried.

The woman who would be his mother came down the stairs first and immediately would swoop in to collect him in her arms. He thinks maybe in those few seconds held to her chest that he won her over. The man who would be his father would arrive next. There would be an argument. A quiet one that never raised above a calm whisper but the fire behind it would be the same. His mother would win; his mother usually did.

Phillip would be introduced in the morning and he would be confused by the addition. Maybe he would be angered by it. He imagines that Phillip looked down at him in disgust and said over his head, “Why is this thing here?”

Maybe that was what happened. Maybe that letter that was left by his other family, his real family, was tucked away somewhere. Waiting for him to discover it’s truth. Maybe, it was behind the picture of a pair of not-brothers.

He would stare at the picture for a beat too long and the story would fall apart under his gaze, and he would see the resemblance in their noses, the way they both had the same exact cow-lick that pushed their bangs into their eyes, in the way they pushed their tongue into the flat of their teeth when their father was in the room.

He breaks the picture frame one day, tears it apart to find nothing but a few words written into the back: Phillip and Jacob Carlyle, August the 2nd 1849.

Maybe, he started to think after that, maybe Phillip just didn’t like him.
Jonathan Archer pokes him hard in the stomach with the pointy end of his pen.

Jacob jolts, focus tearing away from his exam but he doesn’t risk a glance over to the boy sitting next to him. Jonathan Archer is a boy that's difficult to ignore, standing a head taller over most of the boys in their year, he fills the space with the sheer physical presence of his frame.

There is another dig with a pen, this time to the muscle of his bicep. The room is quiet with only a chorus of pens scratching onto parchment and wooden clicks of abacuses to cover the sound of Jonathan’s whispering, “Psst, Jakey.”

He doesn’t respond, Jonathan pokes harder, adding an incessant twist that edges on painful. Jacob holds his breath to stop from crying out.

“What?” He finally hisses, rubbing at the tender area of his arm, “What do you want?”

“Let me see your exam.”

Jacob opens his mouth, jaw bouncing with unformulated words, before eventually he settles on a blustered, “No!”

“Come on, Jakey.” Jonathan whispers, eyes darting to the front of the classroom where Professor Bishop sat, grading papers, “Help a friend out.”

Jacob blinks blankly. Despite sharing a dorm room and most of his classes with Jonathan for over six months, they have never exchanged a single word.

If he was being honest, he’d rather keep it that way.

“Figure it out yourself. I can’t help you.” Jacob says, dropping his gaze back down to finish the final problem.

“Jakey, Jakey please, I’m begging here.” Jonathan smiles and it would be charming if Jacob was one to be charmed, “Just lemme take a little peek.” Jonathan shifts further in his seat, leaning over to get a better view of Jacob’s paper. Jacob flips it over to lay face down on his desk, “No.”

The sound of him slamming his paper down is louder than he intended and Professor Bishop speaks from the front of the room, “Mr. Carlyle, care to share what is so important that you need to discuss it with Mr. Archer during my testing period?”

There is a shift in the attention of the room. No one physically turns to look at him but Jacob can feel the pinpointed focus all the same.

Jacob straightens in his seat, replies succinctly, “He was asking for a piece of paper, sir.” To further sell this, he hands a parchment across the divide of which Jonathan takes it with a sheepish grin.

Professor Bishop hums in thought, tilting his head up to look at them from beneath his reading spectacles, “Is that so? Mr. Archer, the next time you want to cheat I only ask that you do it more subtly. One week detention and no weekend activities. Turn in your paper please. Mr. Carlyle, you as well.”

Jacob gathers his materials swiftly, stepping quick down the row of entertained gazes. He drops the exam into the waiting tray and scrambles out of the room.
There is a sense of dread building up from the soles of his feet, pushing him with a stuttering momentum. He gets to the end of the hallway, pausing at the threshold of the double solid-oak doors and, whether it’s because he’s brave or because he’s foolish, risks a glance over his shoulder.

Jonathan stands at the door of Professor Bishop’s classroom, face ruddy with anger and embarrassment. The large barrel of his chest heaving with short, uneven breaths. Jacob gulps, suddenly recalling that Jonathan Archer has a nickname among the lower grades. One that is whispered about whenever the boy is out of earshot.

_The Bull._

“Shit.” Jacob says.

He runs.

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A thud sounds on the floorboards above his head and he hears the muffled sound of an argument sinking through the ceiling. He climbs the stairs curiously, following the sound to his father’s study. The door is cracked open, a sliver between the curtains.

“Phillip, a circus?” His father barks, the question a hard edge of disappointment pushing Jacob to lean in closer. “Are you crazy?”

“The proprietor offered me a position.” Phillip says, neutral and diplomatic, “You’ve read the papers, father. It’s a lucrative opportunity-”

“Lucrative-” Their father says, disbelieving, “Yes, I’ve read the papers. That man Barnum is a con-artist. The depravity of it all…”

“Father-”

His father’s hand slams down on the desk, rattling the lamp that sits at the edge, “I looked the other way when you decided to pursue your playwriting nonsense but a circus?! We’ll be the laughing stock of New York society,”

“I just-”

“Silence. I want you to remove yourself from this immediately, before you damn us all.”

Phillip straightens, fists curled at his sides and when he speaks, it’s a grated, “I will, after England-”

“What-”

“Barnum and his company have been invited to Queen Elizabeth’s court.”

“Unbelievable,”

“Father,” Phillip says, beseeching, “You know better than I the value in establishing connections...}
abroad.”

There is a pause, and Jacob holds his breath, then, “Fine. Go to England. When you return I want you to immediately disband from this man’s schemes. Do you understand?”

Phillip straightens, tucks his hands behind his back and Jacob watches as his fingers curl over each other, “Yes sir.”

Jacob scrambles back from the door as Phillip’s footsteps approach, stumbling over his feet and falling to the floor as the door is wrenched open and he’s caught red-handed at the threshold.

Phillip stares down at him, surprise bleeding through the anger in his expression. Jacob struggles for something to say, something to explain the hairline fractures that he’s sees spreading in his brother.

Phillip blinks, shakes his head and moves past him without word. Heavy footfalls retreating down the stairs.

“Mr. Jacob, how are you settling in here at St. Andrew’s?”

“Fine, sir.” Jacob shifts in his seat, despite the lavish cushioning it is extremely uncomfortable. Headmaster Beckwith watches him without sympathy, hands clasped on the desk between them.

“And your classes? Not too challenging, I hope.”

“No sir.” Jacob says, “Everything is fine, sir.”

“Well, as I can glean from your exam scores, you have proven to be very bright. However,” Headmaster Beckwith leans forward, frowning, “Your instructors have noted that you haven’t been socializing well with your peers.”

“I prefer to be alone, sir.”

“Do you, now?” Headmaster Beckwith tilts his head, “Father Kravist told me that he saw you fishing your clothes out of the quad fountain yesterday.”

“My clothes were dirty,” Jacob supplies, “I thought I’d give them a wash.”

“My clothes were dirty,” Jacob supplies, “I thought I’d give them a wash.”

“Sister Amelia said you’ve been taking your meals to the library instead of eating in the dining hall?”

“I like to read.”

“And falling down the church steps Sunday?”

His wrist throbs at the memory, “I tripped.”

Headmaster Beckwith gives him a frustrated wave of his hand, “Mr. Carlyle, you are being cleverly
obtuse.”

“Thank you sir.”

Headmaster Beckwith sighs, “Jacob, since you seem to have an answer for everything, I’ll ask right out. Are you being harrassed?”

Jacob thinks of his desk and the broken leg that makes everything slide off if he didn’t prop it with a textbook. Of finding all his shoes being stuffed full with peanuts. He thinks of the missing sheets from his cot. He thinks of Jonathan Archer laughing at him from the top of the church steps.

He squares his shoulders, and his voice carries conviction when he says, “No sir. Not at all.”

There is a cat that hunts in the woods behind the manor.

Burnt orange with egg-shell speckling across her breast. She is winter-starved, rib-cage pulsating against her flank as she darts through the underbrush and is gone between blinks.

The second time he sees her is nearly a week later when he’s sitting beneath the canopy of a walnut tree, his sketchbook splayed across his lap. It’s his favorite tree, one that he had scouted for one long summer afternoon years ago. He loved it because of the divot in the base of the trunk that perfectly fit the curve of his spine as he rested against it.

The cat approaches him, pausing a few feet off from where he sits and he stills in his sketching—a pinecone that he’s gotten bored of shading—and observes. She’s young, not a kitten but caught somewhere in a growth spurt that leaves her head seemingly small for her long limbs. She stalks forward, tail swishing behind her in playful curiosity before suddenly veering to the side and giving him a wide-berth and scampering off out of sight.

The third time he sees her, he’s prepared. He sets up a placemat with shredded fish and some milk that he pours into a chipped saucer stolen from his mother’s tea set. He then sits in his spot, fishes his supplies out from his knapsack and then leans back to wait.

Nearly an hour passes likes this before the cat shows. She peers at him with jewel-toned eyes, head bowed down in distrust before sniffing at his offerings. The edge of starvation in the odd months between winter and spring however have her settling down further to devour the meal.

Jacob grabs his pencil and starts to capture the smooth curves of her spine, the sharp angles of her elbows. He sketches and lines and shades until she finishes her food. It surprises him when she settles down in a sun patch immediately after and curls in on herself for a nap.

Jacob takes this as an invitation and he draws her until the sun has met the horizon and he hears Mrs. Connelly call for supper.

He does this the next week, and the week after. Each time bringing the bribery a little closer to where he would sit. The cat started to wait for him after a while, a consistent meal source that she mewed at as he would set up.
He would talk to her sometimes. Telling her things that he wouldn’t admit to himself. He talked about his schooling, how lonely it was having no one to play with. He talks about his father. His mother. He even tells her about the photo in the hallway and how Phillip always seems miserable when he comes home. It became such a comfort when the cat would look up at him and seemed like she was listening.

He names her Poppy.

One afternoon, three months after he started to feed her, he arrives to the spot to find her missing. He calls for her, stalks around the meadow for hours with no response. He leaves the bowl out for her. The next day finding it empty, or in the process of being scavenged by ants and beetles. He tries again the next day, and the next. Searching from sun up to sun down.

He gives up on the fourth day, dirty and tired from his searching and tears burning his eyes.

His mother sees him approach the porch and he curls against her and listens as she whispers into his hair, “Some creatures can’t be kept. No matter how much you love them.”

The panic that hits him when he reaches into his knapsack at lunch only to find his sketchbook missing is enough to leave him gasping. He dumps out the contents of his bag across the large work table. The noise earns him a glare from Sister Amelia that he ignores as he pushes his textbooks out of the way, even going as far as to shake them out.

He rushes out of the library, leaving his things scattered across the table and the floor as he sprints down the hallway and all the way to the dorm rooms. He slams into the door, fumbling with the knob and tripping to the floor. He rushes to his desk, roots through the drawers even though he has never used his sketchbook at his desk. He opens his luggage trunk and tosses his clothing out of the way. The deeper he digs the more he feel like he can’t breathe.

He crawling under the bed when he hears laughter coming from the open window. He sits back on his haunches to see Jonathan and his friends in the quad, faces alight with entertained grins. Jacob’s heart stutters when he sees that in Jonathan’s hands is his sketchbook, and at his feet is torn pages of buildings, of animals, of his mirror self, ink running from the snow that soaks into the parchment.

The panic which had consumed him snaps into unnatural anger and in a second he’s vaulting out the open window, crossing the short distance to Jonathan. The boy is still smiling when he lifts his head and Jacob takes that split second of surprise to throw his fist into his jaw.

Jonathan stumbles back with a shocked yelp, the remnants of Jacob’s sketchbook flinging to the side. Jacob dashes forward, scoops it up and books it.

Jonathan recovers quick, slamming his fist into the ground and scrambling to his feet and he charges after him with frightening speed. Jacob sprints hard, legs pumping and lungs screaming in the snow-haze air. He makes for the tree, the tallest one on the property and wastes no time wrenching his sketchbook into the branches above. He jumps for the footholds and a pair of meaty fists close around his torso and throw him away and down.

The ground is partially frozen and he hits it with mostly the bone of his hip and knee. Jonathan is on
top of him immediately, one fist wrapped in his collar to keep him still while the other comes down hard on his jaw. Jacob pushes up against Jonathan’s shoulders, is somehow able to get a foot between his chest and Jonathan’s groin and he kicks with unforgiving force.

Jonathan lets out a pained gasp and momentarily lets go to curl in on himself and Jacob, disorientedly, crawls out from under him. He gets up on to one knee, one foot and Jonathan’s hands clamp down on his straggling ankle, dragging him back in with a roar.

Jonathan lands a knee hard into Jacob’s pelvis and pins him with it. Jacob writhes, hands clawing at the ground to dislodge himself and Jonathan punches him again and it snaps his head to the side, rattling his brain against the wall of his skull and the world goes blurry, black edging his vision and Jacob is barely aware that he’s lifting his arms up to defend, or that he’s screaming in pain-

Jonathan is being lifted off of him, and Jacob curls in on the sharp pain in his ribs, groaning in relief.

Jonathan is yelling, “I didn’t do anything! He threw the first punch!”

“Quiet!” Father Kravitz bellows; it was his preacher voice, one that felt that to argue with him was to argue with God, “Mr. Carlyle! Can you stand?”

Jacob thinks about the question for a second, through the pain in his side and the blood pulsing through the skin under his eye. Tries to nod but the motion makes the world spin-

He spreads his sketchbook across his lap and feels a rush of excitement. A blank page sits before him and the prospect of filling it never fails to make him smile. Jacob reaches over into his bag and pulls his favorite graphite pencil, sets to sharpening it with blade until its sharp, needle-fine in the afternoon sun.

He sets the point down, exhales and commits to his first line. A castle under moonlight. That is what this will be.

He erects spires from the parchment, shading crumbling brickwork and gothic buttresses. He imagines himself a weary traveler knocking at the large oak doors. The master is strange. Hidden amongst shadows. What dark secrets are housed inside?

It starts to take shape under his gaze. The moor that the castle sits on, rocky with skeletal trees grasping for pieces of the sky.

The sun moves across the sky overhead and Jacob is too far gone to notice.

He’s adding the final details to the piece when a shadow falls across the page above him. There is an awkwardness to the shape.

“It’s time for dinner.” Phillip clears his throat above him, standing on the porch step next to him.

Jacob nods, shifting down to cover his work, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

He expects Phillip to leave then. His brother doesn’t usually say more than a sentence at a time to
Jacob. But he doesn’t. He stands staring down at Jacob’s head with a raised eyebrow.

“What?” Jacob mutters, fingers fanning the page. The castle bleeds through, the skin of his palm covered in graphite.

Phillip looks surprised, chin dipping down, “Uh, nothing. I didn’t know you liked to draw.”

“Oh.” Jacob says cleverly in response, “Yeah, I guess.”

“Are you any good? Can I see?”

There is uncharted territory in his words and both of them know it. Jacob looks down at his sketchbook and uncurls, just a little. Phillip slides down onto the step above him, knee brushing Jacob’s flank.

Jacob holds up the sketchbook and Phillip takes it, gently as if it were as fragile as the dried flowers mother keeps pressed in her bible.

Jacob doesn’t have the habit of showcasing his pieces to anyone. They are private. Little worlds for him to escape when his mind gets too full. To have someone looking through them is a little jarring and Jacob can feel the skin of his cheeks grow warm.

“Wow.” Phillip says, and nothing else.

Jacob waits for more. Watching Phillip thumb through castles and mountains and naval ships with bright eyes. He shifts where he sits before saying, “What- what do you think?”

“These are really good,” Phillip says, not unkindly, ’I’m impressed.” He pauses on a sketch of a bustling city street.

Jacob colors at that, ducking his head and twirling his pencil between his fingers, “Thanks.”

Phillip pauses again at an image of a train, one that Jacob had done while waiting at the station with mother. His fingers trail over the smokestack as if he would be able to feel the metal.

Jacob can see how Phillip loses himself in it and it’s the first thing that he’s ever shared with his brother.

He opens his mouth to ask after it, to see how far Phillip has traveled with his art, when the porch door swings, father stomping hard on the deck, “Phillip, your mother and I have been waiting. Jacob, put away that silly book of yours and go wash up. Your dinner is going cold.”

Annoyance flickers across Phillip’s expression and Jacob wrenches the sketchbook from his grasp and shoves it into his bag, scrambling up the steps and under his father’s arm.

“Don’t encourage him, Phillip.” His father says lowly when he think Jacob can’t hear anymore, “He’s behind on his studies well enough with the help of that little art book of his.”

Jacob sets his jaw, mouths along with Phillip, “Yes, father.”
Headmaster Beckwith knocks on the door of the lecture hall and his sudden presence jolts the energy in the room. Professor Arnold pauses in his lesson on greek mythology to meet the man at the door, and after a second of hushed conversation they both step outside the room and the everyone bursts into comment.

“I wonder what that’s about.” Roger Addams says behind him and Jacob shrugs, flipping the page of his textbook and reading ahead.

Professor Arnold returns to the room and his face, normally carved in a sort of perpetual boredom is pale. The room holds its breath in curiosity.

“Jacob Carlyle?”

The room turns to him and Jacob raises his hand, “Sir?”

“Can you-” Professor Arnold starts, then clears his throat awkwardly, “Can you come here, please?”

The boys around him let out a roused ’oooh’. Whistling low and snickering. Jacob stands, ears burning as he steps away from his desk-

“Actually, bring your things.” Professor Arnold says, and for some reason he sounds apologetic, “You- I don’t believe you’ll be coming back to class today.”

Jacob frowns, turning to swipe his things haphazardly into his knapsack. He descends from the top of the room, sidestepping Jonathan’s outstretched leg and passes Professor Arnold who suddenly, strangely, sets his hand down on Jacob’s shoulder, giving it a slight squeeze.

Jacob gives him a confused look and exits the room.

Headmaster Beckwith is outside the door and when he sees Jacob, he doesn’t smile.

“Er,” Jacob says, “What’s this about, sir?”

“Mr. Jacob-” Headmaster Beckwith, “Come with me.”

“Why, sir?” Jacob asks, adjusting the strap on his bag, “If this is about the mess outside the dormitory, I had nothing to do-”

“Jacob.” Headmaster Beckwith interrupts, serious as Jacob has ever seen him to be, “Come.”

Jacob’s frown deepens, and he follows the old man down the hall, up the stairs to his office. Headmaster Beckwith opens the door and holds it for him. Jacob steps into the room and sets himself down in the chair in front of the desk.

Headmaster Beckwith shuts the door, and for a moment he pauses, hand gripped on the knob, before eventually letting go and moving to sit. Not in his chair on the opposite side of the desk, but in the twin chair identical to the one Jacob sat in.

He pulls the chair up so that they’re nearly knee to knee, and then he looks Jacob in the eyes and says, “I’ve received some terrible news, Jacob.”
“Sir?” Jacob says, confused.

Headmaster Beckwith pulls an envelope from the top of the desk and hands it to Jacob, “It’s about your parents.”

Jacob blinks and looks down at the envelope. He reaches in and pulls out the letter inside. He reads it, reads it twice. Reads it until Headmaster Beckwith is pushing a handkerchief into his trembling hands, tears blurring the words on the page.

Headmaster Beckwith sets a hand on his back and says, voice low and comforting, “We’ll contact your brother, it’ll be okay.”

He curls away from him, cries harder.

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His father fetches his mother from the snow. Her face is pale, the tracks from her tears are frozen on her cheeks and she’s wrapped in his coat, sobbing quietly. Jacob watches them from the top of the stairs as his father shuffles her into the drawing room, sets her down in front of the fire.

He hears his father speak low to her. Quietly, gently and it makes him climb down the stairs to sit at the bottom step. Listening in the dark.

“My boy.” His mother wails, “Why’d he leave?”

“Shhh, Grace. None of that, now. Calm down.”

“Don’t-” His mother shoves at his father, anger seeping in through her tears, “Don’t you dare tell me to calm down. You and your foolish pride-”

“Foolish?” His father stutters, “I’ve given that boy everything. Every want, every desire I’ve allowed. At every turn he’s shown irresponsibility and you expect me to stand by as he throws it all away?”

“He’s our son.” His mother hisses, “I don’t approve of any of it but he’s our son, and we’re losing him, Jasper.”

“Then let him be lost!” His father shouts back, causing his mother to flinch against the sofa. Jacob sets his head against the paneling of the wall, his vision going cross-eyed as he stares too closely at the floral print.

“Oh, Grace.” His father whispers then, sounding suddenly very tired, “I’m sorry.”

His mother cries, leaning into her hands. His father settles down next to her and wraps an arm around her shoulders, “I’ll… try again after our trip. I’ll talk to him again. I’ll make the effort.”

“You have to,” His mother mumbles, head buried into the side of his neck, “We have to try to understand.”
Jacob stares at the ceiling of the library from where he hides on the second floor landing between the shelves. He counts the tiles despite knowing already that there is one hundred and fifty in total and that counting them again would not yield a different number, but it has kept him from thinking every night so he does it again.

Tonight he’s not alone.

“Not even a letter? It’s been weeks!!” Sister Amelia’s voice is shrill in the night-time silence.

“Apparently he’s been away for business. He didn’t leave any forwarding address for his parents.”

One, two, three-

“Still, for this to happen and him not to come see his younger brother? I can’t imagine it."

He switches it up, tries counting down rather than up. One hundred and fifty. One hundred and forty-nine, One forty-eight...

“I know. Summer is approaching and I’m worried. I don’t know what is going to happen to him if his brother doesn’t claim him.”

So loud.

“The state would take him, I assume.”

Jacob clamps his hands over his ears and starts over.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

The tailor’s apprentice is a few years older than him and Jacob bites the inside of his cheek each time a fabric pin catches his skin. The boy glances up apologetically, before continuing down the rough pattern.

The fabric shop is small, feeling much more so as a few of his classmates milled about. Headmaster Beckwith stood to the side with Sister Mary-Ann, observing the room and speaking with the shopkeeper.

“Another growth-spurt, sir?” The boy asks, motioning for Jacob to step outwardly for him to pin the inseam. Jacob shrugs, staring at himself in the floor mirror, “I guess.”

“I think so, sir.” The boy frowns, glancing between his measurements and the inch of space from
Jacob’s hem and his ankle. The boy curses under his breath and lets out the seam, “You’ve already outgrew my measurements from last week. I’m going to have to take them down again.”

Jacob stares hard at his reflection. He sees his mother in the shape of his eyes. He sees his father in his mouth. But mostly, he’s starting to see Phillip in his shoulders. In his expression.

He frowns, throat dry, and glances away, “Can we take a break?”

The apprentice eyes the precarious pinwork of Jacob’s pants warily, but at Jacob’s pleading look, nods, “Remove those before you step out, sir. I’ll get your clothes.”

Jacob shuffles off the step-stool and gingerly removes his pants and hands them over to the apprentice. The boy returns with his clothing and Jacob sighs as he steps into the worn fabric.

He moves through the room, stepping around the other boys and moving out to stand in the street with his classmates who have already finished with the tailor. A group of them are playing a game of knucklebones while they wait.

A few of them glance upwards as he passes, and there is pity in their expressions, all save for Jonathan, who sneers openly. Setting his jaw, Jacob rounds the corner of the shop into a darkened alleyway, walks all the way down to the opposing street. Alone, away from prying eyes, Jacob leans against the wall and slips down into a crouch, dropping his head between his knees and sucking in a ragged breath. His eyes are burning and it hurts to swallow.

“Shit.” Jacob mutters, swinging his head back and banging it hard against the wall.

P.T. Barnum’s painted face stares back at him.

The poster is faded, yellowing from being in the elements for too long. Barnum is smiling beneath a top hat, miniature elephants and trapeze artists frame his portrait in a kaleidoscope of color. At the bottom of the posture, in twisting cursive, are the words: *Come One! Come All! To The Greatest Show On Earth!*

There are dates etched into the bottom and Jacob is ripping them from the poster before he even realizes he’s moved.

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It’s easier than he expects, slipping out of the church pew during morning service. Father Kravitz’s voice echoes against the tented ceiling and Jacob can hear it as he hurries down the steps.

He sprints across the open field, keeping low as he approaches the wall bordering the academy grounds. The large oak tree is in bloom now, heavy and green and it’s pollen cakes Jacob’s jacket as he scampers up it’s limb and hops the wall.

It’s hill country beyond the wall and Jacob trudges down the ridge and through the underbrush towards town. The poster had outlined a location near the train station and Jacob vaguely remembers which direction that is.

It’s a thirty minute walk from the academy and the summer sun is brutal against Jacob’s head. Sweat
breaks out across his brow and he feels the caress of dampness against his lower back and the bend of his knees. He’s cooking in his blazer, but he marches on, chin tilted down and eyes straight on the path ahead.

He finds the crowd migrating towards the circus at the edge of town. He counts dozens of families and his chest tightens at the women wrapped in their linens, fans curled out to usher air onto their dewy skin. At their husbands next to them with their children running around in excitement. He follows them, blending into the mass with ease. Nobody notices a misplaced teenager.

He sees the tent peeking over the treeline in the distance. Patterned stripes acting as a beacon and drawing them in. There is music playing, muffled trumpets and drums that grow louder and more exuberant as he approaches.

There is a man ushering people through a large gate, his face is pinched, mouth twisted up under his mustache as he calls people forward and bellows out prices. Jacob pays $0.50 for a crumpled ticket to be shoved into his face and is pushed forward by the congestion at the gates entrance.

It’s hot. Muggy with suffocating heat. Jacob feels sweat accumulating against the basin of his throat. The uncomfortable slickness of it dripping down his skin. It smells dizzyingly of fried food. Popcorn and peanuts and poorly disguised manure.

He slips into the tent with the crowd, settles down between two separate families and doesn’t know what to do with his hands on the bench seating. The baby behind him is sobbing, being shushed lightly by his mother. A handful of popcorn hits Jacob in the back of a head by a toddler and the child’s parents whisper their apologies between their berating.

Jacob is out of his element and the sensation it brings is making him sick.

He tilts his head down trying to push out the heavy scent of hay and humidity, breathing ragged between his knees. The curtains pull shut, casting the audience in a red and white glow and crowd quiets in anticipation.

The music begins and Jacob throws his head back to the opening lyrics, sung deep in a voice he knows all too well.

He doesn’t recognize Phillip. The man sliding into the ring in a wave of color and fanfare is not the brother he knows. This man is bigger than life, muscular and confident as he leaps up onto the backs of elephants. He’s sun-burned across the bridge of his nose, built upon layers of already tanned skin. Hair longer underneath his hat, revealed to be loosely styled when he tips the hat to the crowd in a low bow. He doesn’t know this man. How could he when Phillip never smiled so much at home?

And Phillip is smiling. Grinning really, as he pirouettes across the ring kicking up dust and glitter with grace and poise.

The crowd around him is enraptured, hypnotized by the spell that is being cast. Jacob can only see Phillip.

A drop of water hits his hand and Jacob thinks for a second that it’s rain, but his cheeks are wet and he’s crying. He scrubs furiously at his cheeks in the dark. Watching as Phillip twirls a bearded woman in a chaotic waltz and his brother is laughing. A joyous, chest-heaving laugh that Jacob can’t stand to see.

‘He doesn’t care.’ Jacob thinks, angry that he had come all this way to learn something he already
knew, ‘He’s run off and found himself a new home.’

He lets that feeling consume him. Lets it guide him out of his seat and out the tent.

He feels it defining him underneath the unforgiving sun. Phillip won’t forget where he came from. Jacob won’t allow him.

A muffled sound of a shattering glass wakes him from a dream that was fast-fading. Jacob stares at the ceiling, holds his breath in the dark as he listens for movement.

There is a loud, violent crash, like a table turning over. Followed by a thud that vibrates the wall just behind his headboard. Jacob sits up and slides his feet into his slippers, shuffles mouse-quiet across his room into the hallway.

There is light spilling into the hallway from the room next to his. Jacob tiptoes over and pushes the door open, the motion grinding against broken glass that catches under the threshold.

He finds Phillip sprawled on the ground at the foot of his bed. As if his brother had meant to sit on the mattress only to slide haphazardly to the floor. His head is lolled to the side, eyes hazy and distant as he stares into the crackling fire.

The room smells of sweat, and smoke, and his father’s bourbon.

“Phillip?” He whispers, afraid that any louder would break the tense calm that surrounds them.

The yellow glow of the fire reflects wetly in Phillip’s eyes and the motion of him raising a canister, amber-liquid swishing, to his lips feels private. As if Jacob was seeing something that he shouldn’t.

He’s wondering if he should go wake their parents, when Phillip says, “Why are you here?”

Jacob freezes at the words. Not because they are angry, or sad, or drunk, but because they sound indifferent, as if Phillip was commenting on the weather to him.

“I heard…” He pushes the door open a little further, winces as glass shards scrape painfully against the wood floor, “I’ll leave.”

“No. You-” Phillip mumbles, knocks back another swallow, bourbon dripping onto his dress-shirt, “Why can’t it be different?” He waves his hand across the room, across the fire and his drink and Jacob.

“What?” Jacob says, frowning.

Phillip laughs and it’s a hollow, mocking sound, “Nevermind. I can’t expect you to understand this.” He shifts as if to stand, but topples over last minute, knocking the bottle from his hand. It spills across the floor with a clatter, “Shit. Damn it.”

Jacob steps forward to help. Steps back to give some space. Fiddles with the hem of his night-shirt,
before settling on, “You’re drunk, aren’t you?”

Phillip glances up from the floor and smiles, thin-lipped, “Yeah, Jake. I think I am.”

Phillip has never called him Jake. But he says it so casually, as if maybe he’s thought it in regards to Jacob a number of times before.

Maybe it’s this that has Jacob finally crossing the divide between them. Jacob has never had to help a drunk person before, but he’s witnessed his mother helping his father. Nights after bad business deals or good poker nights with colleagues.

He starts by prying the bottle from Phillip’s hand. Phillip watches it go listlessly, hand falling to the ground. Jacob sets the bottle off to the side and reaches over to lift one of Phillip’s arms over his shoulder.

Phillip lifts like a boulder and Jacob grunts under the weight. He wedges his shoulder under Phillip’s clavicle and the smell of alcohol is pungent here. He tries to breathe through his mouth but the taste is worse than the smell.

It takes some maneuvering and some false starts, but somehow he’s able to leverage Phillip back onto his feet. Together they wobble around the side of the bed and Phillip falls across the mattress with a groan.

Jacob looks across his brother’s prone form and thinks about his mother. She would remove his father’s tie, so he does that. She would tug off his father’s boots, so he does that. She would tuck him into bed, tilting his head to the side. Jacob tugs the duvet out from under Phillip’s calves and tosses it over his chest.

At the end of this, he feels very proud for his efforts, is thinking that maybe he should go fetch a glass of water for Phillip bedside table until Phillip says, drunken and already dreaming, “I hate you.”

The room goes cold. Phillip starts to snore.

“Okay.” Jacob whispers, alone.

Chapter End Notes

Bye.

Chapter title inspiration - If I Go, I'm Goin' by Gregory Alan Isakov.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!