Royal Trappings
by tastewithouttalent

Summary

"Someday, McGillis has decided: someday he will have everything, the power and the wealth and the steering of his own life, of his own future, to be managed by something stronger than the biting winds of winter that are currently slicing through the thin of his threadbare clothes." McGillis has never relied on anyone but himself and never turned away an opportunity. A mistaken identity and a gullible prince are exactly the kind of chance he's always hoped for, only to find himself struggling with the one thing that has never let him down before: his ambition.
Opportune

It’s the rainy days that are the worst.

McGillis has learned how to look after himself. He’s spent what years of his childhood he can remember scrabbling survival from the city streets, in the dark corners where adults don’t bother checking and fighting against the fists and kicks of other children as desperate as he for a bite of food or a safe place to steal a few hours of sleep. McGillis is too small to take on the bigger children, and he lacks the collection of followers that might grant him some staying power in the better corners of the city; but he’s fast, and he’s smart, and that opens up options to him that aren’t available to the large, slow stupidity that reigns among the rest of his peers. He can’t hold the secure points of the safer alleys, can’t maintain a grip on one of the corners that stay dry and even warm for most of the year; but the unlatched doors of inns give way with silent ease to his careful touch, and he long ago learned that a flat stare and a large vocabulary will buy him tolerance if not love from any of the adults who might catch him. He can talk himself out of most trouble, if he’s speaking with someone who hesitates over a blow at all; and if he pushes too hard and strikes a nerve of self-consciousness at being outtalked by a street urchin, the worst that he’ll get will be a casual backhand and a split lip or a bloody nose. McGillis has had too many of both to much care about a new addition to his collection, and if it pays off in a warm place to stay or the heel end of a loaf of bread, it’s a risk he calculates well worth taking.

The problem is the rain. Snow is colder but it’s less invasive, too; it’s easier to build up a ring of a barrier as the stuff sticks to the ground, and if McGillis can tuck himself into a corner it’s unlikely to melt and seep through what tattered clothes he’s wearing at the moment. Sunshine is better, even on those hot days that stick McGillis’s unkempt yellow hair to the back of his neck with sweat and leave him dizzy under the weight of direct sunlight; people are happier in the sunlight, more willing to toss him a glinting coin or to offer him an apple or the edge of a sandwich in exchange for a few hours spent plying a fan for some fainting lady or overbred nobleman. But rain gets everywhere, it turns the shadowy corners of the city to mud and soaks through McGillis’s clothes to strip his body of what heat he is able to muster; and it leaves the streets empty of potential victims and employers alike, as everyone with the means to do so retreats into the warmth of the candlelit inns or the fortified walls of their own manors. McGillis is left to walk down the streets, hugging to awnings over storefronts when he can and trudging through puddles when he can’t, watching for opportunities he knows he won’t get while he waits for exhaustion to peak high enough that he’ll be able to sleep through the shivering cold bearing down on him.

That’s what he’s doing now, just as he does with every storm: walking down the street with his head ducked down and shoulders hunched in instinctive but ultimately futile resistance to the splash of the water trickling over the back of his neck and under the ill-fitting collar of his coat. There’s no one else on the street but him; the sun is sinking below the horizon already, and the shadows of falling night are enough to chase away what wanderers may have yet been willing to brave the storm. Even the thieves and pickpockets have retreated to what comfort they can find, perhaps spending a few stolen coins to buy entrance to the heavy press of bodies inside the overstuffed inns and the dangerous possibilities they offer to those of most violent tendencies; McGillis doesn’t fear those in any case. He has nothing to offer, as anyone who can so much as glance at him can see; the only interest he might provide is to those depraved individuals who crave nothing more than stealing another’s life for no purpose at all, and McGillis has a knife slipped in close against his skin to fight off any such. It’s a dull blade, to be sure, hardly a well-polished weapon; but it’s enough to provide enough resistance to those who might wish to lay hands to him for what little value his body and life may offer, and that’s enough to grant McGillis comfort in his safety, if nothing else. He has very, very little he can call his own, but that has just made him the more jealous of that life that is the only
hope he has of progressing to something else, of clawing his way into that casual comfort the adults around him take with such offhand ease. Someday, McGillis has decided: someday he will have everything, the power and the wealth and the steering of his own life, of his own future, to be managed by something stronger than the biting winds of winter that are currently slicing through the thin of his threadbare clothes, and he’s hardly about to let some malicious drunk in a dark alley steal his only means of continuing forward to see what else his life may leave in the reach of his ever-hungry grasp.

“Hey!”

McGillis’s head turns, his feet stop. There’s no one else on the street that voice could be calling to, no one else who could serve as the intended audience; but it still takes him a moment to believe it truly is meant for him, that the rusty weight of that shout is aimed in his direction. He’s invisible, nothing to nobody, so valueless he disappears from right in front of people’s eyes, that nobles and merchants look right through him as if he’s not even there; but there is someone looking at him now, there’s a pair of eyes fixed on him from within the gold-illuminated doorway to the kitchen of an inn. McGillis can’t see the speaker’s face well -- the bright from inside aches at his night-adjusted eyes and washes out the other’s face to obscurity -- but he can still tell the direction of their attention, even if there were any other options for the subject of that shout. Still, the idea of being of interest of any kind is foreign enough to hunch McGillis’s shoulders and set his mouth onto a frown of distrust even as he raises his voice to call back an answer of his own. “Are you speaking to me?”

The shadowy mouth cracks onto a grin, that rough voice drags over a laugh. “Indeed I am, young sir.” McGillis grimaces at the mockery of the words, feeling his shoulders tense with an urge to turn and keep walking rather than respond to such teasing; but the shape in the doorway moves to lean against the frame so the light falls over their face as they lift a hand to gesture McGillis in, and McGillis can’t help the way his attention draws towards the glow of warmth and comfort inside. “You’re unlikely to convince me you’re happier standing out there like a drowned rat.”

McGillis bares his teeth in distaste at this particular description, however apt it may be; but the other, the innkeeper, he assumes, is still standing with the door open, and McGillis has his pride but it’s not enough to keep him from taking this kind of unheard-of generosity. He turns, answering the summons of the other’s gesture with as much deliberate slowness as he can manage even as he draws near enough to smell the wafting scent of fresh bread and some kind of roasting meat from inside, the heavy weight of both enough to make his mouth water and his stomach twist on long-carried hunger.

“There you go,” the innkeeper says. McGillis can get a better look at him as he draws closer; there’s a crease at the other’s forehead, long years of stress written clearly into his expression, but his smile seems sincere, at least as much as McGillis can tell. He leans back against the door as McGillis approaches, settling himself into comfort against it as he considers the other’s appearance in the light from inside the inn. “Are you always so mistrustful, my lord?”

“Yes,” McGillis says without hesitating. He stops at the foot of the stairs without taking advantage of the opportunity offered by the open door; the innkeeper is too broad, he blocks half the doorway just from where he’s standing, and McGillis isn’t at all confident in his ability to slip back out even if he manages to lay hands to a loaf of piping hot bread or a nearly-done roast. His gaze slides into the inside of the inn, to the movement bustling in the kitchen over the innkeeper’s shoulder; but it’s only for a moment before he’s looking back up to frown at the man before him again. “What do you want?”

The innkeeper’s eyebrows raise. “You speak right to the point of it, don’t you?” he asks rhetorically. “I just saw you wandering through the wet and thought you might like a bite of supper and a warm place to sleep.” He lifts a hand to gesture inside. “We can as easily put up one small boy as everyone
McGillis doesn’t move. “And what is it you’d like from me in exchange?”

The innkeeper stares at him for a moment. “You are a suspicious one,” he says. “How old are you, to have such distrust of the world already?”

“I’m past twelve,” McGillis lies. He’s not certain of his precise age in any case, but he’s no older than eleven years at a stretch. Still, the difference between one year and the next always matters to adults, that he’s seen. “I’ve seen enough to know what is wise and what isn’t.”

The innkeeper snorts. “You look like a vagabond but you speak like a prince,” he observes. “Where did you pick up that fancy speech from?”


“Is it not enough to want to do a good deed in the midst of a storm like tonight?” the innkeeper asks. The question is meant to be rhetorical; McGillis just keeps staring at him to offer a silent answer in spite of that. He can see the crease at the other’s forehead deepen, can watch his smile start to give way at his lips; finally the man ducks his head and turns away to frown into the bright of the room behind him.

“I’ve made note of you,” he says to the warmth inside without looking back to McGillis. “You carry yourself with dignity more than most of your fellows and you have the face to go with it, under that dirt and those clothes. There are more than a few patrons who’d be the happier to pay an extra coin for a drink served by a promising young lad like yourself.”

McGillis lifts his chin in understanding. “It’s whoring you want me for.”

The innkeeper’s head whips back around, his eyes go wide with horror. “What?” he blurts. “No, nothing of the sort. You’re a child, and a boy, and…” He shakes his head, grimacing in apparently sincere distress at the very idea. “You’re a child.”

McGillis lifts a shoulder into a shrug. “Some places charge more for that.”

The innkeeper makes a sharp gesture with his hand as if to cut off McGillis’s words, as if to push aside the entire line of thought. “No,” he says again, lifting his hand to push through his hair as he shakes his head. “I don’t—we don’t run that kind of a business here.” His hand drops, his gaze comes back to settle on McGillis again; he looks pained as he considers the boy in front of him. “We could use an extra pair of hands on busy nights like this one, and we’ve got more than enough food and a warm corner or two in the kitchen even if all the rooms are full up.”

McGillis lifts his chin into understanding. He’s heard of this kind of arrangement of convenience happening to other children, those lucky enough or sweet-faced enough to pull someone’s attention; an extra plate of food and a corner to sleep in is far less of a toll on the pockets of ever-stingy innkeepers than the wages an older or more experienced server might ask for. Sometimes the children show back up on the streets a few days later, pockets heavy with the coins they’re stolen and wild-eyed with their own recklessness and good fortune; McGillis always counted those among the greatest fools, to throw aside the opportunity of lasting comfort for the sake of a briefly-tasted wealth too soon spent or stolen from the very hands of the thieves themselves. Far wiser to seize such a chance in both hands, to take the benefits of such a rare opportunity; even if it comes with unspecified demands on mind or body, McGillis has always thought that a fair price to pay for the advantage gained by association with a business rather than a damp street corner. He hasn’t ever truly expected to be called out for such a chance; but with the door to the inn open and the innkeeper
still standing watching him, albeit with somewhat more concern behind his eyes now, McGillis is the last person to turn his back on this.

He ducks his head forward, letting his nod carry his gaze down to the muddy ground and keeping it there as he picks his way forward. “Okay,” he says, speaking clearly as he steps under the awning around the inn that sheds rain from the tiles to spatter to puddles around the perimeter. When he lifts his head to meet the innkeeper’s gaze it’s with the best smile McGillis can muster, the full force of absolute appreciation while still staying just this side of grovelling. “I’d appreciate the opportunity. I won’t disappoint you.”

The discomfort in the innkeeper’s expression eases, some of the strain across his shoulders gives way. “No need to worry about that,” he says, reaching out to press a hand against McGillis’s shoulder to steady him as he comes up the steps to move towards the glow of the inn’s interior. “We’ll get you cleaned up and fed first thing, and then we’ll see what we can do with you.” His tone is paternal, his touch is gentle; McGillis wonders vaguely if the man has lost a child before, to be so welcoming to what amounts to a complete stranger. “You must have had a hard time of it. Don’t worry. I bet with a little soap and dinner in you you’ll turn out to be that little lord you act like.” He sounds satisfied, comfortable and pleased in himself for doing a good deed and offering such unasked-for generosity; there’s a tinge of self-congratulation on his tone, as if he thinks McGillis might really turn out to be some long-lost nobleman’s son who will bring rewards and riches to his modest inn.

McGillis doesn’t bother trying to correct him. In the worst case he’ll just end up back on the street again, no colder than he is now and hopefully with a fuller stomach and a better night’s sleep; and if he can lay hand to some kind of understanding with the innkeeper, or one of the maids, or even a patron, he could rise far beyond anything that’s been available to him before, and McGillis has never been shy about seizing opportunities presented to him.

The innkeeper is still talking, babbling about a warm bath and a cup of soup and a change of clothes; but when McGillis ducks his head, it’s more to hide the satisfied edge of his smile than in conscious agreement to the man’s suggestions.
McGillis does well at the inn.

There isn’t a catch to the innkeeper Conel’s offer, as it turns out. McGillis was ready for one, prepared to be set to work as a pickpocket, or a plaything, or sold to interested patrons no matter what the man said that first night; but Conel seems to be one of those rare honest people in the world, or at least reasonably kind in his treatment of McGillis himself, however much he may be prone to shortchanging customers of their payments and adding additional charges to the set cost of a room. It’s no worse than what McGillis hears and sees at the other places around town, as his cleaner face and better clothes grant him occasional access where he couldn’t go before; and it’s better than most, at least judging from how many returning customers the inn has. McGillis grows familiar with nearly a dozen faces, as the years pass and men and women come and go, until by the time he’s grown to a height with the man who beckoned him off the street he can place names to the patrons whose drinks he serves and earn himself an extra coin for his own keeping. He has a small handful of those tucked away in his pocket, now, kept on him out of childhood habit and the constant possibility of a quick retreat or a sudden change of fortune; it’s not enough to grant him any kind of independence as yet, but the innkeeper seems to view McGillis as something like a son, if a somewhat prettier one than the man’s own heavy jowls and stocky legs would be able to produce, and McGillis is willing to reap the benefits of that even if he still doesn’t entirely understand the man’s apparent affection for him.

For tonight, those benefits mean work. There’s some kind of a celebration going on throughout the city, a party extending through all the inns and even spilling out onto the streets in some of the more enthusiastic cases; McGillis doesn’t understand why the birth of a second heir to the throne should be such a cause for excitement, but then, he supposes it’s more for the excuse of the event than from any expectation that the newborn princess herself will gain anything from it. There’s certainly little thought of the royal family within the walls of Conel’s inn; as far as McGillis has seen, everyone’s attention is fully given over to the drink and dancing in which the event has allowed them to indulge. The room is roaring with sound, laughter and shouts and the high, piercing note of a flute laying down a rhythm for the stomping dance filling the larger part of the space; McGillis is left to hold a tray of drinks high over his head, maneuvering deliberately to keep from bumping into a patron or spilling one of the mugs of beer before delivering them to their owners to spill wherever they should choose.

He lands the mugs safely, in the end -- this isn’t the first time he’s taken on this task, and if there’s anything McGillis can pride himself on it’s the elegance of his motion -- and looks back over his shoulder to the bar to judge if there’s another round yet waiting. There’s not -- one of the serving girls is collecting the last before turning to brave the crowd before her -- but McGillis still begins the process of returning towards the bar, this time with significantly more ease now that he doesn’t have the burden of a full tray of drinks to steer. With the tray pressing to his side he can move with all the speed he picked up in his years on the streets, sliding between dancing couples and laughing friends through spaces that would be far too small for someone without his own lithe adolescence to guide them. McGillis ducks under an upraised arm, presses close against the edge of the wall to maneuver around a lady’s overlarge skirts, and he’s just approaching the bar counter again when there’s a voice from the din behind him, a tone too sharp and deliberately piercing for him to mistake it as directed to someone else.

“What do we have here?” The voice is high, pushed up past its natural range to a breathless falsetto; it would be enough to make McGillis flinch, if he were at all prone to showing his reactions so openly. As it is he just tips his head to look at the speaker: a woman leaning against the bar behind her, her position undoing what measure of composure her fine gown grants her. Her lips are stained
scarlet, her face painted to an illusion of more youth than she can lay claim do; McGillis estimates that she’s aiming for a few years older than his own early teens and is probably the far side of twenty, hardly old enough to merit the attempt at youth for any reason other than to adopt an innocence she lacks. Her smile is soft, her lips parted as if on sincere surprise, but her eyes are hungry as her gaze trails over McGillis before her, marking out the span of his body from shoulder to hip and down the length of his legs in the simple breeches Conel provides for him. “A young lord in disguise, perhaps?”

McGillis ducks his head in acknowledgment of the compliment. “I thank you,” he says, and then he’s tipping the rest of the way forward into a bow that is far more appropriate for the difference he is too keenly aware of between the lady’s status and his own. “I am afraid I must declare myself to be no more than I appear to your ladyship.”

“Well spoken,” the woman hums. “You certainly have the tongue of nobility to go with your looks.” The flirtation is perfectly clear to hear, even before McGillis straightens to meet the heavy-lashed consideration in the woman’s gaze on him. He meets her eyes without flinching; he knows exactly how far propriety extends, and where he can press against the hazier edges of it, and he counts himself a good enough judge of personality to know when some shading of impudence will be appreciated rather than offensive.

“You flatter me,” he says; the words sincere but his tone almost cold with distant calm. “Your favor does honor to a humble innkeeper’s boy.”

The woman’s lashes flutter, her chin comes up. The shift in her expression strips away the thin veneer of innocence from her gaze and grants it something harder, sharper, more obviously calculating than what went before. “You might return the same honor,” she tells him. “The ladies are in want of partners, it seems. Would it not be to the inn’s betterment to fill the needs of its guests?”

“Indeed it would be,” McGillis says levelly. “It’s unfortunate that my education did not cover the finer arts of dancing.”

“You didn’t pick that up when you learned your fancy speech?” the lady asks; but the question is rhetorical, as the sparkle in her eyes makes clear. “It’s hardly a burden to learn. You have grace enough, I warrant you would do honor to yourself with a bit of training.”

McGillis doesn’t so much as bat an eyelash at the barely-audible suggestion draping itself over that last word. “I would be grateful to you to teach me, should the demands of the inn allow it.”

The woman’s lips curl on a heated smile. “I think they shall,” she says; and then she’s turning over the counter, tipping far forward over the edge as she lifts a hand to draw Conel’s attention to her. There are a handful of men arrayed alongside her, too tired or too drunk to be pulled into the dancing in the main floor, but Conel turns to attend to the woman as soon as she tilts in to let the light spill down against the neckline of her dress. McGillis can see their lips move, although he’s too distant and the room too loud for him to pick out the details of their speech; but he knows the structure of what must be happening well enough that he’s stepping in to set his tray down and strip his apron over his head to fold away even before he sees the woman reach into the purse tied close against her waist. McGillis keeps his gaze on the glint of the coin, alert for the possibility of gold that might indicate a arrangement for a more private sort of dancing; but it’s silver that falls into Conel’s hand, and McGillis doesn’t rate even himself as that cheap a purchase. That means it’s just his time that’s being purchased, the span of an hour away from his ostensible work, and McGillis doesn’t need to see the uncertain look Conel gives him to step forward, stripped of the marks of his usual role to make himself someone suitable for the arm of the noblewoman turning back to fix him with self-satisfied possession in her eyes.
“My lady,” McGillis says, and dips into a bow suitable for the opening of a dance in imitation of the men he’s been watching out of the corner of his eye for the whole of the evening. It’s a close enough match for satisfaction, judging from the smile pulling at the corner of the noblewoman’s lips as he straightens and extends his hand palm-up in offering. “May I be granted the honor of your hand for this next dance?”

The woman’s gaze slides down over McGillis, measuring him so closely he rather suspects she has the knowledge to fit him for an entirely new set of clothing; but when she looks back up to his face she’s smiling again, and when she lifts her hand it’s to lay her fingers against his palm as gently as bird wings fluttering to brace against him.

“There’s a good boy,” she purrs at him. “By the time I’m done with you you’ll be dancing as if you were the one born in the palace.”

McGillis doesn’t care particularly about dancing any more than he really cares about the woman’s smile, or the dark of her eyes on him, or precisely what use she may fantasize making of him. But the mention of the palace is another layer of polish, another opportunity to smooth the remaining rough edges on the facade McGillis has spent the last years constructing, and if the coin weren’t enough to pull a smile to his lips that thought proves more than sufficient.
“Wow,” the girl presently in McGillis’s arms coos, fluttering her eyelashes up at him as her lips part over the weight of the sound in her throat. “You’re a really good dancer, did you know?”

McGillis huffs a laugh and lets himself flash a smile down at the girl. “I’ve heard,” he says, and lifts his arm to urge her into a turn that sends her twirling away from him for a moment. There’s a rush of skirts, a swirl of motion expansive enough to brush the legs of the more reasonably attired patrons around them; and then the girl is coming back somewhat more rapidly than she quite ought to to return herself to the offer of McGillis’s outstretched arm. McGillis replaces his hold on her, unhesitating and unhurried, and the girl lifts her arm at once to replace her hand where she’s kept it the whole of the evening, up a little higher on McGillis’s neck than is quite appropriate.

“You’re just so graceful,” the girl continues, casting her gaze up through her lashes at McGillis and letting her teeth fret the edge of her lip. “I don’t think I’ve ever danced with anyone as good as you.” They patter through a rhythm of featherlight steps, McGillis’s simple boots fitting easily against the girl’s silken slippers to bring them across the room in a rush of breathless motion. “I bet even the prince isn’t as good a dancer as you are.”

“I’m sure His Highness is skilled enough to put all the rest of us to shame,” McGillis says; but he’s not really paying attention to the flippant lilt of the conversation any more than he’s putting any thought to the shift of his feet as he steers the girl around the room. She’s not terrible, all things considered; she would be better if she kept her attention more on the dance and less on pressing herself as close against McGillis’s chest as she can get, but it’s hardly the first time he’s dealt with that. That’s become a regular part of his life since that first evening of training and a few hours of practice with one or another of the maidservants; McGillis has always been a quick learner when it comes to things like this, and the easy physicality of dancing requires very little effort from him at all, once he has the rhythm of it. It’s easy to fall into, simple to offer the support of his arm for an hour or three when there’s a highborn lady desirous of a turn around the inn floor; even Conel stopping complaining about shirked duties, when he realized that McGillis’s latest talent was drawing handfuls of young ladies to fill the interior of his inn with custom of their own as well as that of the rougher men who are willing to pay themselves into ale for the opportunity to linger over the sight of the pretty girls who come to take advantage of McGillis’s grace for an evening of their own pleasure.

It’s never been any more than dancing, and the occasional sliding hand or stolen kiss at the corner of McGillis’s lips; McGillis is fairly sure by this point that he has Conel to thank for that, in the end. He wonders, sometimes, why the other resists; there’s decent money to be made in the buying and selling of more physical pleasures, and the clientele McGillis is drawing surely doesn’t lack for money. Perhaps it’s potential repercussions the rough-voiced innkeeper fears, an angry father or suitor rattling at his door with a mob out for vengeance for despoiling a girl more than capable of choosing her own manner of corruption; or maybe he still holds to that morality he voiced McGillis’s first night, whatever unusual purity there is in him that makes him balk at the idea of collecting gold from the selling of someone else’s body. McGillis wouldn’t mind -- it’s just another job, another way to turn a profit to his savings that are steadily growing, courtesy of his silk-dressed admirers -- but he doesn’t bring it up to Conel, and Conel doesn’t ask, and so they keep on as they have been, McGillis setting aside serving tables to lead ladies instead and Conel reaping the majority of the benefits in either case. It’s a reasonable pattern, McGillis thinks, at least for now; and if he can feel himself straining against the limits it imposes on him, his funds and his pride aren’t yet so swollen that he is ready to turn his back on the closest thing to a home he’s had for the last several years.

“Truly,” the girl says now, her voice clear and overbright with an attempt at calm that goes so shrill
with nerves McGillis’s attention is drawn back around to her from the paths of memory he was
glancing through. He looks down at her but she’s not looking at him; her head is ducked forward, her
expression hidden entirely behind the heavy fall of her dark hair. He keeps his attention on her even
as they pull into a turn and he twists her out into another flare of brilliant skirts and flashing motion;
when she comes back in she glances up to catch him looking at her before ducking her head down
even farther. When she speaks again he can barely pick out the words at all from the dull hum of
conversation and music around them. “I dare say you’re a better teacher than our rusty old dance
instructor. He can hardly stand at all, much less show us the steps he claims to know.”

McGillis makes a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat. “He must be quite skilled, to teach
dancing while being unwilling to dance himself.”

The girl’s tension cracks onto a humorless laugh. “He’s dreadful.” When she lifts her head she’s
smiling, her eyes bright with amusement and strain at once; McGillis can see her expression soften as
she looks at him, as her gaze flickers away from the cool consideration in his eyes to the shape of his
mouth to linger overlong against the curve of it. “All stuffy and pompous and full of rules instead of
fun.” Her lashes flutter as she drags her attention back up to meet McGillis’s steady stare again; when
her mouth shifts it’s so she can bite against her lip in a put-upon show of interest. “I bet you’d be a lot
more fun.”

McGillis doesn’t look away any more than he so much as dips his head in acknowledgment of this
overt flirtation. “I’m hardly a trained tutor. The only things I can teach you are what I have picked up
myself.”

“That’s more than enough,” the girl tells him. “You’ve probably learned a lot of interesting things in
the life you’ve lived.” She sounds excited by the idea, as if living under the awning of a closed shop
and going hungry for long days is romantic in some way; it probably is, to someone who has never
wanted for necessities a day in her life. “I’d be much better off with you as a tutor than that old man.”
She lifts her head to toss the dark of her hair back from her face. “I’ll tell Father so, and then you can
come stay with us instead of here in this rundown inn.”

Conel’s inn is far from rundown, compared to some McGillis has seen, but he keeps any such
correction tied to silence on his tongue as he ducks his head in surrender. “My lady does me much
honor.”

“You do honor to yourself,” the girl says. Her hand against the back of McGillis’s neck slides to
stroke against his hair; McGillis is reminded unavoidably of a child stroking the fur of a beloved pet
cat. “You deserve better than this.” McGillis doesn’t say anything in answer to this, doesn’t so much
as shift at the motion of the girl’s hand, but some flicker of tension must come through in his eyes, or
perhaps the lady is able to read his silence with the weight it carries in truth; her hand stills, her steps
stutter. “You will come, won’t you? If Father says you may?”

McGillis meets the girl’s eyes. There’s something like concern behind her gaze, something almost
like fear at the petulant pout of her lips; if she didn’t carry so much of her spoiled upbringing in her
 carriage and attire she would look like one of the maids that used to flirt with McGillis, the girls far
closer to his own status who wield no more power than their own charm in their attempts to win his
attention. McGillis lingers in silence for a moment, appreciating that glimmer of tension, that
expression of something far closer to humanity than the puffed and polished artifice this girl wears as
carelessly as she wears the jewels at her ears; and then he ducks his head, letting his gaze slip down
to break apart whatever chill his stare might have carried on it.

“Of course,” he says, his acquiescence smooth and unhesitating. “I will be happy to take whatever
opportunities my lady sees fit to bestow upon me.”
From the way the girl flutters and titters at this, she takes it the way she was meant to; if there’s more honesty there than McGillis usually carries in the structure of his flirtations, well, there’s no need for her to see through his real motivations.
“Oh.” The voice is high, breathless, nearly inaudible for the range it’s jumped to in Margot’s throat; McGillis imagines he wouldn’t be able to hear it at all were he not as close as he is.

“McGillis, darling.”

McGillis doesn’t answer. He’s not truly intended to; for all the sound of his name pulling into a plea against Margot’s lips he knows what he’s meant to do in this moment as surely as if he’s following the steps of the same dance he spent the last hours tutoring the noblewoman through. He stays where he is instead, with his head ducked forward to kiss just against the line of the girl’s dress, where her neckline is skirting the very edges of decency even here within the walls of her own home. It’s a straightforward thing to keep her occupied, an imitation of the desire he knows he’s meant to be feeling after a few hours of pressing close together with the excuse of dancing to keep them there; and his imitation has always been persuasive enough to pass for reality except under the very harshest of scrutiny. McGillis would wager on his ability to fool some of the sharpest eyes in the kingdom; and Margot’s fluttering lashes and soft-parted lips are hardly among those.

“Ah,” she gasps now, her hand clinging to McGillis’s hair as she presses forward where she’s perched on his lap, her skirts falling so heavy around them both McGillis thinks it might be a miracle to find his way through them even were he trying. “Oh, this is so wrong, I ought not to be doing this!” There’s no real judgment in her tone; far headier is the excitement, the same thrill of wrongdoing that McGillis is sure drew her fingers into his hair and her lips pressing hard against his at the conclusion of their first lesson. He’s an indulgence in disobedience, the more exciting for how much he ought to be off-limits; and Margot is hardly the first girl to be taken with the idea of a noble tutor too infatuated with her beauty to know his proper place. McGillis never takes the first step over the line of propriety himself -- he’s not meant to, in the structure of the fantasy he plays to -- but he acts out the part of the lovestruck tutor whenever the girls press him to a wall, or a doorway, or into the shadows of a classroom or their bedroom, for those more forward than Margot. That’s what they’re expecting to see, after all, and expectations, as it turns out, are everything.

“We must stop,” McGillis says now, adopting a tone of some strained effort, as if forcing himself through words like bitter ash on his tone. “If someone were to find us like this--”

“I don’t care,” Margot declares, with enough drama in the words to suit the heroine of some tragic romance. Her arm slides tight around McGillis’s neck, her breasts crush to his chest; McGillis lets his hand slide up to catch against her shoulder to steady her, but she needs no encouragement to press herself as near against him as she can get. “We could run away and be together, I’d be happy to do anything if I could only be with you!”

McGillis refrains from asking exactly what her definition of anything entails. “No,” he sighs, sounding suitably distraught. “I could never do that to you or your family. I have already breached their trust this much.”

“It’s worth it,” Margot declares, secure in her status as her father’s only daughter rather more than McGillis is as the recently hired tutor who barely merits a room for himself in the mansion. “Everything we do we do for love, my darling, I’d do it all again!” She ducks in to press a lingering kiss against McGillis’s cheek; he lets her, as trapped to submission by her position over him in the household as by her actual physical presence pinning him to the chair. One kiss leads to another, leads to a tongue against his ear and the heat of exhales gusting against the back of his neck, leads to Margot rocking herself forward to press against McGillis beneath her, her hips marking out a rhythm of clear intent. McGillis submits to it, for a few minutes at least; it’s only once Margot is whimpering
against the side of his neck and fisting at his hair that he braces his hands at her waist to urge her back and away from him.

“My lady,” he says, his voice dipping into the appearance of strain enough to match the tremor running through his hands. “We should stop.”

“Why?” Margot whimpers at his shoulder. Her fingers are seeking for the buttons at the front of his vest, striving to push them loose in spite of the stiff resistance of the fabric. “Stay with me longer, McGillis.”

“My lady,” McGillis says; and then, after a suitable pause: “Margot,” as he lets his voice break on strain. It’s enough to pull Margot’s head away from his shoulder as her eyes open wide on surprise; McGillis keeps his head dipped down to look up from under his lashes at Margot over him as he adopts the appearance of breathlessness. “We must stop here.” He pauses, makes a show of taking a breath, and then lets his head drop so his gaze is indicating the front of his breeches, or where they would be visible were they not buried somewhere in the lace and satin of Margot’s skirts. “I...I do not know how much more restraint I have in me, if you continue like this.”

“Oh,” Margot says; and “Oh,” as she pushes away from McGillis with frantic haste. McGillis has to catch against her waist to keep her on her feet and prevent an outright fall as she scrambles off him; when he glances up at her her face is ducked down, her attention pinned determinedly to her skirts. “Of course. Yes. I should have thought.” Her cheeks are brilliant pink, her words the perfect show of a young girl flustered by an acknowledgment of sexual desire; it would be a fairly convincing show, McGillis thinks, if it weren’t for the way her gaze skims back to the front of his pants and the catch of her teeth at her lip as she tries and fails to bite back a self-satisfied smile.

McGillis clears his throat. “If you wish to stay…”

Margot twitches as if startled. “Ah,” she gasps. “N-no, no. I should--” She lifts her hand to wave vaguely towards the door before she tucks a curl of hair behind her ear. She takes a deep breath, visibly steadying herself, and McGillis lets his hold on her hips go even before she takes a step back to draw away from him. “We always have tomorrow, after all.”

McGillis offers her a smile as sincere as he can make it over the tension he’s holding behind his eyes. “Of course,” he says, and pushes to his feet so he can fold himself into a bow. “May your night be as pleasant as you have made my evening.”

Margot titters over a laugh. “Ah,” she says. “Yes. Of course.” Her hand touches against McGillis’s hair again, a brief, possessive contact; and then she clears her throat again and turns towards the door in such a rush McGillis can hear her skirts rustle. He holds his bow as she retreats; it’s only with the sound of the door opening that he lets his head raise fractionally to look after her. Margot is standing in the doorway, pushing at her hair to bring it back to a semblance of decency as she steps out into the hallway; but she hesitates in the entrance, as McGillis knew she would, before glancing back over her shoulder. Their eyes meet, Margot’s smile breaks free of her hold on it; and then she shifts her fingers in a restrained wave, and turns to step out into the hallway with her head held high on self-conscious satisfaction. McGillis watches her go, watches the door shut, waits for a moment; and then straightens at once, abandoning his soft gaze and shallow breathing as easily as he does his position. He pulls his vest back into place, realigning it over his shoulders as part of the same motion that smoothes the wrinkles from the silk shirt he’s wearing under it; it’s the work of a moment to refasten the top button at his collar and to press his hands to his hips to lay his pants flat to his thighs once more. He pushes his fingers through his hair, shaking his head back to press the golden locks back into place, and then he’s as cool and composed as he was when Margot arrived for her lesson this afternoon. He waits another minute, delaying his departure to be sure she won’t be returning; and
then he strides forward towards the door to make his retreat out into the hallways of the mansion.

There are few servants present. It’s late in the evening, long past the bustle of dinner and the general buzz that fills the halls during the daylit hours; there are few to take note of McGillis at all, and fewer still who care to speak to him. The others have rest, or drink, or romance on their minds; no one is willing to pause for even the outline of small talk, especially with one occupying the awkwardly lofty position of dance instructor. The maids think him pretentious, the serving men mistrust his looks; the family are the only ones who consistently consider him to be one of the serving class, and even there there are exceptions, as Margot aptly proves. It might be a strain, if McGillis were interested in friends or had any intention of lingering here overlong; but this is the third such position he’s occupied, and he has no more interest in ingratiating himself with this household than he did in the previous ones. This is a temporary position, a source of income and a way to build his own polish; and most importantly, it grants him access to resources he wouldn’t have otherwise.

The far wing of the mansion is deserted by the time McGillis arrives. Even the family rarely visit these rooms; they serve as a statement of their status more than something they truly make use of. It’s entertainment the noble-born favor more than education; and so the opportunities available to them go unused even when they have access right within the walls of their own home. McGillis can appreciate the irony of it, if nothing else; and he appreciates the freedom from any fluttering ladies or posturing lords hovering around him. The halls are quiet, the lights dim; and when McGillis lays claim to one of the candleholders set into an alcove just outside the doors he seeks, there is no one there to tell him to desist. He carries the light forward with him as he reaches out for the handle of the heavy wooden doors, imposing and well-polished and never used; and then he pulls the weight of it open, easing the oiled hinges until there’s space enough for him to slip through and let himself into the library.

It’s silent within the walls. The candles in here are rarely lit, except by direct order of the noble family; and they are all in their beds, or on the way there, helped along by the elaborate meal they enjoyed and the long, lingering baths their servants draw for them. There’s only one sconce in the whole space that has had any use in the last long months, and it’s to that that McGillis heads with his source of illumination. He draws back the cover, tips his candle in to catch the well-used wick of the lamp inside; and then lowers the cover again before blowing out the risk of the open flame in his hand and setting his candle aside on the table. The glow of the sconce fills the space around him with golden light, illuminating a corner well enough to read by while the rest of the room remains dim with the weight of night.

McGillis leaves it as it is, turning his back on door and light alike to step towards the racks of books and draw one free. It’s the same one he’s been working on for the last few days: a history, one of the summaries of past battles and monarchies written in such a flowery style it takes on something of the tenor of myth in spite of its claim to accuracy. But there is information in it all the same, underneath the layers of embellishment and equivocation; and it’s that that McGillis wants, that he craves with far more desire than what he pretends to have for the noble daughters whose interest buys him this access. He would happily spend all his days teaching spoiled flirts how to follow the steps of a dance, would grant them the seeming of attraction they seem to so crave from him; all he desires in payment he can find in the silent dark of these unused libraries. McGillis takes his book, cradling it with a reverence sincere enough to reveal his imitation of such with Margot as the charade it is; but there’s no one here to see him any more than there is to interrupt him. He has the library, and the night, and freedom, for a few hours at least; and that’s all he has ever needed.

With this kind of information at his fingertips, he doesn’t need to resign himself to passively waiting. With enough knowledge, he’ll be able to create his own opportunities.
The door to the carriage flies open before the horses have entirely stopped moving. McGillis was ready for the sudden halt -- he's been as pliant as he can be, out of self-preservation if nothing else -- but it’s still enough to throw him forward on the seat and leave him bruising his knees against the floor of the carriage. He grabs at the edge of the seat before him, trying to push himself upright and into motion out of the doors, but he’s not quick enough to override the hand that fists at the back of his collar to jerk him up and sideways.

“Get out of my sight” and there’s a shove, a force violent enough to send McGillis toppling out of the carriage entirely. McGillis has the presence of mind to go slack and keep himself from serious injury as he hits the carriage steps and tumbles to the dust of the street below, but the impact is still enough to blow all the air from his lungs and leave him staring stunned and wide-eyed up at the brilliance of the sky overhead. “Take your damned face and your fancy clothes and be grateful I left you with your life.” The carriage door slams shut; McGillis gets an elbow under himself and pushes upright enough to look up and meet the stormcloud expression of the red-faced man glaring at him from the interior of the vehicle. “If I ever see you anywhere near my daughter again you’ll find me far less benevolent.” He holds McGillis’s gaze for a moment, as if to underline the force of his threat; and then he jerks the curtain of the carriage window closed between them to break off the interaction.

The motion is the only warning McGillis has for the renewed motion of the vehicle; it’s only by pulling his legs in close against his chest that he gets his feet out of the way of the wheels and saves himself from a broken leg or a shattered foot. Either might heal, eventually, if treated by a skilled enough healer and with enough time to rest; but McGillis can’t afford the time to recover, not if he wants to keep himself off the streets where he began. The carriage doesn’t stop, either to ensure his well-being or to cement his hurt; it just rolls away, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake to bring the few people around coughing into their handkerchiefs and to burn at McGillis’s eyes. He squints into the haze of it, blinking hard to clear his vision of the dust; and then he pushes himself the rest of the way upright and gets to his feet, careful with the bruises he can feel forming at hip and elbow and shoulder. He’s stiff with the ache of it, his body protests his motion as he steps forward; but it’s hardly the first time McGillis has forced himself into action, and a few steps help to ease the first aching hurt from his body. His limbs loosen, the few sideways glances at him pull away as the excitement of the scene gives way to mundane concerns, and McGillis is left to make his way along the street and to somewhere he can pause to catch his breath and consider his next move.

It’s not the worst rejection he’s ever had. The girls who are so keen to secure his employment may be happy to fawn over his good looks and flutter their lashes into flirtation or somewhat more than flirtation, but their fathers are less than pleased by this kind of behavior, and the fact that McGillis is never the one to initiate such does him no good when it comes to defending himself. He is an outsider, and a man, and of far lower social class than the girls he is meant to teach; and that makes him the perpetrator, regardless of the actual facts of the matter. McGillis has become unfortunately used to this; his attempts at refusal only result in unmerited accusations with the same result, and dalliances are inevitably caught out as discretion gives way to desire. This position lasted him some months, thanks to a doting father’s blind eye when it came to his daughter’s falsehoods; that it should end more dramatically than the others is no more than a token of the same. McGillis has been all but expecting this; aside from the bruises and the shouting, he has made out well enough, with most of his wages and even his fine clothes still unharmed but for the dust coating them. With a bit of brushing those alone would be enough to buy him uncontested entrance to one of the finer inns in the city; from there he can see to getting himself another employer, whether via the dancing he relies on or the knowledge he is becoming increasing proficient with. Perhaps he’ll do better as a history teacher, where he can keep more physical distance between himself and the young women he’s meant to educate; but regardless, his first step will be to find himself lodging for the evening, and the
privacy of a room to clean the street dust from his clothes and take stock of the bruises across his body.

McGillis lifts his head from the street before him, his contemplation giving way to determination now that he’s decided what to do next. There’s an inn a little farther along this road; not one of the best in the city, but well enough that his appearance in his present garb won’t cause much of a stir. He can get a bath, and a meal, perhaps, before he heads back out for the evening, and it won’t cut too sharply into those savings he’s built up so far. He steps out into the street, his pace quickening as he thinks of the comfort awaiting him within the inn before him; and there’s a yell, a shout of “Get out of the way!” with an edge of near-panic on the words. McGillis’s head comes up, his attention swinging around on instinct to track the sound as his feet stall their movement in the road. There’s a rush of speed, a thunder of sound; McGillis barely has time to make sense of a horse bearing a rider, barely glimpses a flash of wide eyes and the rattle of long, ground-covering strides barrelling down on him. There’s only a heartbeat of time to react; but McGillis’s street-learned instincts serve him well enough to send him backwards, throwing his weight into his second fall of the day rather than keeping his balance and remaining upright to be run down by the horse and rider. Were he in his full health he would be able to dart backwards and keep his feet under him; it’s the lingering effect of the bruises from his first tumble that drag his motions to unusual clumsiness and send him falling hard against his hip as he tries to move out of the way. His ankle twists, a flash of pain jolts up his leg; but there’s no time to flinch, he’s too busy throwing himself aside from the force of those trampling hooves. The horse thunders past, accompanied by the incoherent shouts from the rider clinging to the reins set in its teeth; and then both horse and unlucky rider are skidding around the corner, and McGillis is left lying in a cloud of dust for the second time today, significantly more bruised and shaken than he was by his first interlude.

It takes him longer to get to his feet, this time. He’s breathing hard from adrenaline, for one thing; for all the angry shouting in the carriage, that was no more than McGillis was expecting to encounter, and it’s hardly the first time he’s dealt with as much. Getting almost trampled under the hooves of a runaway horse is something new, however, and following so hard on the heels of the first McGillis finds himself trembling until it’s all he can do to get himself out of the road and leaning against the side of the building behind him. More of a concern even than his present rush of adrenaline is his ankle: he didn’t think of it until the horse was well past him, but when he first tries to get to his feet the surge of pain that rushes up his leg is so much as to very nearly send him toppling right back to the dirt again. He has to hobble to get to the wall, and then he drops to sit without trying to even dust himself off; he can feel the throb of his ankle running up the whole of his body to short-circuit any thought of anything else. He knows he ought to get himself to an inn, and rapidly -- the swelling he can feel starting against the injured joint is only going to increase with time, and he’s already fast losing his ability to walk under his own power -- but he will make it nowhere at all until the fear for his life has ebbed a little, and so for the first few minutes McGillis contents himself to staying where he is, his head tipped back against the wall behind him as he consciously breathes through the panic that so seized him.

“I’m so sorry!”

McGillis doesn’t know the voice. It’s that of a stranger, cast into the lilting accent of the truly high-born, those well outside the range of even his vastly improved social circles; he would hardly think the words were directed at him at all, were they not so close. But they are, they’re shouted with clear intent behind them, and that’s enough to bring his head forward from where he’s leaning against the wall, and to bring his focus onto the speaker now stumbling towards him in breathless haste. It’s a young man, his cheeks flushed with exertion and his violet hair tousled around his face; his appearance, and the dust clinging to him, is wildly out of keeping with the richness of the clothes he’s wearing, from the gold embroidery outlining the purple of his jacket to the sheen of the breeches dyed to a similarly royal color. McGillis recognizes him from his clothes as much as his face, as the
rider who so nearly missed murdering him with his wild horse; and then the stranger stumbles in to drop to his knees alongside McGillis, and it’s as he raises his gaze to meet the other’s that McGillis is hit with a second jolt of recognition as he looks straight into the eyes of His Royal Highness Gaelio Bauduin, crown prince of the realm.

“I’m so sorry,” the prince says again, reaching out to clutch at McGillis’s shoulder as if to underscore the sincerity of his words with the force of his hold. His eyes are wide and bright, his lips are parted on the pant of his breathing; there’s nothing at all in his expression but sincere concern, as if he has any need at all to worry about who he inconveniences in what will someday be his own kingdom.

“Kimaris is a new horse. We’ve been trying to break him in for weeks but I didn’t think he’d lose his head as soon as we made it to the outskirts of the city. I hope he didn’t injure you?”

McGillis huffs an exhale verging against the edge of laughter as much disbelieving as anything else. “He knocked no more than the wind out of and the dust onto me, Your Highness.”

The prince breaks into a laugh of his own, the curve of it wide and unrestricted enough to crinkle at the corners of his eyes. “I am glad you moved quickly enough to get out of the way, I think he would have run right through you if not. I’m afraid he’s a bit too much for me. Are you badly injured?”

McGillis shakes his head in a refusal short enough to keep the lie of his set lips from being noticed. “I’m sure I’ll be fine with a bath and an hour’s rest.”

“Let me provide as much,” the prince says. “It’s the least I can do in repayment.” He pushes to his feet before looking down to beam at McGillis. “Where’s your preferred inn? I’ll pay for a night’s lodging for you to recover, or my men can take you back to your estate, if you’re from this vicinity.”

McGillis doesn’t so much as bat an eyelash at this massive overestimation of his rank. “I’m just a visitor,” he lies without a quiver in his voice. “I was intending to stay for a few days myself, I’m sure I can make my own way from here.”

“Certainly not,” the prince says, with all the casual self-assurance his rank grants him. “It was my horse who all but trampled you, it is my duty to look after subjects and visitors to my realm alike.”

A smirk tugs at the corner of McGillis’s mouth. “I believe it was the ground that did the damage, Your Highness, not the horse.”

The prince flashes a ready smile at McGillis. “In which case it is still my responsibility, as the ground is part of my realm as much as the rest.” He extends a hand to McGillis before him. “I insist.”

There’s not much McGillis can offer by way of protest to that. He lifts his hand instead, uncomfortably aware of the dust coating his skin as he presses his palm close against the prince’s, but the other doesn’t so much as flinch before he closes his hold tight around McGillis’s hand and pulls to urge the other to his feet. McGillis stands, letting himself be urged to upright by the grip against his wrist; and then his weight shifts over his ankle, and his vision flashes to white for a moment, the air rushes from his lungs, and he throws out a hand in a desperate attempt to catch himself from falling facefirst to the road again. His fingers close against the prince’s elegant coat, his grip rumpling the fabric as his pitch forward throws him very nearly into the other’s arms, and McGillis just has time for a rush of horror at his accidental rudeness before there’s a hand closing tight at his elbow, a grip steadying his balance even with the support of his ankle entirely absent.

“You are hurt!” The prince’s tone is sharper than it was before, with the edge McGillis feared to put there, but he’s not shoving away the other’s sudden weight against him or retreating from the desperate grab McGillis made at his coat; he’s holding McGillis up instead, his hand against the other’s arm so unshakeable McGillis thinks he might not be able to drag himself free even if he tried.
“You can’t stand, you need a physician.”

McGillis shakes his head and tries to free himself from the prince’s hold, at least insofar as he is able to uncurl his grip on the other’s jacket and pull back to take some of his weight over his own feet again. “It’s just a twisted ankle, I’ll be fine. It’s nothing worth you worrying yourself over.”

“It is,” the prince says, his voice breaking so high on insistence he would sound almost tearful, if there weren’t so much self-assurance under his tone. “Your injuries are a result of my actions, it is only proper that I see them well mended.”

“You Highness!” It’s another voice, this one from the end of the street; the prince turns his head in response as quickly as McGillis glances sideways, feeling his shoulders tense with the reflexive panic at the approach of guards he has never quite been able to shake, however fine his clothes may be. But there’s no anger on the faces of the men approaching, no alarm at seeing an entire stranger all but draped over their prince’s shoulder; they barely spare a glance for the clothes that grant McGillis the seeming of wealth before their focus is returning to the prince’s face instead. “Are you well? Did you fall?”

The prince shakes his head with the unthinking dominance of royalty, brushing aside the sincere fear in his guards’ expressions with a toss of his hair. “I’m fine,” he says with lofty certainty. “Unfortunately some harm has been done to this visitor to the kingdom.” McGillis can see the flicker of confusion over the guards’ faces in the moment before they process his presence as more than part of the background; even once they’re looking at him, it takes them a moment to notice the awkward angle of his leg as he holds his throbbing foot just shy of the ground rather than risking putting any pressure on it.

The prince’s head comes up fractionally higher; McGillis’s attention is drawn unavoidably up to track the motion as the sunlight sweeps out over the clean lines of the other’s face and lights up the fall of his hair to the same royal shade as his clothing. “I wish to see him cared for to undo some of the hurt that befell him as a result of my misjudgment. Bring us a pair of horse so we may return to the palace.”

McGillis tightens his grip on the prince’s shoulder. “Your Highness,” he murmurs, speaking in an undertone that is as polite as he can make it. It takes a moment for his words to make it through to the prince’s attention; when they do his chin comes down at once, his innocent-wide eyes come back into focus on McGillis’s face before him. McGillis ducks his head towards his foot and grimaces by way of explanation. “I am not certain I can manage a mount just at present.”

“Oh,” the prince says, his tone falling back to the casual ease he used with McGillis before. “Of course, yes, I should have thought.” He lifts his head to look back to the guards. “Just one will be sufficient. I’ll escort him back myself. If you continue on down this street you’ll find Kimaris back at his old stable; apparently that was where he was so bent on travelling. Bring him back to the palace and we’ll resume retraining him tomorrow.” There’s a murmur of assent from the guards and a shower of bows, but the prince isn’t waiting for those; he’s turning back to McGillis to flash another of those relaxed smiles at him. “I’ll see you well again before you continue on your way, my lord…?”

It takes McGillis a moment to realize the other is asking for the name of the role he has assumed McGillis bears; he ducks his head forward into a nod, hoping to cover his odd hesitation with the appearance of awe instead. “Fareed,” he says. “McGillis Fareed, Your Highness.”

The prince’s laugh is as warm as his smile. “No need to stand on ceremony,” he says. “I might have killed you, that makes us nearly friends, doesn’t it?” When McGillis glances up the prince is beaming at him with nothing but sincerity behind his expression. “Call me Gaelio, please.”
McGillis ducks his head into acquiescence. “Well,” he says. “Gaelio, then.”

It’s surprising how easily the name of royalty falls from his lips.
Audience

McGillis has never worn such a fine coat in his life.

It doesn’t entirely fit him. The shoulders are a little too narrow and the waist is a little too broad; it’s clearly a borrowed article, to anyone with an eye to such things. But the fit is near enough to pass a quick glance, and the princely cut fine enough to be clearly preferable to the dust-stained coat he arrived in; and the fabric itself is a rich, heavy thing, layered over with such weight that McGillis can almost feel the gold of its worth like it’s pressing close against his skin. He’s not easily awed, at this point in his life, and even now he’s sure his expression is as calm and composed as he could wish it; but he can feel his skin prickling as if with goosebumps, as if his whole body is trying to fit itself into the outline of these clothes and finding that it’s his street-rat heritage that doesn’t fit their perfect seams more than the other way around.

McGillis doesn’t linger over his appearance. There’s a part of him that would like to, that would appreciate the moment to relish in his present situation, so much higher than even his loftiest dreams have dared to fly; but there’s a servant standing by the doorway, hands folded and gaze distant but still present in that quiet, pervasive way that servants always are. McGillis has seen more than one noble forget those watching eyes, has seen the way the expectations of the upper class disregard any servant who has the intelligence to stand still for more than a few heartbeats of time; but his own history has made him constantly aware of his surroundings, to dodge trouble and seize opportunity alike, and he can no more forget the shadow waiting by the door than he can fly. His facade will remain intact so long as he has any kind of an audience; and so he turns away from the mirror before him with as much casual grace as he can muster with his aching foot, and when he moves it’s to lift a hand to gesture the man in towards him rather than bothering with trying to make it to the door himself.

“Thank you,” McGillis says as the man approaches, dropping the words with dismissive habit the way he’s learned from the nobles he’s worked for and the ladies he’s entertained, and when he reaches to take the support the man offers him it’s with the same assumption of aid, with as much offhand flourish as a lady reaching out with an empty wineglass without looking to see the pitcher waiting to refill her drink. McGillis braces his arm hard atop the man’s offered elbow, leaning against it until he can trust his balance, and when they move it’s nearly as if the servant at his side is reading the intention from his thoughts directly.

Even with support, it’s a difficult walk. McGillis’s twisted ankle has hardly stopped aching; if anything he thinks the pain has grown worse, in spite of the wrapping the physician pressed around the swelling and the bitter draught of liquid the man claimed would strip the worst of the pain from McGillis’s awareness. The only thing it seemed to effect was to twist McGillis’s stomach and curdle at his tongue; but then again, if it’s doing what it’s supposed to, he’s grateful to the bitterness for allowing him to retain some measure of coherency around the throb of hurt running up his spine in time with each beat of his heart. He doesn’t think he’d be capable of leaving the room at all were it much worse; and one does not simply refuse a royal invitation to dinner.

The dining hall isn’t far from the quarters McGillis was shown to. He’s glad for the shortness of the walk, if nothing else; he’s only paler than usual by the time they’re drawing up to the door, rather than overheated with the pain of his physical exertion. It’s enough for him to pause for a moment to catch his breath, to steady his shoulders and straighten his position, and when he ducks his head in permission the servant at his arm doesn’t hesitate in reaching to push the door open and leading McGillis through into the space within.
“Your Majesties,” the man says, in a clear, carrying tone sufficient to fill a far larger room than even the expansive dining hall they have just come into. “I present Lord McGillis Fareed, at your request.” The man draws the support of his arm away to drop into a bow to underscore his words; McGillis is left to steady his bad foot behind him as best he can and fold forward into a gesture of respect suitable for the position he is assumed to hold. It’s still shakier than he’d like, thanks to the uncertainty of his footing and the dull drumbeat of pain against the back of his thoughts, but there is no excuse for impoliteness under the circumstances, after all.

“I thank you for your graciousness,” McGillis says while he’s still tipped forward into the angled shoulders and ducked head the situation demands. “Your Majesties are as benevolent as the stories have made you to be. You do me much honor by your consideration.”

“Indeed.” The voice is low, rich and dragging rough over the depth of its range; McGillis doesn’t have to lift his head to know it as the king’s. There’s a power under that tone, the expectation of obedience so bred-in it stands for no resistance; McGillis’s spine prickles as if in self-consciousness of his true standing, his knees tremor as if thinking of dropping him to the floor where he ought to be, stripped of his false title and borrowed clothes. “We do not often have such unexpected guests join us with so little announcement. However, under the circumstances—”

There’s the sound of footsteps, the weight of boots thudding as they approach down the hallway; it’s enough to tip McGillis’s head in spite of himself, to straighten his shoulders enough that he can look back towards the door still held open behind him. There’s motion at the other side of the door, a blur of color and a scuff of shoes, and then: “McGillis!” in a voice as bright as the smile that goes along with it. McGillis straightens without thinking, his attention entirely captured by the beaming happiness on Gaelio’s face as he steps forward into the dining hall and reaches out to clap his hand hard at McGillis’s shoulder. “I went to meet you but the servants said you had left for dinner already. You should have waited, I would have been happy to take you down with me.”

There’s the sound of a throat clearing, the noise of it pointed enough to pull McGillis’s focus back up and away even as Gaelio goes on smiling at him. “Of course you’re met our son.” That’s the queen, this time, her eyes softer than those of her husband seated at the table alongside her and her voice warmer; she’s smiling as she looks at the prince at McGillis’s shoulder, her expression obviously affectionate even as her mouth twists on something a little bit like resignation.

“Yes,” the king intones, with significantly more weight on the word. “Who insisted on taking out his favorite horse and nearly trampled a man to death for his recklessness. We hope you’ve learned a lesson today, Gaelio?”

Gaelio ducks his head at McGillis’s side, his mouth twisting on something like a grimace that ends up rather undermined by the bright in his eyes. “I have, yes, father. But everything turned out alright in the end, after all!”

The king raises an eyebrow. “Your new friend may not be so casual about his injuries.”

“He’s fine!” Gaelio insists; and then, turning back towards McGillis next to him: “You are fine, aren’t you?”

McGillis hesitates for a moment, caught between the king’s expectant stare from where he’s seated at the end of the table and Gaelio’s bright eyes just alongside him; finally he clears his throat and lifts his head into the most politic smile he has. “A minor injury is well worth the unexpected pleasure of meeting the rulers of the realm so personally.”

“There,” the queen says. “You could stand to learn a thing about propriety from him, Gaelio.” Her words are chastising but her smile is warm, and Gaelio’s undampened cheer says he’s as aware of
that fact as McGillis. When the queen tips her head to consider McGillis again it’s with her chin very slightly raised, and when she speaks the maternal softness has been swept aside to be replaced with regal polish. “We are happy to welcome you to the kingdom, Lord Fareed. Please take as much time as you need to recover as our means of recompense for the harm our son’s thoughtlessness has caused.”

McGillis ducks forward into another bow. “I thank you again for your generosity, Your Majesty.” He’s careful in straightening over his bad foot, but even in his conscientiousness the tentative pressure he puts on his swollen ankle is enough to flare a rush of blinding hurt across his vision. It’s only in pressing his lips together that he keeps from crying out, and by the time he’s blinking himself back into clarity there’s a hand holding hard at his arm to serve as the answer for why he’s still upright.

“You really should sit down.” Gaelio’s voice is softer, now, without the tone of proclamation he had before; it’s also much closer than McGillis expected, enough to speak clearly to the identity of that support at his arm even before he’s lifted his head to meet a pair of worried blue eyes fixed on him. “Ought you to be walking at all?”

McGillis huffs a short laugh, the most sincere he can muster with his head throbbing with the hurt at his ankle and his whole body tense on his need to keep from trembling against the prince’s hold on him. “I could hardly refuse a royal summons.”

Gaelio rolls his eyes expressively. “It could have waited,” he says, with all the dismissive certainty of one who has never known anything but a lifetime of sovereignty. “Father just wanted to make a show of chastising me for the accident. He’s been going on about Kimaris being a danger for ages, you know.”

“Has he,” McGillis says, with only the faintest hint of dryness under his tone as the prince’s bracing hold at his arm turns him towards one of the chairs arrayed around the banquet table. “The animal seemed quite docile when I saw him.”

“He is,” Gaelio says, with distraction audible on his tone. “Even after town, he…” He trails off into silence; McGillis keeps his gaze on the table before him, even as he feels the force of Gaelio’s stare weighting against his face. “Are you teasing me?”

McGillis reaches out to catch at the arm of the chair before him to lean against the support so he can ease some of the burden he’s been placing on the prince. “Certainly not,” he says before casting his gaze sideways through his lashes at Gaelio staring at him. “I would never think to toy with the crown prince in such a fashion.”

It’s something worth remembering, to see the way surprise breaks across Gaelio’s face: his eyes open wide, his mouth comes open, the whole of his expression goes soft and slack. For a moment he looks no different than McGillis alongside him; for a moment he looks years younger, a child startled into delighted shock by an unexpected occurrence. “You are.” McGillis ducks his head again to half-hide his face, but there’s a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth, and the bright spill of Gaelio’s laugh a moment later does nothing to ease the tension of it. “I can’t believe it.” Gaelio lets his hold on McGillis’s arm go to grab around his shoulders instead and pull the other in close against him for a brief moment of affectionate pressure. “I knew you would be fun to have around, McGillis!”

It’s only McGillis’s hold on the arm of the chair that keeps him on his feet against the pull of the prince’s grip on his shoulders, but if he has to think about maintaining his balance, the satisfied smile at his lips needs no attention at all.
Dupe

The prince’s laughter is bright enough to fill the whole echoing space of the oversized corridor around them as he helps McGillis down the hallway towards the other’s quarters. “You’re joking, of course,” he says, with such certainty on the words McGillis doesn’t even try to argue with them. “What cause would a lord have to be in such inns in the first place? You must have had tutors of your own to teach you, surely.”

McGillis doesn’t have to try for the quirk of the smile at his lips. “I assure you, it’s the honest truth,” he says, with enough twist to the words that they’ll pass for the teasing they’re not. “I really did learn to dance in a common room inn.” He leans in closer to Gaelio next to him and pitches his voice softer, into the illusion of a whisper enough to draw the other’s attention tipping in towards him in reflexive fear of losing some part of McGillis’s speech. “I assure you, the maids at such are much more interesting to dance with than some stuffy tutor.”

The words are meant to make Gaelio laugh, and they succeed, coupling the volume of the other’s amusement with a flush across his cheeks that speaks more clearly to his almost-embarrassment on the subject than McGillis thinks he knows. Gaelio ducks his head forward, finally giving up the all-in focus he’s been turning on McGillis’s face since they left dinner to watch their footing instead; it’s a worthwhile subject, McGillis thinks, with both the prince’s balance and his own so utterly dependent on the set of the other’s feet.

“You’re certainly the most interesting person I’ve ever spoken to,” Gaelio says, without any trace of self-consciousness on his tone. It’s strange to hear the compliment delivered with such innocence, the more so when it’s stripped of the fluttering lashes and breathless tone the noblewomen McGillis usually interacts with would grant it. “Most people I am meant to befriend are too aware of my position, it’s as if I were trying to speak to a servant. But you don’t seem to think about my title at all.”

McGillis’s shoulders tense; he becomes keenly aware of the weight of his arm around Gaelio’s shoulders and the amount of force he’s resting upon the other to keep himself on his feet. “I apologize,” he says, hearing his voice going cool and distant even as he offers the words. “I have not had the honor of interacting directly with royalty before. If I have done you any disrespect, I assure you it was without intention, Your Highness.”

Gaelio hisses sharply past his teeth and shakes his head hard. “No, no!” His hold around McGillis’s waist tightens for a moment, as if to pull free the tension infusing the other’s posture by force. “Don’t do that, you mustn’t turn into one of those bowing nobles who never see anything but my position. I won’t have it.”

McGillis presses his lips together and fixes his gaze on the floor before him, keeping his head ducked forward and his expression deliberately neutral as he takes in the prince’s words. It’s hard to keep his thoughts clear; his injured foot feels distant, now, the pain too far-off to be of any trouble to him, but he’s paid for it with several glasses of wine, and his thoughts are fuzzy and warm no matter how he tries to straighten them. It’s hard to calculate how he ought to be behave, hard to balance propriety with the prince of the realm with the easy taunting that Gaelio’s wide eyes seem to draw past McGillis’s lips; the temptation to offer teasing to startle another laugh from the other is too much for McGillis to avoid, at least when he has the weight of wine filling his head with a warm, hazy sense of security. He considers his words carefully, turning them over in his mind as if feeling out the edges of them for unexpectedly rough corners; and then he huffs a silent breath of resignation, and gives up the attempt to restrain himself. “Will you order me to disrespect you, then?”
McGillis wonders what the guards trailing in their wake must think of Gaelio’s constant ripple of laughter. Is he always this lighthearted, is this some ease that comes with never going hungry, with never wondering where you will rest your head? Or is it something innate to Gaelio himself, some brightness of character that McGillis lost when he was too young to remember, or perhaps never had in the first place? McGillis doesn’t know; McGillis tries to avoid the curiosity to find out that flickers at the back of his mind.

“That would be counterproductive, I suppose,” Gaelio says. “Shall I ask nicely then, without the order behind it?”

McGillis lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “It would be worth a try,” he says, and lifts his hand to gesture towards the door they are approaching. “These are my quarters, Your Highness.”

Gaelio turns accordingly, obeying the motion of McGillis’s hand like it’s an order; McGillis is reminded briefly, unavoidably, of the shift of his dancing partners, of the easy grace with which they submit to his lead. It’s a fair comparison, on the surface of it; in the moment, in relation to the prince of the realm, it’s dangerous enough to knot something very like fear into his stomach. He presses his lips close together and blinks hard, trying to center himself on the present moment as distinct from the rush of intoxication glowing so warm in him, and when Gaelio comes to a halt McGillis draws free of the other’s support as gracefully as he can, limping forward to reach and catch himself against the handle of the door before him before he turns and ducks into the best bow he can manage under the circumstances.

“Thank you,” McGillis says, offering the words with as much sincerity as he can give them before he’s even begun to straighten from his bow. “Your generosity today has more than proven your royal blood to my eyes, Your Highness.”

Gaelio snorts inelegantly by way of answer to this, his mouth quirking up onto a smile as he steadies his footing anew without the burden of McGillis clinging to him to stay upright. “It’s the least I could do after nearly running you down,” he says, without any particular concern on the words. “I can’t have visiting lords going back injured with tales of my family’s cruelty, now can I?”

It’s a joke, even if it’s a weak one. McGillis is meant to laugh, he knows, he can see the structure of the suggestion under Gaelio’s words; but his intoxication twists, as it is sometimes wont to do, turning from warm contentment to a chilled edge in the space between two heartbeats and the next, as McGillis wonders how much his clothes are to thank for his present situation. Would the prince have been so concerned about the urchin McGillis used to be, or would that smile and those bright eyes have carried on down the street without even glancing at the hungry children that cower in the city’s shadows? It’s a more bitter thought than McGillis expected it to be; it dampens his laughter and strips even the easy lie from his expression, until it’s a struggle to muster so much as a smile. He does so -- he can hardly let the prince’s teasing go unanswered -- but the tension is too clear, McGillis can see it reflected back as Gaelio’s own smile fades, as his eyes widen. McGillis takes a breath, bracing himself at the door as he reaches for an excuse, for something to soften the blow of his unamused response, but:

“You’re in pain,” Gaelio says, speaking for McGillis without a flutter of self-consciousness at doing so in his voice. “I should have thought. You’ve been bearing with it the whole evening to keep me occupied and here I am forcing you to stand while I babble at you.” He steps in over the distance to McGillis before him and reaches out with that easy contact of one who has never known any true danger in his life; his hand at McGillis’s elbow is warm and steady, as if it’s carrying the same focus that Gaelio offers behind the bright of his eyes and the apologetic curve at his lips. “Please get some rest. Send word in the morning, the kitchen will send up breakfast to your quarters if you’re in too much pain to come down.”
McGillis’s smile eases a little; he can feel his expression warming with slow-growing sincerity. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Gaelio,” the prince says, shaking gently against McGillis’s arm. “Or will you force me to make an order of that too?”

McGillis huffs a laugh properly at that and ducks his head forward. “No, Gaelio.”

“Good.” Gaelio’s fingers tighten at his arm for a moment. “It is good to have someone here I can talk to,” he says, speaking softly enough that McGillis thinks even the guards won’t be able to catch the details of the words. “Thank you.” He lingers for a moment, staying close as if to punctuate his statement; and then he lets McGillis’s arm go and steps back out to the more reasonable distance he was at before.

“I’ll send the physician in the morning,” Gaelio announces in a more carrying tone. “Until then, may you sleep well and recover quickly!” McGillis ducks his head in assent and stays there until Gaelio has turned to begin moving away; it’s only once the prince and his pair of guards are well down the hall that McGillis turns back to the door, and only once he’s limping into the shadows inside that he lets his smile fade from his lips.

It’s dark inside, with only the glowing coals in the fireplace to cast any kind of illumination over the room, but McGillis doesn’t stir them alight and doesn’t reach for the bell to call a maid to do so either. He doesn’t need more than a little to see by, and the shadows make it easier for him to let his expression fall into the weight of consideration without fear of having that darkness glimpsed by someone it isn’t intended for. He shrugs out of his fine coat to drape it over the back of a chair, sits at the edge of the same to struggle free of his boots and breeches; and then makes for the bed without spending the time to search for more appropriate bedclothes than the shirt he is left in. His ankle is throbbing again, the aching heat of it a match for his heartbeat in his chest, but McGillis doesn’t think his rising headache can be blamed on his injury any more than he can pin it on the wine he drank. He climbs into the bed -- softer and wider than any he has slept in anywhere before -- and pulls the downy weight of the blankets up over him, but even with his head on the layers of thick pillows and the room deathly quiet compared to the servant’s quarters and thin-walled inns he’s slept in before, rest is a long, long time in coming. McGillis tells himself it’s the ache from his ankle, and the excitement of the day, and the heady rush of his sudden rise in position, that are keeping him so restless; and when the dreams come, he gives them the name of nightmares instead of the legitimacy they would be granted by the more accurate term of memories.
McGillis feels better in the morning.

That was almost a certainty. He’s had a long day, after all, between his falls and the abrupt upset of his social situation and the unexpected interactions with some of the most important people in the realm; after several glasses of wine all he can think to do is be grateful he didn’t cause more trouble than he did and fall into bed with the throb of his ankle to lull him into uneasy sleep. But the bad dreams give way at some point as the pain retreats to an ignorable level, and sometime after midnight McGillis slips into true sleep, deeper and far more restful than what came before. He sleeps without moving, or if he does he doesn’t recall it, and by the time the morning comes his good cheer has returned as if to take the space of the hurt of his foot that has faded almost out of noticing. It twinges when he gets out of bed, and the ache has resumed more sincerely by the time a servant arrives with a tray of food and a jacket that fits him far better than the borrowed coat he wore the night before; but it’s a dull, distant thing, without the blinding pain that came with the first day of damage, and more to the point it leaves McGillis able to pace around the confines of his quarters until he’s certain of his own footing. He eats standing up, more to test his balance and secure his comfort than for any other reason, and by the time there’s a rap at the door to announce the physician returning to examine him McGillis is finished with his meal and dressed carefully in the palace-fine clothes now provided for him.

The physician’s examination of his ankle is a quick thing, far more perfunctory than the considered attention he gave the day before with the prince in attendance. McGillis wonders at first if it’s a function of his audience, or rather the lack thereof, that has allowed the man to retreat to such brusqueness; but when the doctor straightens and nods there’s enough satisfaction in the gesture to cast his distance as professionalism rather than the disdain McGillis took it for.

“The hurt is not as bad as I feared,” the man declares as he pulls his coat back into alignment over his shoulders. “It will heal better if you can keep from putting too much pressure on it, but I expect there will be hardly any pain by the end of the week. Keep it wrapped and rest will do all that is needed.”

“May I walk on it?” McGillis asks as the man turns with every apparent intention of leaving with that as his final statement. The question gets him a wave of the hand and no more than a glance of the doctor looking back at him.

“Certainly.” The physician draws the door open and steps out into the hallway. “I daresay some light exercise will work through any stiffness and you’ll be the better for it. Mind that you rest if it begins to hurt too badly, though.” McGillis nods understanding and the doctor moves away to let the door swing shut behind him. McGillis is left in the quiet of his visitor’s quarters with no audience, and no attendants, and nothing at all to do with himself.

It feels strange to be so idle. McGillis has never made it to such rarified heights of society before; even in the lapses of supposed free time he eked out for himself in his various roles as tutor and serving boy and presumed seducer, he was always aiming towards some goal: information, or manipulation, or affection, depending on who he was with and what he was doing. But there is no one around him, nothing he can seek for; he can hardly aspire to be higher than here, within the walls of the royal palace, and even if he doesn’t belong here he has an open pass for at least as long as his injury and the prince’s good graces grant him. The experience is his to relish, his to revel in; and he has not the least idea what to do with himself, with nothing that needs doing pressing down on him.

He leaves his rooms, eventually. The quarters are large but beyond the plush weight of the bed and the rich carvings of the dresser and ornate mirror there’s not much to do; everything is polished and
tidy and spotlessly empty, as if waiting for the influx of possessions a true lord would bring with him on a visit to the royal palace. The thought makes McGillis uncomfortable, as if looking into empty drawers is a little too close a match for his own hollow facade; and he wants to move, in any case, he hardly wants to fritter away the possibilities of this opportunity on pacing over his rooms. He might be able to find a library if he goes looking for one, or perhaps even an art collection, in the high wings of the palace; and he’s supposed to exercise his ankle, in any case, by the physician’s vague orders. So he smooths his hair, and tugs his coat into order, and once he’s assured himself by aid of a gilded mirror that he is as lordly in seeming as he knows himself to be common in truth, he steps out into the hallway to begin a slow circuit of the castle.

It’s a large space. McGillis can guess at the number of servants employed here, from maids and footmen to cooks and stableboys, but even with so many to keep the halls spotless and the rooms in good keeping he sees almost none as he winds his way from one long corridor to the next. Perhaps they are tucking themselves into staircases of their own, the narrow, winding servants’ paths that McGillis knows exists from his more immediate use of the same in some of those noble mansions; perhaps it’s simply that the palace is so expansive that the odds of actually running into a servant are vanishingly small in the first place. Regardless of the cause the result is the same: McGillis is left what feels like utterly alone, wandering through endless, arching hallways while he tries to keep his mouth closed to hold his sense of awe inside the span of his own thoughts rather than leaving it clear on his face for anyone to see. Not that he has to worry about that; even his usual awareness of his surroundings gives no indication that he has any kind of an audience. He’s too honored a guest to require the escort of a guard, but apparently the palace servants have more important demands on their time than to take a visiting lord on a tour of the grounds. McGillis has no doubt he could obtain a guide if he were to ask for one, suspects he could even get himself a smile for the duration of a conversation were he to initiate some kind of interaction with any servant he happens to see; but he knows too well what it’s like to be on the other end of that interlude, and he has no interest at all in basking in attention he knows to be forced. Better to be left to his own devices, however lonely they may be; and in the meantime, he gains the benefit of wandering through the palace halls with enough freedom to grant him the illusion of truly belonging to these gilded spaces.

He thinks he’s imagining the music, at first. It’s a faint thing, so distant it seems to ebb and flow with each step he takes; the sound of his footsteps against the tiles underfoot is enough to all but drown it to silence, however softly he may tread. But he can pick out the high notes when he stands still, can almost piece together the rhythm of a melody around the empty spaces of music lost across the distance between the source and his ears; and he can follow the lilt of it, if he walks slowly and listens carefully. It’s something of a challenge -- the corridors are winding and the music isn’t bound by the same restrictions of motion that McGillis himself feels -- but it grows easier the nearer he draws, until he can take the last few turnings without hesitating. He proceeds forward with ease, even if his usual grace is somewhat inhibited by the ache of his injured foot; and when he finally approaches the door from which the music is spilling, he is so certain in its source that the idea of pausing over reaching to push it open never so much as crosses his mind. He steps forward without waiting, the satisfaction of victory bright in his thoughts as he grasps the handle; and then he draws the door open, and music spills out and into the hallway with his gesture.

The sound is coming from a piano set up at the far side of the room from where McGillis is. It’s an enormous thing, large enough to suit a room all but empty except for the instrument itself; McGillis has never seen anything of similar proportions, even in the most overblown of the mansions he has visited. The sound spilling from the open lid fills the whole of the room, ringing off the walls until McGillis feels a little like he’s stepped into the interior of an instrument itself for how clear the sound is; he can see, now, why he was able to hear it from so many corridors away. The instrument is enormous, the music spilling from it immersive; for the first moment those two facts are so much that McGillis has trouble even making sense of the musician drawing such resonant tones from the piano
itself. It’s a girl, young enough that her feet are hanging loose over the edge of the piano bench rather than anywhere close to reaching the pedals; but she’s playing with surprising skill in spite of that, as she leans far to the side to reach for some of those high trilling notes that carry so far through the palace. Her playing is hardly worthy of a concert in its own right, to be sure -- it’s bright and lively, more the kind of thing to dance to in a common room than the sort of overwrought elegance the nobility might listen to on their own -- but her intention in the action is admirable on its own. McGillis stands in the doorway for a moment, intrigued in spite of himself by the girl’s efforts to play an instrument so vastly overlarge for her; and then there’s a mistaken note, a sour sound obvious enough to even his untrained ear to draw a flinch from him, and the music cuts off abruptly as the girl’s shoulders lift in a physical representation of a similar grimace.

“Don’t you say anything, Gaelie,” she says in a bright tone that carries with the same edge those high notes did as her hands drop from the keys and she braces herself to turn towards the door. “I did much better yesterday when you didn’t interrupt--” and then she lifts her head, and she sees McGillis, and her words die to a sharp inhale of shock. “Oh.” She rocks back on the bench, flinching away from McGillis as her eyes go wide. “You’re not Gaelio.”

McGillis ducks his head in assent. “Indeed I am not,” he says before dropping forward to kneel into a bow lower than propriety requires but better suited to the apology he intends to offer. “I am sorry. I heard the music and wished to know its source.”

“Oh.” The little girl slides forward and off the piano bench to come forward; McGillis looks up but doesn’t get to his feet, to keep himself just below her eye level rather than towering over her. She regains self-possession as she approaches; by the time she’s standing in front of him she has all the formal bearing to give away her identity even if the shade of her hair and the wide bright of those eyes so like her brother’s didn’t do it for her. “You must be the visiting lord. Gaelie’s friend.”

McGillis coughs over a laugh. “I am indeed the visitor,” he says. “As to the friendship, I’ll have to leave that to His Highness to decide.”

The princess’s smile comes as easily as her brother’s. “Gaelie likes you very much,” she says, with all the unselfconsciousness of a little sister spilling her sibling’s secrets. “I don’t think he talked about anything else the whole of breakfast. I’ve been hoping to meet you, although he said I shouldn’t bother you.”

McGillis flickers a smile. “Well then,” he says, and he lifts a hand to offer it palm-up for the young princess. She lifts her own without hesitation, the motion elegant enough to speak to her familiarity with the gesture, and he ducks his head to skim his lips into the outline of a kiss against the back of her silk glove. “I am doubly glad for the chance to make your acquaintance, Your Highness.”

“Oh,” the princess sighs. “You really are just like a prince yourself, just like Gaelie said.” McGillis lets the princess’s hand go and lifts his head but stays kneeling; the princess draws her hand back but only to clasp before her as she beams attention at him. “What is your name?”

McGillis ducks his head. “Lord McGillis Fareed, your humble servant.” The lie tumbles from his lips easily now, granted confidence by repetition; he doesn’t even feel the flicker of familiar tension in his chest that usually accompanies an untruth, as if he is forcing reality to conform to his lies by the speaking of them. “It’s an honor to meet you, Princess.”

“McGillis!” The voice is distant, muffled by the weight of the door behind McGillis, but the tone is clear enough to carry its owner’s identity as surely as the name itself. McGillis glances back over his shoulder, his attention shifting as quickly as the princess’s does; from the hallway there’s the sound of boots as someone approaches with a hasty stride. “McGillis?” The door shifts, the weight of it comes open; and Gaelio steps into the room, his hair tumbled to disheveled curls around his head and
his eyes wide and bright with enthusiasm. He sees McGillis first, his attention centering close on the other before him, and when he steps into the room it’s with a smile spreading across his face to make the welcome of his outstretched hands the clearer.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he says as he claps a hand to McGillis’s shoulder and offers the other for McGillis to clasp. “What are you doing out here?”

McGillis accepts the offer and lets himself be pulled to his feet by the prince’s urging. “I thought to test my ankle with some walking,” he says. “When I heard music I followed it back here to find an unexpected artist at her work.”

Gaelio scoffs a laugh at this overt compliment. “It’s just Almiria’s piano practice,” he says as he glances at his sister with a dismissiveness only made possible by his own higher rank. “You’ll be stuck here all morning if you let her talk you into listening.”

“I didn’t talk him into anything,” Almiria protests. “He said he wanted to meet me, Gaelie, not that I was a trouble like you said!”

“Of course he did,” Gaelio says. “You’re a princess. He has to say that so you won’t have him exiled.”

Almiria huffs and crosses her arms. “I wish I could have you exiled.”

“Too bad for you I’m the heir,” Gaelio says with airy unconcern as he pulls at McGillis’s shoulders to urge the other towards the door. “Go back to your music, I’ll take over entertaining my guest myself.”

“Goodbye,” Almiria calls with something like tension on her voice. “Will I see you again, Lord Fareed?”

McGillis looks back over his shoulder to dip his head into a nod and flash a smile at the princess as Gaelio urges him out the doors. “I certainly hope you shall.” Almiria beams at him, her whole face lighting up with simple happiness before Gaelio draws them out into the hallway and lets the door swing shut behind them.


McGillis offers a smile in answer. “I had barely arrived, in fact. I hardly had a chance to hear her play at all. She’s quite good, isn’t she?”

Gaelio snorts. “You don’t need to butter me up by complimenting my sister,” he tells McGillis directly, and pulls to urge the other into forward motion down the hallway alongside him at a pace less than perfectly comfortable for McGillis’s aching ankle. “Yes, of course she’s good. She ought to be, she’s been studying since she was four.”

“She’s made great progress,” McGillis hums. “It’s only been a few years, then?”

Gaelio’s laugh is bright enough to fill the whole of the hallway; his rapidfire stride slows, as if to make space for the brilliance of his amusement. “A few,” he repeats. “She’s going on five years now. She’ll be nine at her next birthday.”

“Ah,” McGillis says. “My apologies, I took her for somewhat younger than she is.”

“That’s because she’s such a waif,” Gaelio says, with no indication on his tone now of the irritation that was so briefly there. “She’s still a child, extra years or no, and there’s not much fun to be had in
entertaining those, even royal ones.” He tightens his hold on McGillis’s shoulders and leans in close; when McGillis tips his head in answer Gaelio’s hair skims his own, from how near the other has drawn himself. “I’ve got something a lot more fun for you. The guards are about to start their archery practice out on the training grounds. If we hurry we won’t miss more than the first few, and they always save the most skilled archers for last.” In spite of his words Gaelio is still moving more slowly, apparently content to speak of the enjoyment to be had in his planned outing rather than rushing to actually obtain it; if anything his pace is slowing as he finds the flow of his words and begins sketching out the setting awaiting them. “I’ve asked some of the maids to bring us tea while we’re out there, we can linger the whole morning if you’d like.”

“I thank you for your consideration,” McGillis says. “Might there be a bench at the training grounds where I could rest for a few minutes?” He gestures towards his foot. “My ankle is doing well, but…”

“Oh,” Gaelio says, his eyes going wide with realization. “Oh, of course, yes!” He looks away from McGillis and out into the hallway; there’s a maid at the far end of it, just about to turn the corner, but his shout is enough to draw her back. “You there!” The maid turns to offer them both a curtsey, as much to McGillis as to Gaelio alongside him, and Gaelio draws them to a halt. “Have a blanket brought out to the training grounds at once for us to sit upon. We’ll be spending the morning watching the archery.”

The maid ducks her head. “Certainly, Your Highness.”

“There,” Gaelio says, sounding self-satisfied as the maid moves away to obey. “How’s that, then?” He’s smiling all over his face, his eyes as bright as the smile he turns on McGillis still caught under the weight of his arm. “How is your experience as a guest of the palace treating you so far?”

McGillis gives Gaelio a smile as warm if not as impossibly bright as the one being bestowed upon him. “It’s wonderful, of course,” he says. “I can hardly imagine leaving.”

McGillis thinks he can find plenty of value in entertaining royal children, heirs to the throne or otherwise.
Favored

McGillis doesn’t leave at the end of the week.

It’s not that he injures his foot again. In actual fact the sprain is all but gone by the third morning he wakes, and he doesn’t ask when he should leave, and every morning Gaelio tracks him down to declare some new delightful outing he has in mind as a means to entertain his guest. He never asks for McGillis’s input, whether he’d prefer dancing or reading or hunting; he just provides, in excess, entertainment upon entertainment until McGillis is all but drowning in the pleasures Gaelio is ready to heap upon him. It’s dizzying, too much too fast, a feast spread before a starving man; but McGillis isn’t about to refuse the opportunity to ensnare himself further into royal good graces, even if he ends no better than that starving beggar gorging himself to death on too much rich food. He’ll linger as long as he can, as long as he is welcome; and between the prince’s ready smile and the princess’s flushed happiness, McGillis suspects the span of that welcome to be lengthening on itself with every passing day.

“Are you certain you’re up for this?” Gaelio asks now, turning to walk backwards down the overwide corridor that will lead both himself and his presumed-noble guest to the courtyard where he assures McGillis he has an array of horses ready and waiting. “If your foot isn’t better all you have to do is say so. Even if we stay inside I’m sure we can dodge Almiria and find something more fun to do than sitting through another of her recitals.”

McGillis smiles and ducks his head in acknowledgement if not acceptance of this. “I would hardly say no to another chance to hear Her Highness play,” he says, with the strict edges of politeness crisp at the corners of his words; and then, with a glance through his lashes and a curl of his lips to buy himself more of Gaelio’s goodwill: “But my foot is entirely well enough for a bit of horseback riding, if that is your Majesty’s wish.”

Gaelio’s smile is as brilliant as the gold inlaid into the gilding at the walls. “Polite as ever,” he says. “Good thing I have plenty of excuses to show you a far better time than what you’ll find in the palace.” He turns on his heel, moving so gracefully he makes the action look like the fluid line of a dance as he darts forward to catch at the handle of the heavy door leading out to the courtyard.

“Come on then and I’ll show you what I have to offer instead!” The prince draws to the side, holding the door open for McGillis with a smile as bright on anticipation as if he’s offering the whole of paradise on the other side of the entrance, and McGillis smiles and ducks his head in surrender and steps through.

The door lets out onto a courtyard, one of many that encircle the palace. McGillis has had occasion to see the one that serves as a training space for the palace guards, and the one circled with trees just starting to give up their flowers for the first signs of unripe fruit forming at their branches; he’s even visited the rose garden arranged for the princess, with Almiria clinging to his hand as she points out her favorite plants among an array of pink blossoms that look the same to McGillis but for location. This is a new one, with a smooth array of paving stones marking out a circle as McGillis steps through the doorway; and in the middle of the space thus indicated there are three horses. Two of those are standing still, held to careful attention by a stableboy and a footman; the third is prancing at the edge of the space, kicking its feet in disregard of the peace otherwise filling the yard. It’s not the doing of the horse, or at least not the horse alone; McGillis suspects the animal’s excitement has at least as much to do with the stiffly proper position of the rider perched atop it, a young woman in an elegant riding dress and with her pale hair styled to careful precision around her face. Her chin is lifted, her nose is in the air; McGillis can all but see the nobility of her position clinging to her in
every line of her stiffly haughty demeanor even as the prince of the realm follows him out into the courtyard and drapes a casual arm around his shoulders.

“Unfortunately I’m afraid we can’t go anywhere on horseback without Carta butting in,” he says in a tone pitched loud enough to carry across the whole of the courtyard. The woman’s head tips, her gaze slices sideways, but she doesn’t dignify Gaelio’s comment with the respect of a complaint; she just heels her horse into a loop of the courtyard, guiding it with such sure grace that McGillis can hardly see her hands move on the reins.

“She’s something of a show-off too!” Gaelio shouts, not even pretending to aim the words at McGillis at his side; and then, as the woman’s head whips around to glare at him, he laughs and tips in to speak to McGillis directly. “Honestly Carta’s the best rider I’ve ever seen. She’d be more tolerable if she weren’t so determined to prove that to everyone she meets, but…”

McGillis laughs as the woman draws up to a halt in front of them in a clatter of hooves. “I’m sure I won’t be giving her any competition,” he says, and then turns smoothly from Gaelio to duck his head into the acknowledgment suitable from one noble to another. “Your display has already put my own meager skills to shame, my lady.”

Carta sniffs, lifting her head to toss a lock of dark-tipped hair back from her face. “A flatterer,” she says, sounding dismissive but with her eyes lingering on McGillis before her. “At least you’re not ashamed to admit when a woman has you bested.”

“He hasn’t even gotten on his horse yet,” Gaelio protests, speaking loud before McGillis can put words to any kind of a response. “It hardly counts as a competition when you’re on a horse and we’re just standing here.”

Carta tugs at the reins of her horse to draw it dancing back from the other two, looking as composed as she did in her approach. “Go ahead, then,” she says, ducking her chin in haughty allowance towards the other horses. “Do you think I’m trying to stop you?”

“I was simply waiting for an introduction,” McGillis says, speaking up before the crease of rising irritation at Gaelio’s forehead can coalesce into an actual snapped reply to Carta’s teasing. “It’s a bit more challenging to make someone’s acquaintance from horseback, I find.”

Carta sucks in a sharp breath of air, her cheeks flushing deep red at this minor bite; but at McGillis’s side Gaelio snorts a laugh, the sound clear to hear in the moment before he lifts a hand to press against his mouth as he struggles to shift the giveaway reaction into a cough instead. Carta’s gaze cuts from McGillis to Gaelio, her expression hardening from hurt to irritation as quickly as her attention shifts; and then she’s moving at once, rising in her stirrups and bracing a hand against the pommel of her saddle in expectation of dismounting.

“Very well,” she says, still in that elevated tone as if the motion is all her own idea. “If the prince himself refuses to stand on ceremony I suppose I can grace you with a few minutes of my time.” Her boots hit the pavement, she turns in a swirl of skirts and a toss of her hair, and when she strides forward it’s with aggressive confidence in her step, the kind of put-upon swagger that would draw knives were she in the kind of dark alleyways McGillis grew up in. But there are no touchy patrons here, no robbers ready to accept any suggestion of a fight, and when Carta steps up to McGillis and extends her hand with peremptory speed there’s no one to interrupt the assumption of her motion. “Nice to meet you.”

Gaelio heaves a sigh from over McGillis’s shoulder. “McGillis, this is Carta Issue.”

Carta’s chin tilts, her nostrils flare. “The Lady Carta Issue.”
“The Lady Carta Issue,” Gaelio repeats, with enough pedantic rhythm on the words to make a mockery of them in fact if not in meaning. “She fostered here at the palace when she was a girl, after her father’s death.”

“Only for a few years,” Carta says at once. “I’ve been in charge of my own estate ever since I reached my majority and could take charge of governing my own people.”

McGillis ducks his head into a nod. “I’m sure they are grateful to have such a competent guide,” he says without meeting Carta’s aggressive gaze. When he lifts his hand he keeps the motion low, almost deferential as he braces his fingertips against Carta’s palm to steady her hand for the not-quite touch of his lips to the soft leather of her riding glove. “As I am grateful to be given the opportunity to make your acquaintance.”

“This is McGillis,” Gaelio says, in far softer tones than the teasing lilt he used for Carta’s introduction. McGillis lets his touch at Carta’s hand go and straightens again to meet her gaze; both of the other two are looking at him, Carta with her eyes wide and her lips parted as of on words left unvoiced and Gaelio from alongside him, with a smile at his lips so warm it looks almost possessive as his blue eyes fix on McGillis next to him. “He’s a foreign lord visiting the country. He’s been staying here as my guest for the last few weeks, since I ran into him by accident in town.”

“More literally than otherwise,” McGillis says, in the same polite tone he used with Carta before he cuts his gaze sideways to catch Gaelio’s gaze. McGillis’s expression stays smooth, but Gaelio breaks into an outright laugh at this gentle teasing, all his composure giving way at once to unabashed amusement. McGillis can feel the corner of his mouth twitch with laughter of his own before he smooths it back to calm; when he looks back to Carta she’s frowning at Gaelio, her mouth drawn into a petulant pout at his evidence of some joke in which she’s not invited to share. McGillis clears his throat to draw her attention back to him, while Gaelio is still collecting himself back to calm; it’s only when Carta is watching him again that he lets his mouth curve onto a polite smile and ducks his head into another nod. “I am honored to be graced with your presence, my lady.”

Carta’s head lifts again, her lashes dip to shadow over her eyes. “Of course,” she says. “It’s only right that you would be grateful for the opportunity to meet one of the Issue family, Lord…”

“Fareed,” McGillis says easily, without so much as batting an eyelash.

“Lord Fareed,” Carta repeats back. There’s something almost uncertain on her tone, like she’s trying out the shape of the words, or maybe lingering over them as much as her gaze is clinging against the line of McGillis’s jacket and the fall of his hair; but it’s only for a moment, and then she’s turning on her heel to offer McGillis a view of her back instead of the color still staining her cheeks.

“Hurry up then,” Carta says, speaking loud so her voice will carry without her having to turn around from the elegant display she’s making as she remounts her horse. She ducks her head as she settles herself again, occupying her attention with smoothing her skirts even as she clears her throat to speak in a tone of pronouncement more than request. “If you boys aren’t interested in riding after all, I’ll go back and amuse myself without you.”

“Give us a minute,” Gaelio protests. “McGillis is injured, after all.” That’s patently false -- McGillis hasn’t so much as missed a step in days -- but he doesn’t give voice to a protest to this statement any more than he draws his arm free of Gaelio’s hold when the other catches at his elbow to support him. “Here, I’ll see you safely settled.”

McGillis falls into stride with Gaelio without complaint. It’s simple enough to submit to, in any case; and if the heir to the throne wants to lead him bodily to his horse before they head out for the afternoon, he won’t resist the support. Gaelio brings him to the pair of horses being held at the far
side of the courtyard, opposite from where Carta has resumed pacing her mount in long, sweeping
arcs around the perimeter, and when he reaches to tug against one of the stirrups it’s with his head
ducked down to half-hide his expression as he speaks in a tone low enough to be inaudible to anyone
other than McGillis and the stoic footman holding the horse steady for them.

“Carta’s always like that,” he murmurs, his tone so soft as to make the words nearly conspiratorial.
“She’s head of her own family now and determined to prove she doesn’t need a husband to help her
manage it.” Gaelio lifts his head and his hand at once as he reaches up to pat heavily at the shoulder
of the horse standing calmly before them; his lips are curving on a smile, but his gaze still flickers
sideways to consider McGillis next to him with something like concern. “Although she might make
an exception for you, I think.”

McGillis raises an eyebrow. “Really?” he says without looking back over his shoulder to where he
can hear Carta pacing her horse around the perimeter of the courtyard. “She doesn’t seem particularly
friendly towards me.”

Gaelio snorts a laugh and looks back to the weight of his hand against the horse in front of him.
“You don’t see her with other people,” he says, with a weight to the words that catches McGillis’s
attention to vivid focus. “She’s never as nice as she was just now.”

McGillis considers Gaelio for a moment: taking stock of the tension at his fingers and the set of his
mouth, even as he holds to the smile he adopted. The expression is clearly fixed, struggling for
purchase at the other’s face; McGillis wonders idly if it’s ever convinced anyone, if the people
around Gaelio really are so blind as to take this half-formed attempt at deception as persuasive truth.
Maybe it’s enough, for someone with a rank as high as Gaelio’s to keep people from mentioning his
obvious true feelings; maybe it’s just that they never bother to see anything more than the status
glittering in the shine of his clothes and the sleek curl of his hair. McGillis tilts his head for a moment,
gauging the set of the other’s eyes and the tension at his jaw; and then he reaches out to touch at the
edge of the saddle before him, to catch the very edge of the leather in his fingers as he looks at it
instead of at the prince.

“I wouldn’t worry,” he says, as softly as Gaelio spoke. “However much she may appreciate the
respect of a lord, a prince’s affection must by necessity carry far more weight.”

Gaelio’s head swings around, his eyes open wide. “What?” he asks, sounding so genuinely confused
that McGillis doesn’t need the aid of sight to see the sincerity of the shock painted clear across the
other’s face. He looks up and sideways, carefully, keeping his expression deliberately uncertain;
Gaelio is staring at him, his blue eyes wide and framed by the dark of his lashes. His mouth is soft,
now, the tension at his mouth stripped away entirely by surprise; as McGillis looks at him he huffs a
breath with shock audible at the back of his throat. “You think I...Carta?” He scoffs an exhale and
shakes his head hard. “It’s not like that.”

McGillis keeps his attention on Gaelio, keeps watching those blue eyes, that soft mouth for a flicker
of tension, for any indication of deception or equivocation. “No?”

Gaelio shakes his head hard. “No,” he says, and breaks into another laugh too sudden to be anything
but real. “No, not at all. There were talks of a betrothal when we were young, and again when Father
began looking for engagements for me a few years ago but...” He grimaces so hard McGillis almost
expects him to stick out his tongue to indicate his disgust at this idea. “It would be like marrying my
sister. My older sister. She’d do nothing but boss me around all day.”

McGillis lifts his chin. “I see,” he says. He turns his gaze back to his hand at the saddle; when he
slides his thumb against the pattern at the edge of the leather it’s with intention, the appearance of
uncertainty even as his heartbeat thursms steady, as his breathing keeps smooth. He lets the pause go
long, just enough to take on the seeming of uncertainty, the edge of uncomfortable shyness; and then, quickly, like he’s tumbling over the words that fit with perfect precision to his teeth: “She would have been lucky to stand alongside a man like you.”

It’s a simple statement; there’s nothing in it but flattery, no more than the meaningless compliment McGillis might offer to any one of those fluttering noblewomen he has tutored over the past years. But he delivers the words like a secret, like they’re something fragile and delicate; and he hears Gaelio’s breath catch, sees the flickers of Gaelio’s lashes as the other looks up at him. It’s a clear answer to the question McGillis is really asking, too obvious to be mistaken, and when McGillis glances up it’s already knowing what kind of softness he’s going to see in the prince’s face, what kind of surprised affection will be caught at the curve of his lower lip. They gaze at each other for a minute, Gaelio’s whole expression clear to read; and then, from the other side of the courtyard:

“Are you just going to go on standing there?” Carta calls, her voice lifting to the very edge of shrill frustration as the clatter of hoofbeats against the paving stones announces her approach. “I thought you said you wanted to go for a ride, Gaelio.”

“Ah,” Gaelio blurts, sounding as startled as if he had forgotten anyone else was there. He ducks his head and drops his hand from the side of the horse before him, flinching back like a child caught doing something he shouldn’t. “Yes. I’ll take the other horse, then, McGillis, if this one suits you.” He’s turning away before McGillis has even had a chance to duck his head in answer, much less to give any voice to a possible protest, and he’s mounting as quickly, moving with more haste than composure. McGillis is slower about his own action -- his experience with this is painfully limited, and he doesn’t care to risk the startled motion Gaelio’s horse makes in response to the other’s abrupt movement -- but it’s still hardly a minute before he and Gaelio are both mounted and taking the reins from the servants standing holding them with the long-suffering patience of palace staff. McGillis takes a moment to settle himself, to make certain of his seat and his grip at once before he tugs against the reins and presses his heel to the side of his horse to guide it into a careful turn.

“Finally,” Carta says, still with that edge of petulance clinging to her voice and her eyes still fixed on McGillis before her. “I could nearly have made it back home and returned before you were done gossiping, Gaelio.”

“I wasn’t gossiping,” Gaelio protests, in such a strangled tone that McGillis doesn’t bother turning to see the flush he can hear in the other’s voice. “I’m being a good host. Something you could serve to learn yourself.”

Carta huffs and tosses her head. “We’re not at my home,” she says, and urges her horse into a turn so she can take the lead towards the entrance to the courtyard. “If we were I would be able to put you to shame.” Her lashes dip, her gaze slides sideways; for a moment her attention draws over McGillis like a touch, her teeth catch against her lower lip in a gesture McGillis recognizes with perfect clarity. “You’ll have to make a visit to my estate before you leave the country, Lord Fareed. I’ll see to it you have an experience of true hospitality.”

McGillis ducks his head. “You’re too kind,” he says, his tone polite and warm with assumed appreciation.

“Good,” Carta says, sounding as self-satisfied as if McGillis’s words were overt agreement and not the meaningless compliment they were. “Let’s go, then.” And she kicks her horse into motion, tipping forward and in as her mount leaps forward into a sudden surge of action.

“Hey!” Gaelio shouts. “Wait for us!” And he’s moving as quickly, if with a somewhat more delayed reaction; McGillis is left to press his heels into the sides of his own horse, and rock his weight forward in his saddle, and let the example of the other two guide his own motion. His thoughts are
spinning, his mind full of possibilities that shift and reform with every patter of his horse’s hooves beneath him; and he lets them wash over him, surrendering to their flow as gracefully as he rides the rhythm of the trot his horse has fallen into.

He doesn’t know yet what use he’ll be able to make of this new information, but that’s okay, for now. He’s never been at a loss when it comes to making the most of an opportunity.
“Look over there,” Almiria says, gesturing with one hand while she reaches up for McGillis’s sleeve with the other. “Isn’t that a beautiful dress, Mackie?”

McGillis looks in the direction of the princess’s pointing finger. There are a dozen dresses in the window, all of them in various combinations of silk and satin and lace, but it’s abundantly clear which one Almiria is talking about, if only from the relative size of the child’s gown displayed in the corner of the polished window. “Ah,” he says, stepping forward obediently in answer to the tug of the fingers against his sleeve. “Yes, Your Highness, it’s lovely.”

“I want to try it on,” Almiria declares, and pulls harder at McGillis’s wrist before looking up to supplement the force of her urging with the full impact of her wide blue eyes. “Will you come with me, Mackie?”

“I don’t think I’d be welcome in a lady’s dressing room,” McGillis tells her. “I suspect the seamstress and her assistants are better able to give advice on fashion than my own uncultured tastes.”

Almiria’s mouth draws into what would be a sulky pout on anyone without the rank of royalty to grant her a kinder description. “You’re not uncultured,” she insists. “I don’t want to get a dress you don’t think is pretty on me.”

“Your Highness is lovely in everything,” McGillis says in his most convincing tone of sincerity. “It is my privilege just to linger in the artistry of your own taste.”

Even this isn’t quite enough to ease Almiria’s frown. “But Mackie--”

“Are you at this again?” That’s another voice, brighter than Almiria’s and more direct than McGillis’s; both of them turn as one to look back down the street, where Gaelio is approaching with a stride both rapid and unconcerned. He has an orange in one hand and is tossing it up and down to catch against his palm; his grin is brilliant with easy taunting. “You can’t hoard his attentions to yourself all day long, Almiria.”

Almiria hisses, sounding more than a little like an injured kitten. “I’m not hoarding him, Mackie likes spending time with me!”

“The princess is a most pleasant companion,” McGillis says politely. “It’s an honor to serve as her escort through the city.”

Gaelio snorts, sounding patently unconvinced. “I still think she can manage to try on a dress by herself,” he says, and waves his hand to shoo Almiria off. “Run along and fuss with your lace.”

Almiria lets go of McGillis’s sleeve, but the motion is clearly unwilling even before McGillis looks to see the way she’s frowning up at him. “You’ll still be here when I get out, won’t you?” she asks. “You won’t run off and hide somewhere with Gaelie?”

McGillis gives her his best smile, the polished one he’s practiced on the noblewomen he used to train, and ducks into a bow the deeper to account for the difference in their heights. “I won’t move from this spot,” he promises. “You’ll be able to see me the whole time you’re within.” It’s a simple promise to make, after all, and it gains him the favor of a beaming smile from the princess in place of the unhappy frown that went before.

“Very well,” she says, with the bred-in formality of the words a harsh contrast to the childish tone
she takes for them. “Wait right here for me!” And she turns to make her way to the door of the shop with a self-assurance that hesitates not at all in drawing the door open and stepping inside. She’s hardly alone, of course -- Gaelio ducks his head to gesture the handful of guards trailing their tiny party inside after her -- but she doesn’t seem to notice the silent strength of her entourage any more than McGillis has ever seen Gaelio bothered by their followers. It’s a strange thing to see, for someone who has learned to prize what moments of solitude he can claim for himself; it’s one of the few things McGillis finds he doesn’t envy Gaelio even fractionally.

Gaelio heaves a sigh as the last of the guards steps into the shop to follow Almiria, the arrayed span of them en masse more than enough to fill the otherwise-empty interior. McGillis’s attention shifts, drawn away from the glass-hazed image he can make out of the princess within and to the prince at his side, now just moving to lean his elbow hard against the edge of the fence so he can turn in and grin up at McGillis.

“I’m sorry you got caught playing babysitter,” he says. He still has the orange in his hand, is still tossing it up and down with idle intent, but his gaze is all on McGillis, his head angled up so the sunlight catches at the curl of his lashes to cast drifting shadows across the blue of his eyes. “If you were a little less nice to her you wouldn’t end up acting as nursemaid all day, you know.”

McGillis offers Gaelio a polite smile, something deliberate enough to tread the line between necessary agreement with the prince and polite interest in the princess. “I don’t mind,” he says, turning away from the focus of those eyes on him to gaze unseeing at the street. This is one of the better parts of town, where nobles do their shopping and royal children come for an experience with a few more trappings of what Gaelio calls rusticity than can be offered within the polished walls and expansive chambers of their home. McGillis came here once when he was a child; he made it two blocks past the border before a well-dressed guard caught him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him back to far more dingy alleys, all the while hissing threats that McGillis knew better than to take for empty words. He had escaped from that with no worse than a sprained wrist and a bloody nose; he had been luckier than some of the other children, in that. “It’s always a pleasure to accompany any part of the royal family, of course.”

Gaelio snorts. “Yes, you’re very polite, I know that already.” The orange flickers in McGillis’s periphery; his attention is drawn sideways in spite of himself, his focus pulled to the motion without his conscious intention. “I didn’t invite you to stay at the castle because of your graciousness, though. What do you really think?”

McGillis blinks to refocus himself on Gaelio’s face, on the tipped-down angle of the other’s chin and the shadow of his lashes weighting conspiratorial darkness over his eyes. He lets his forehead crease, lets his mouth dip towards the very beginning of uncertainty as he meets the other’s gaze. “I would never lie to--”

“You would” and Gaelio is straightening at once, unfolding from the fence to stand almost toe-to-toe with McGillis before him. The prince has the advantage of height, if only barely, but Gaelio wears his height as casually as he wears his fine clothes, and his gaze meets McGillis’s without any indication that he even notices the slight gap between their eyes. There’s a smile at his mouth -- McGillis has almost never seen Gaelio without it -- but his eyes are serious, now, hard enough with certainty that all McGillis’s instincts warn him to tread with care. “I know Almiria eats up all this polite nonsense as much as Carta does but it’s just words. You’re speaking through a mask, when you talk like this.” Gaelio tips in closer, just by the distance to rock himself in over his toes instead of his heels; McGillis isn’t even sure the other knows he’s doing it. “I want to know how you really feel.” Gaelio’s head tips, his lips curl onto a smile; he looks almost pleading, now, like a child begging for some favorite treat from a doting parent. “Please, McGillis. We’re friends, aren’t we?”
McGillis presses his lips together and takes a slow breath. “We are, Your Highness.” A pause, a dip of his lashes. “Gaelio.”

Gaelio’s expression softens, his smile goes warm. “There,” he says, sounding deeply satisfied over the word. “That’s the McGillis I know.” He leans back and away again, returning to his languid lean against the fence behind him as he resumes his idle tossing of the orange in his hand. “I thought I might have to drag you into an inn and pour wine down your throat to get you to be honest.”

McGillis’s smile breaks free from him in spite of himself, unintended and unstructured. “And break my promise to your sister?”

“Almiria’d forgive you anything,” Gaelio says, his gaze fixed on the orange as he bounces it against his palm. “She’s too besotted with you to think straight.”

“It’s flattering for you to say so,” McGillis says. “It’s quite a compliment to be the recipient of the princess’s favor.”

Gaelio’s laugh is warm enough to crinkle at the corners of his eyes; McGillis can see the dark of his lashes press together to a moment of shadow with the flash of the other’s amusement as Gaelio looks back to him. “You do encourage her.”

McGillis lifts a shoulder into a shrug. “It’s wisest to stay on the good side of royalty, don’t you think?”

“Of course.” Gaelio is still smiling at McGillis; it’s harder to keep watching the soft of his eyes than McGillis would have credited. “Polite with the princess and honest with the prince, as we demand of you.”

McGillis ducks his head in surrender to this point without giving up the easy curve of his lips. “Some are easier to please than others.”

Gaelio just laughs in answer to that, rather than laying claim to one or the other of McGillis’s references. He looks back to the steady arc of the fruit in his hand as he tosses it up and catches it, the rhythm taking on the pattern of rote now as it continues. They’re both silent for a moment, as if the conversation is over, before Gaelio takes another breath to speak.

“It is politeness,” he says without quite letting the phrase swing up into a question. His gaze is fixed on the orange in his hand, his attention apparently caught by the bright curve of the fruit; his attempt at feigning disinterest is as clear as the strain underlying his voice on the words. McGillis watches Gaelio’s throat work over the high collar of his shirt, watches his shoulders hunch to tension under his fabric. “You’re just flirting with Almiria to be nice, right?”

McGillis almost laughs. It’s the wrong response to have, the more so when Gaelio’s mouth is falling towards the flatline concern of a frown instead of his usual smile, but he can hardly fight it back. There’s something charming about the question as much as the strain that goes with it, something directly, unequivocally normal about this display of almost-envy from someone who has so much. For a moment McGillis sees: not the prince, not the heir to the throne of a country, but a young man no older than he and innocent with his years, still caught in the adolescent fear of rejection however fine his coat may be. It seems to soften the curl of Gaelio’s hair, seems to darken the shadows of his lashes, and McGillis’s lips curve onto a smile instead of that held-back laugh as something strange and warm presses against the inside of his chest as he looks at the dip of Gaelio’s worry-softened mouth.

“Gaelio” and McGillis is reaching out to touch his fingertips against the edge of Gaelio’s sleeve, to
skim the calluses of his palm over the silk of that richly dyed coat. Gaelio’s head turns at once, his put-upon attention to the orange in his hand collapsing as quickly as McGillis’s fingers brush his sleeve; the worry in his eyes is as soft as the pout of his lips. McGillis meets that uncertain gaze, feels his heartbeat fluttering in his chest, and when his smile expands it’s with more sincerity than he expected to be there.

“I don’t mind playing nursemaid to the princess.” That’s all he intended to say, just that polite equivocation with the comfort of a touch and the warmth of a smile; but his mouth is still moving, words are coming free from the cage of his chest and McGillis doesn’t close his lips to stifle them. “But I’m happiest in these moments with you.”

Gaelio’s eyes widen, his lips part on surprise. McGillis can sympathize; he hadn’t know he was going to say that, hadn’t intended to let those words pull free any more than he intended the resonance of sincerity they bore. Gaelio’s lashes dip, his attention slides down McGillis’s face to drop from his eyes to his mouth, to linger against the curve of his lips; and then there’s a thud, the sound soft but clear in the echoing silence of the moment, and they both look away at once to where the orange has missed Gaelio’s outstretched fingers and fallen to roll away across the dirt.

“Sorry,” McGillis says, speaking too quickly to allow himself to muster a structure for the words beyond the casual speech he’s used the whole of his life. He pulls his hand away from Gaelio’s sleeve and takes a step away from the fence so he can move out into the street in pursuit of the fallen fruit. “I’ll get it.”

“Don’t bother,” Gaelio says, waving his hand to sweep aside this action. McGillis looks back to the fence; Gaelio is turning away from the street already, tipping in to lean against the fenceposts with complete disregard for the dropped fruit. “I’ll just get another, it doesn’t matter.”

McGillis huffs a laugh and takes another step out into the street. “Surely it’s worth the trouble to pick it up, Your Highness.”

“Of course not,” Gaelio says, the words so unhesitating they stall McGillis where he stands and pull his attention back around to the other. Gaelio is lounging against the fence, the very picture of regal grace; he only glances at the fallen orange, and then it’s with a curl of dismissal at his lips. “It’s dirty now.”

McGillis rocks back, startled in spite of himself by this casual finality. “The peel might be, perhaps, but surely the fruit is fine.”

Gaelio grimaces and waves a hand. “I’ll buy myself another,” he says. His eyes widen, his expression brightens; when he looks to McGillis’s face his smile is immediate and warm with invitation. “And you too, if you want one. Do you?”

McGillis gaze at Gaelio for a moment. The prince’s face is open, his eyes are bright; he’s as thrilled by this idea of buying a gift for McGillis as a child might be at receiving one of their own. It’s charming, in its way, endearing as Gaelio so often is; and yet McGillis is still standing in the middle of the street, already halfway towards picking up the fruit that the prince has already swept aside as contaminated. It’s just an orange, it’s not as if it matters to either of them or to any one of the noble visitors who traverse this part of town; but McGillis’s wrist aches with remembered threats, and his stomach twists on the hunger he’s never been able to entirely shake, no matter how well-fed he may be now. He looks into Gaelio’s shining eyes, considers the other’s generous smile; and then he turns away, ducking his head so the prince won’t see the look on his face as he moves forward towards the orange.

“This one is fine,” he says as he bends down to catch the dropped fruit in his grip. The orange is a
little dusty from its fall, the peel faintly sticky against one side where the impact with the ground crushed some of the oil free; McGillis can smell it strong in the air as he straightens and catches the fruit between both hands. He keeps his head down as he turns to come back, his focus fixed on the dig of his fingernails into the peel as he pulls it open with force enough to offer up a mist of tangy sweet into the air before him. He’s drawn the fruit apart by the time he’s rejoining Gaelio at the edge of the fence and exposed the segments inside for the glow of the sunlight against the bright color; he keeps his gaze on the orange as he leans back against the support behind him and pulls to urge a segment free. The fruit is sweet when McGillis bites into it, the flavor of it bursting over his tongue as the segment gives way to juice; he eats it without noticing and without raising his gaze to meet Gaelio’s lingering stare.

It’s the prince who breaks the quiet, eventually, with a huffed laugh that frames itself more around confusion than anything else. “I didn’t know you liked oranges so much,” he says. “I’ll ask to have them with dinner next time.” McGillis works another segment of the orange free from its peel without answering; Gaelio tips in closer, near enough that McGillis can see the curl of his hair falling alongside his face. “Aren’t your hands dirty?”

McGillis lifts one shoulder in a shrug to dismiss this concern. “It’s good,” he says, biting off the words to some edge of curtness. Gaelio rocks back, his weight shifting as he moves away as if McGillis had pushed him, and McGillis glances up in spite of himself to see the other’s face. Gaelio is watching his hands and not his expression, his gaze holding to the movement of McGillis’s fingers rather than meeting the other’s gaze; there’s a crease at his forehead and a flicker of tension against his lips as he frowns at the movement of McGillis’s hands. He looks wounded and desperate at once, like a puppy trying to determine its sin after being kicked; there’s no judgment anywhere in his expression, no trace of malice behind his eyes. He just looks confused, lost and a little bit wanting; and McGillis can feel his chest tighten on sympathy in spite of himself even before Gaelio’s head comes up to answer the weight of McGillis’s stare. They look at each other for a moment in silence, Gaelio blinking at McGillis like he’s trying to read a book in a language he’s never studied; and then McGillis sighs an exhale and essays a smile, careful as the motion of his hand as he holds out the orange segment in his fingers.

“Here,” he says. “Try it for yourself.” Gaelio’s gaze drops at once, his eyes going wider as his frown evaporates; when he reaches to take the peace offering there’s no hesitation at all. He takes the fruit from McGillis’s outstretched hand and brings it to his mouth at once to bite into the segment; there’s a spray of juice, a sudden, sharp tang of orange in the air, and Gaelio offers a soft, incoherent sound as he draws the segment back from his mouth and lifts his other hand to shadow his lips. It’s clearly a note of pleasure, even if McGillis weren’t watching the flicker of appreciation pass over the other’s expression, and his own mouth is tugging on a smile as Gaelio lifts his face to beam delight into McGillis’s own.

“It is good,” he says, sounding as startled as if he truly doubted McGillis’s words. McGillis huffs a laugh as a grin breaks over his face, but Gaelio is already bringing the segment back to his mouth for another bite. His teeth catch at the fruit, the white of them bright in the warmth of the midday sun; the juice spills over his lips, a drip of it catches at the corner of his mouth. Gaelio hums delight around his mouthful of fruit and brings his hand up to cover his mouth in shade again; but McGillis keeps watching to see the motion of Gaelio’s tongue catch at the juice and swipe against the shine coating his lower lip. Gaelio glances back up at him, his eyes crinkling with pleasure as he beams up at McGillis, and McGillis blinks, and breathes, and smiles back.

He doesn’t have to reach for the expression at all.
The week after their ride together, Carta throws McGillis a ball.

That’s not the excuse of it, of course. It’s framed as a celebration for the lesser nobles in the surrounding estates, a gesture of generosity from the Issue family to host the enjoyment of the other houses. But McGillis receives an invitation all his own, sent by a messenger distinct from that sent to the royal family, and his suspicions are confirmed as much by the frown on Almiria’s face as by Gaelio’s laugh about who the real guest of honor is. McGillis accepts, of course — it would be unthinkable to refuse such a direct invitation, even if his position as a guest of the royal family might give him the clout to manage it — and the night of finds him disembarking from the carriage drawn up alongside the Issue estate with both the crown prince and princess waiting for him before they all three join the crush of nobility winding its way towards the sound of music and the hum of conversation spilling out from the ballroom before them.

“The Issue estates are the largest in the country,” Gaelio tells McGillis, leaning in close to be heard. He still has to nearly shout to make his voice carry; the sound of the crowd alone is deafening and the music is loud enough to be heard clearly over whatever attempts at small talk may be being made. “That’s why Carta’s so good with horses. With the miles of forests she was encouraged to ride as much as she wanted.” He lifts a hand to gesture towards the spill of satin and silk filling the room as they step through enormous doors thrown wide for the choking mass of humanity. “Big parties like this are just a side effect of the size of the estate.” McGillis ducks his head in a nod — any attempt at speech in response is clearly futile before it’s begun — and then a hand touches his elbow, a voice declares “Lord Fareed,” with enough force to carry even over the roar of the crowd, and when he turns in response he looks right into the upturned chin and fixed stare of Carta Issue.

“We’ve been awaiting your arrival,” Carta says. “You’re later than I thought you’d be.”

McGillis ducks his head in a nod. “The crowds delayed us somewhat,” he says, wondering vaguely if Carta can hear his response at all. “And we made a later departure of it than we intended.”

Carta sniffs. The noise of it is utterly lost, but the tilt of her chin and the dismissive cast of her lashes carries all the important details of the reaction clearly even in silence. “I should have known,” she says, giving Gaelio a look better suited to an innkeeper considering a muddy urchin off the street than nobility looking upon her prince. “Gaelio’s far too accustomed to taking advantage of his title to arrive late to every function to which he’s invited.” Carta shakes her head as if to dispense with the subject and lifts her other arm to loop through the angle of McGillis’s elbow without waiting for Gaelio to muster a response. “Come along, you’ll be dancing with me for the first of it.”

McGillis glances back at Gaelio, who rolls his eyes dramatically as soon as he has the other’s attention before ducking to take Almiria’s hand and leading her away to the quieter fringes of the hall. The corner of McGillis’s mouth twitches in an attempt at a smile, or maybe of outright laughter, but he lifts a hand to cover it and by the time he’s turning back to Carta he’s replaced amusement with an appropriately doting display of awe. He ducks his head in a nod of surrender as an easier response than trying to give voice to a reply, and when Carta tosses her head and pulls to urge him out onto the ballroom floor McGillis lets himself be led without complaint.

It’s harder work than he expected to dance in such a space. The room is enormous, it would be cavernous were it stripped of the crowd filling it, but with what must be hundreds of people within the air is stifling, the music deafening. Carta pulls McGillis to the middle of the room, elbowing past her own guests with little to no concern for their own motion, and when she turns to face him she seizes his hands with as much force as if she intends to take the lead rather than ceding it to him.
McGillis gives way to the demands of Carta’s hold, surrendering to the desires of the lady of the house more than fretting over his own, and when she brings them into step with the music he lets her steer him with only enough resistance to keep from outright running into the other couples around them. Carta’s not a bad dancer, all things considered; it would be easy to soothe her into true elegance with very little effort on McGillis’s part, were he looking to instruct her. But she’s not looking for instruction, as the set of her face and the rhythm of her steps makes clear, and so McGillis submits to being led around the floor as surely as if he were one of Carta’s horses with a bit between his teeth instead of a deliberately polite smile on his lips.

He escapes after a dance or two. Carta is the heir of the household, after all, which puts her in some demand as a partner, and McGillis is quick to lose himself in the crowd as soon as he is free. There are other women he can and does claim for a dance, and a smile, and a half-shouted flirtation; but his primary interest is in working his way to the fringes of the crowd while spending enough time dancing to avoid causing offense. He dances with blondes, and brunettes, and a girl with her scarlet hair curled to ringlets all across her expansive bosom; with girls willow-thin with their first adult height and matrons who eye him with more hunger than he suspects to be quite proper. It’s easy to muster a smile, and a bow, and to offer himself as the steady hand for an uncertain young girl or the pliant plaything of the more determined women around him; and finally he makes his way to the stairs leading up to the second floor balcony overhanging the ballroom, and he retreats with a show of shakiness in his movements and a flush at his cheeks that will serve as an excuse for his departure.

It’s quieter upstairs. There are tables set around the second level, with chairs comfortable enough to suit the supposed chaperones who are too busy getting themselves tipsy on the profusion of wine to look to their charges. There is food to be had as well, arrayed across elegant banquet tables that seem more designed to be admired than used; McGillis is just looking at one of these when there’s a touch at his shoulder, the contact casual enough to prove his company’s identity even before he turns his head to see the crown prince’s smile.

“Escaped from Carta’s clutches at last,” Gaelio observes, his tone light and amused enough to strip the words of any real bite they might carry alone. “I thought she’d keep her hold on you until you collapsed of exhaustion in the middle of the ballroom.”

McGillis’s mouth catches on tension to curl up sharply at the corner. “I’m not certain she’d let go even then,” he says, borrowing the easy curl of Gaelio’s tone for his own lips. Gaelio snorts a laugh that brightens the whole of his face with warmth and McGillis turns aside as he tries to restrain his own smile to a reasonable level. “Have you been hiding up here the whole time?”

“No entirely,” Gaelio says. “I danced a round or two before I made my excuses.”

McGillis’s gaze drags sideways in spite of himself as his eyebrow arches up into a skeptical curve. “How did you break free yourself?” he asks. “The Lady Issue notwithstanding, I’d think the heir to the throne would be in high demand among the noblewomen.”

“Oh I am,” Gaelio says, so easily it’s clear he takes this interest as more of an assumed right than the compliment to his title it is if nothing else. “That’s why I brought Almiria.” He turns away from the edge of the balcony to gesture back towards one of the tables against the far wall. When McGillis follows the direction of Gaelio’s gesture his attention is drawn to the vivid purple of royal silks, the shade a more saturated version of the striking hair the princess shares with her brother. Almiria is playing with the glass in front of her rather than looking at them, and McGillis only glances at her before he looks back to Gaelio beside him. The prince is smiling with the full flush of self-satisfaction over his features; when he tips his head to meet McGillis’s gaze the gesture is as much an invitation to share in his amusement as anything else. “I can’t leave the sweet princess to fend for herself, now can I?”
“Oh yes,” McGillis says without looking away from the color of Gaelio’s eyes fixed on him. “I can see you dote upon her.” His tone is sincere enough to pass for the honesty it’s not, but the dimple of Gaelio’s grin says the other heard the sarcasm McGillis can feel tightening in his throat. The amusement presses the corners of Gaelio’s eyes to tension and catches the sweep of his lashes against each other, and McGillis looks away before he can get caught in their shade.

“Your Highness,” he says instead, speaking clearly as he steps away from the balcony and towards where the princess is sitting. He times his approach precisely; he’s dropping into a bow just as Almiria is lifting her head to look at him, ducking out of eye contact even as she catches a breath of pleased surprise at his sudden appearance. “I’m lucky to have my retreat from the dance floor be met with such beauty.”

“Mackie!” Almiria slides off the edge of her chair without any concern for the sleek fall of the skirts so carefully arrayed around her; she has her arms around McGillis’s waist by the time he’s upright and is pressing her face against the smooth of his jacket without concern either for the clothing or for appearances. “I didn’t think you’d come to find us.”

“Of course,” McGillis says. He has a polite smile ready as soon as Almiria lets him go enough to step back and look up into his face; from the way her cheeks flush and her smile brightens, it’s persuasive enough to serve. “I couldn’t refuse our hostess’s request, but it’s always a pleasure to spend a quiet evening with Your Highnesses whenever I am given the chance.”

“You always have the chance,” Almiria says, but her forehead is creasing and her mouth is tensing on a frown in spite of this reassurance. “I suppose you would want to dance with the grown-up ladies, wouldn’t you?”

McGillis shakes his head. This, at least, is easy to deny, if not for the reasons Almiria will read into his words. “I cannot refuse them, of course, should they ask. But I’m glad to have the excuse to spend as much time as I may with you.”

“Really?” Almiria says. Her expression is easing into softness, her eyes are wide and bright as she looks up at McGillis; she might as well be begging to be comforted with whatever pleasant fiction McGillis might concoct. “Instead of dancing with the noblewomen?”

McGillis lifts a shoulder in a dismissive shrug. “Dancing is pleasant enough,” he allows. “These kind of crowded ballrooms aren’t the right kind of place to do it justice, though. There’s hardly room to move.” He ducks down and lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “And I can’t let the nobility see me sweat like a commoner.” This brings a laugh from Almiria, startled into brightness not unlike her brother’s, and McGillis is smiling as he straightens.

“We could do a better job of it up here in any case,” he says, considering the clear space between the mostly-empty tables and the corridor leading farther into the shadows of the mansion. “There’s space enough for real dancing up here, if you have the inclination.” He pauses for a moment, just long enough to make the thought seem unstructured, before he looks back to Almiria still standing before him. “Have you been taught to dance, Your Highness?”

Almiria’s breath catches on sharp, sudden surprise. “Me?” she says. Her cheeks start to flush to pink. “Of course I know how to dance. But—”

“Excellent,” McGillis says, speaking into the space while Almiria is still struggling to fit words to her obligatory protest. He ducks forward into a bow again, keeping this one more shallow so he can offer his hand to the girl. “May I request the honor of the princess’s hand for a turn, Your Highness?”
Almiria presses her lips tight together and ducks her head forward, flushing pink enough that McGillis has no expectation of refusal, even if it takes her a moment to lift her hand and accept his. He waits her out, holding to his smile and his open position alike, and when Almiria finally reaches out to accept his offer he’s expecting it well enough to close his hand around hers with easy grace.

“I’m not tall enough,” Almiria protests, the words weak as McGillis closes his hand around hers and reaches to hover his other fingers just over the elegantly tailored line of her ballgown. “We can’t properly dance together.”

“Proper dancing is overrated,” McGillis tells her. It is harder to match the steps when he’s tipped forward as he needs to be to let Almiria reach his shoulder, but the words taste of sincerity all the same. “I’m having more fun now than I have the whole of the evening.”

“People will stare.” Almiria’s head is down, the dark curls of her hair falling in front of her face, but the flush across her cheeks is still perfectly clear to see. “Someone like you shouldn’t be dancing with a child.”

“It’s my honor to be dancing with the princess,” McGillis tells her without missing a beat of the conversation or of the music. He lifts their clasped hands and touches just against Almiria’s waist; she takes the turn as indicated, more smoothly than many of the noblewomen McGillis has had occasion to dance with even tonight. She wasn’t lying about her training in this; McGillis can see the marks of well-learned grace in the unthinking ease with which she moves. “That’s all I care about and that’s all anyone else should too.” That pulls a smile onto Almiria’s face, even if she still won’t look up to meet McGillis’s gaze, and it stops the rest of her protests.

They finish out the rest of the song without speaking to interrupt the sound of the music much-softened by their distance from the musicians. By the time the last notes are giving way Almiria’s smile looks to be a permanent fixture on her face, even if her blush appears to be as certain, and when McGillis lifts his hand from her waist so he can sweep it behind him and duck into a bow she even manages to raise her chin to look up at him with eyes bright and clear with happiness.

“Thank you for the indulgence,” McGillis tells her, shifting his hold on her hand so he can draw her gloved fingers in the general direction of his mouth and duck his head into the seeming of a kiss even if it doesn’t land at the fabric. “Your kindness does me honor.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Almiria says, careful words of politeness made strange by the childish pitch of her voice. McGillis lifts his head to smile at her, and for a moment she smiles back in spite of the self-conscious flush she’s wearing all across her round cheeks.

“Alright,” comes a voice, the sound clear and carrying bright over the hum of the musicians below. McGillis straightens, glad in himself for the excuse to step out of the awkward hesitation between himself and the princess, and Gaelio steps in as quickly to close the distance between where he’s been leaning against the balcony and the other two. “It’s my turn to cut in.”

Almiria’s mouth turns down at the corners, her brows draw together to a stressed angle. “You can’t dance with Mackie, you’re both boys.”

“And you’re a little girl,” Gaelio says without turning to look at her. “If he can dance with you he can dance with me.” His tone is teasing as he throws the words over his shoulder at his sister but his eyes are dark when he meets McGillis’s gaze, his smile edged with strain enough to undo the casual seeming of his tone. He ducks his head into a desultory bow and extends his hand towards McGillis. “May I have this dance?”

McGillis doesn’t even try to hold back the twist at his lips as he lifts his hand to touch his fingers
against Gaelio’s palm. “Of course,” he says. Gaelio closes his hold on McGillis’s hand and steps closer; McGillis backs up without looking, following the guidance of the prince’s hold with entire trust. “Forgive me my clumsiness, I admit I’m unfamiliar with taking this role.”

“You’ll be fine,” Gaelio says, but he sounds distracted and looks more so as he turns his hand up to support McGillis’s palm against his and reaches out for the other’s waist. His hold is firmer than McGillis’s on Almiria, but McGillis doesn’t think the difference is by much. “You know what you’re doing to make dancing with Almiria look so good.” His hands settle into place, his shoulders dip with the force of an exhale, and Gaelio lifts his head to meet McGillis’s gaze again. He’s smiling still, the expression too warm to be feigned, but his eyes are dark and McGillis can feel the tension in the support of that hand against his. “Shall we?”

McGillis lifts his free hand from his side, careful in the motion as he imitates the gesture he’s only ever been the recipient of before. It’s strange to do it backwards, like trying to fit himself into the mirror of his thoughts, but with Gaelio’s hand at his waist the gesture feels more reasonable than otherwise as he lets his hand alight just against the gold-thread embroidery of the other’s coat. “Lead on, Your Highness.”

Gaelio does; or, rather, Gaelio tries. They do well enough for the first few steps: McGillis is paying close attention to what he’s doing, and Gaelio is moving slowly enough that they steady to McGillis’s comfort rather than urging for something faster. Their motion is awkward and uncertain, tentative as if it’s their first time attempting anything like formal dancing, but they’re hitting all the right steps, if with a stiff intent that makes McGillis feel a little like he’s a puppet going through the motions without really feeling them. Gaelio’s head is ducked down, his forehead creased on attention he shouldn’t need to pay to their feet; McGillis wonders distantly if he’s always this nervous or if it’s just the unfamiliar warmth of someone else in his arms that is doing this, if he’s the more self-conscious for the lack of a crowd or the shape of his partner. It’s certainly doing McGillis no favors; Gaelio is so tentative about his hold that McGillis is left to lead them both from the wrong position, inverting and committing to his motion rather than just following the guidance of the prince’s hold. He takes a step back but goes too far, his stride too much and Gaelio too slow to follow; when Gaelio tries to catch up he stumbles in too-fast and out of rhythm with the music, nearly toppling them both over at once.

“You’re terrible at this, Gaelie,” Almiria puts in. Gaelio’s awkward movements stutter to a halt and McGillis turns his head to look to where the princess has resumed her seat and is watching them with her head tipped to the side on what is clearly the weight of judgment. “You’re much better with your tutor. Did you have too much wine?”

“I’ve hardly had any at all,” Gaelio protests. His voice is skidding high and his cheeks are flushing dark when McGillis looks back at him; the prince isn’t looking in his direction, but the tension at his mouth says the absence is intentional rather than accidental. “It’s hard to lead, you don’t understand.”

“Mackie’s doing fine,” Almiria says, sounding as proud of this fact as if it’s her own doing rather than McGillis’s. “He was good at leading, too.”

Gaelio huffs a sharp exhale, frustration as clear in the sound as embarrassment is crimson across his cheeks. When he turns back to McGillis it’s with so much force to the motion that he might as well be slamming a door in Almiria’s face, and McGillis braces himself for the too-forceful lead that would naturally result from being in a temper. He’s ready to go pliant, to let Gaelio steer him and ease the other’s excess as best he can; he’s not expecting Gaelio to drop his hold outright to leave McGillis’s hand as unsupported as his waist.

“Here,” Gaelio says, and he reaches out to catch his hand against McGillis’s shoulder instead.
McGillis blinks at him, caught more off-balance by this than he wants to admit, but Gaelio isn’t waiting for an answer before he catches at McGillis’s hand at his shoulder and pulls it away to clasp their alternate hands instead. “Let’s try it this way.”

McGillis’s eyebrows jump in spite of himself; but Gaelio is already holding to the support of his hand, and well-trained reflex is guiding his feet forward and his hand towards Gaelio’s waist even as he hesitates over the motion. “Are you sure, Your Highness?”

Gaelio nods and tightens his hold on McGillis’s hand. “We can’t dance with me leading you, clearly,” he says, and then he lifts his gaze and his eyes are brilliant even before he flashes that brief, blinding smile. “I always liked the idea of following anyway.”

McGillis huffs an exhale that turns itself into a smile against his lips. “Well then,” he says, and he settles his hand against Gaelio’s waist and steadies his footing. “Shall we try this once more?” He tightens his hold on the prince’s hand, curling his fingers into place so he can urge back against the other’s palm, and Gaelio moves at once, as if the guidance of McGillis’s touch is steering him. There’s no hesitation, no fumbling uncertainty; he just moves, immediately, following the lead McGillis gives him without question. McGillis’s heart skips, his blood going warm with the flush of power, with the control he can feel radiating from his fingertips; but the music is in his ears, and his hold on Gaelio is steady, and when the next cue of the music comes he’s moving in anticipation of it to guide Gaelio back by another step, to steer him into a rhythm as smooth as if it’s the music guiding them both. Gaelio’s balance draws back, McGillis’s foot comes forward, and they’re moving in time, now, their bodies finding a pattern for their action as smoothly as anyone McGillis has ever danced with before.

“There,” Gaelio says. His hand in McGillis’s hold shifts; his thumb slides in against the other’s skin. It might be accidental. McGillis doesn’t think it is. “It’s much better like this.”

McGillis breathes out. His exhale winds into Gaelio’s hair. “Your grace compensates for my clumsiness.”

Gaelio’s snort is as entirely inelegant as the delighted amusement in the glance he casts towards McGillis. “You’re just better at leading,” he says. McGillis’s fingers press to Gaelio’s waist, his hand sliding in against the other’s back, and Gaelio moves in answer, his body curving to McGillis’s touch as if he’s following some unvoiced instinct. “If you could dance with Almiria you could dance with anybody, I think.”

McGillis’s mouth twitches on a smile but when he speaks he fights to level his voice to polite distance. “Your sister is a very accomplished dancer for her age.”

“Sure,” Gaelio says. They’re drawing closer and McGillis didn’t even realize; his whole hand is weighting at the dip of the prince’s back, now, their legs are nearly pressing together every time they take a step. Even their clasped hands have lowered from the strict propriety of a few inches of distance from their bodies; they’re between their shoulders, now, as if the catch of their fingers against each other is a secret they are caging between them. “It must be easier to dance with someone who’s a better match for you, though.”

McGillis lets the corner of his mouth catch onto a smile to dodge this question instead of giving voice to a potentially dangerous answer. He’s willing to run any number of risks in pursuit of a goal -- danger isn’t foreign to him any more than power is. But his heart is racing faster than he should, faster than the rhythm of the music spilling up around the elegant shape of the balcony supports, and for all that his feet are moving in graceful rhythm he’s not thinking about the act of dancing at all. He can hear the sound of Gaelio’s breathing dragging to unreasonable speed against his shoulder, can feel the tension in Gaelio’s fingers pressing against his hand; there’s anxiety in the other’s grip and damp
heat against his skin, sweat to speak to the fever in his blood as clearly as the color burning across his cheeks and spreading out to glow over the whole of his face. McGillis can see the dark of Gaelio’s lashes if he looks sideways, can see the stick of moisture clinging to the other’s barely-parted lips and sticking a few strands of hair against his forehead, and there is danger here, he can taste it on his tongue and smell it in the air and hear it in every ripple of music that splashes over them. Gaelio’s hand is shifting, his fingers at McGillis’s shoulder drawing up towards the other’s neck instead, his lashes raising to meet McGillis’s gaze; and then the music demands a step forward, and McGillis moves and Gaelio doesn’t. For a moment the surprise is enough to startle McGillis back to himself, to scatter away that strange, immersive focus on the details of Gaelio before him; and then he comes back to reality, returning so rapidly he’s catching his footing even as Gaelio stumbles at the impact and starts to fall.

“Your Highness,” McGillis blurts, the words spilling from him as his gentle hold on Gaelio turns into a clutch to keep the other on his feet. Gaelio’s hand at the back of his neck tightens sharply, dragging so hard McGillis is afraid for a moment he’s going to pull them both down at once, but then his boots catch at the floor, he manages to steady himself, and they’re both left breathless with adrenaline enough to pull apart all the brief elegance of their movement together.

“Mackie!” That’s Almiria, of course; she’s leaping off her chair and darting forward with speed enough to speak to her concern if not enough to really help in the moment that has just passed. “Are you hurt?”

McGillis shakes his head. “I’m fine,” he says, but he’s not really thinking about the question any more than he is noticing the bruise at his shin where Gaelio’s leg caught his own or the pain at his fingers from the prince’s sudden too-tight grip. He steadies his hold against Gaelio’s hand and pulls to urge the other back to his feet, this time at a somewhat safer distance from McGillis himself than what they had edged into. “Are you well, Your Highness? Are you injured?”

Gaelio ducks his head and huffs over a breath. “No,” he says, with more amusement under the sound than pain. He sets his feet carefully against the floor and lets his hold on McGillis’s shoulder go to push his hair back from his face instead. When he emerges from the shadow of his hand he’s grinning, his eyes bright as he meets McGillis’s gaze. “Thanks to you stopping me from pulling you down atop me, I think.”

McGillis cracks into a smile without thinking about it. “I can hardly be called a dancer at all if I can’t keep on my feet.” It’s only after he’s spoken that he realizes the words can cut in a way he didn’t intend -- a sign of his distraction in the moment -- but Gaelio laughs instead of leaping to insult.

“I suppose that makes me not much of a dancer myself,” he says. “At least I can claim the excuse of being a beginner to dancing with a lord.”

McGillis ducks his head into a nod. “You did splendidly,” he says, his voice bright with barely held-back amusement of his own. “A little practice and you’ll have men and women alike clamouring for your hand.”

“Indeed,” Gaelio says, his eyes sparkling with amusement enough to say he’s taking McGillis’s sincerity as teasing. “I shall be counting on you for that practice, McGillis.” His hold on McGillis’s hand tightens; McGillis can feel the warm pressure of it run all the way up to his shoulder.

McGillis doesn’t look down and away from Gaelio’s face until there’s a pull at his sleeve, an impulse urging his attention to follow even before the force is enough to drag his hand apart from the prince’s. He does look, then, blinking like he’s just coming back to himself, and finds Almiria to be the cause of the force, with her eyes pleading and her voice ringing with a plaintive chord all out of keeping with the demand she is exerting on his sleeve.
“It’s my turn next,” Almiria says, her voice quivering on insistence as her lower lip curves into a pout. “It’s not fair for you to keep Mackie all to yourself, Gaelie.”

“I’m the heir to the throne,” Gaelio informs her in an excessively haughty tone. “I can do whatever I like, fair or not.” Almiria looks away from McGillis’s face to her brother’s, her forehead creasing on hurt, and Gaelio sighs theatrically and turns away. “Fine, do as you like. I need to catch my breath anyway.”

“Worn out already?” McGillis asks. “I’d hoped for a bit more stamina than that.”

Gaelio’s head swings around, his attention veering to McGillis at once. McGillis meets the other’s gaze levelly, staring straight into those brilliant eyes without flinching away from the taste of flirtation warm on his tongue, and in the end it’s Gaelio who breaks first, who colors pink and breaks into a smile to answer.

“I’ll be sure to practice,” he promises, and steps back towards the support of the balcony behind him to lean against the railing once more. “Will that suit you, sir?”

McGillis doesn’t answer aloud, but he thinks his smile speaks for him even more clearly than the dip of the head he gives before he turns aside to occupy himself with charming the princess back into good humor once more. He doesn’t deliberately look back to Gaelio -- to Almiria’s eyes, he’s perfectly devoted -- but he can feel the other’s gaze lingering on him like a touch, and if his smile tastes like wine on his tongue, he knows who to blame for his intoxication.
Indulgence

McGillis should leave. He knows he should. He can feel the weight of his deception growing with every passing day as the shape of his lie takes on texture and form with every smile from the princess, with every laugh from the prince. He is a guest in the palace on credentials not his own, with the assumption of an existence he lacks possession of; and even if friendship will cover any minor slips on his part, the longer he lingers the more likely his absence of responsibilities will become clear, the greater Gaelio’s curiosity about “Lord Fareed’s” estates will rise. McGillis should take his good luck and depart, should vanish back out into the world that he used to live in with the polish and memories of the palace to keep him company; or he should commit to the lie, should dig himself so far into Almiria’s good graces that he can keep himself as a periphery of the royal family even in the event his true history comes out. Almiria is more likely of the two to be forgiving, more likely to let childish innocence sway her in his direction when the truth inevitably comes clear; and yet McGillis smiles when she smiles, and humors her highbred whims, and takes every opportunity to duck away and into Gaelio’s presence instead. That is a danger all its own, one that offers him none of the possible safety that the princess can provide; and yet McGillis keeps reaching for it, acting on some unconscious desire as keen and deep-rooted as hunger. He can’t make himself let go, can’t persuade himself to back away; and so he starts every morning telling himself this will be the last, that he will mention his struggling estates today and be gone by the evening, and every night Gaelio smiles a good night to him and McGillis shuts his bedroom door with the resignation to his failure as bitter as the bite of wine on the back of his tongue.

There’s an impact against his forehead, the force of a blow without any of the pain an intent to harm would bring. McGillis lifts his head at once, startled out of his thoughts and into the present moment by the contact, to see Gaelio still leaning over the table, his lips still curving on a grin and his hand still outstretched from the flick he’s just delivered to McGillis’s head.

“Hello in there,” he says, his voice light with teasing. “Lord Fareed? Are you still with us?”

McGillis blinks hard and tries to bring himself back into the moment as Gaelio brings his arm back to the table so he can lean against both elbows instead of just one. There’s a chair behind him that he could recline into but he stays where he is, canted far across the table and with a smile pulling against his lips that looks as irrepressible as ever.

“Your Highness,” McGillis says. He shakes his head and lifts a hand from the book before him to push through his hair, buying himself a moment of shadow for his face as he huffs a laugh that he hopes sounds more sheepish than panicked. “My apologies, I lost track of time for a moment there.”

“Clearly,” Gaelio says without so much as a flicker in his smile; if anything it goes wider to spread across the whole of his face. “You haven’t turned a page in almost five minutes. You didn’t even answer me the first two times I tried to get your attention.”

McGillis offers an apologetic smile. “I am sorry, Your Highness. I would never have deliberately ignored you.”

“How many times must I tell you to not call me that?” Gaelio asks, with a smile wide enough to make his lack of sincerity in the words clear even as he reaches out to push against McGillis’s forehead again.

McGillis submits to the force without offering any more resistance than that effected by a smile.
“Gaelio.”

“Much better.” Gaelio subsides to the other side of the table, dropping to sit at least at the edge of his seat instead of leaning in over the distance between them, but his shoulders are still tipped forward, and his gaze is still lingering on McGillis’s face even as the edge of teasing in his smile gives way to the soft of contentment. “Penny for your thoughts, then. What had you so distracted?”

“Are my thoughts worth so little to you?” McGillis asks, but with a smile to go with the same so Gaelio just grins in answer rather than protesting. He lets his head duck forward, returning his gaze if not his thoughts to the text before him as he frames the structure of his response in his head. It would be easy enough to lie, to smile and laugh and give some insincere response; but McGillis is finding it harder and harder to lie to Gaelio’s face, as if he’s betraying some of that sky-bright in the gaze that lingers on his with such dedication. It’s all another reason to leave, to distance himself from the palace and those within it as soon as he can; and it’s with that thought in his head that he takes a breath and offers truth carefully structured into a different seeming. “I was reflecting on my welcome here.”

Gaelio’s laugh is as warm as a touch. “I hope it remains to your liking.”

McGillis’s smile pulls wider in response; he can feel the tension at his lips like a pressure against his temple. “It’s not my enjoyment that I was thinking of.”

There’s a pause. McGillis wonders if he shouldn’t take a breath and state his concern more clearly even than he has, if he shouldn’t give voice to the needling sense of imposition that has been building in him day by day; he wonders if Gaelio won’t need to be confronted with the question outright in order to realize what it is McGillis means. But when Gaelio takes a breath McGillis can hear the catch at the back of it, can pick out tension in the sound as if the prince is responding to a blow, and he knows that his point has carried through if not his intention.

“You don’t mean you doubt my word.” Gaelio’s voice has dropped towards certainty, his tone catching the intense edge that always makes him sound a little shrill. He would sound frantic if he were someone else, if he hadn’t been raised as he has; with the surety of his rank to back him the strain gives him a suggestion of command until his words sound nearly a threat even as he voices them. “You know we all love having you here.”

McGillis lets his smile go wry as he looks up through his lashes at the prince across the table from him. “Your sister might, perhaps.”

“No” and Gaelio is moving, too fast for McGillis to react, too rapidly for him to shy back and away. His shoulders come in, his hand comes out; when he clutches against McGillis’s hand the force is enough to still any motion the other might have been thinking of making unformed. Gaelio’s eyes are very bright on the other side of the table; with his smile melted by the heat of intensity he looks softer, as if the innocence that he wears as comfortably as his fine clothes is pulling childish pleading free from the clear of his eyes. “I do. I want you here.” His fingers tighten on McGillis’s hand, tensing as if to chase away the start of a tremor McGillis can feel in the other’s grip. “That is enough, isn’t it?”

McGillis’s mouth fights to break into a smile that he knows doesn’t reach his eyes. “Will you order me to remain a guest in your home, Your Highness?”

“If I must,” Gaelio says, in that self-certain tone again; and then his eyes go soft and his mouth gives way. When his hand tightens on McGillis’s wrist it feels like a plea, as if he’s struggling to find stability more than reaching to pin the other in place. “Don’t you want to stay here, McGillis?”

McGillis does. He has a plethora of knowledge around him, rich clothes on his shoulders and
extravagant meals laid before him every day; he has a bed to sleep in, in a room warmed by a fire kept burning through the whole of the night without even bothering with tamping it to coals. This is more than he could have ever hoped to attain, certainly more than a boy from the street deserves; but it’s not a sense of morality or of guilt that burdens him in this moment. McGillis did away with both of those long ago, he would hardly have survived this long or done this well for himself if he held to them; which is all the more reason why meeting Gaelio’s steady gaze feels so much like inching towards the edge of a cliff, like falling into an ocean too blue to tell it from the sky overhead. There’s something there that McGillis can’t put a name to, something dark and shadowed and dangerous in a way all his instincts tell him to flinch from; and Gaelio is leaning in, and reaching out, offering himself up for the taking with every shift of his lashes and every part of his lips. It makes McGillis’s chest tighten, makes his mouth all but water with hunger of a different sort than his usual; and he ducks his head, and fixes his gaze on the table as he draws his hand back and free of Gaelio’s hold.

“Of course I want to,” he says, carefully, calmly, as he sets his fingers to the edge of the book before him to draw it back across the table towards himself. “I think I’d be happy just to live in a corner of this library, if I were permitted.”

Gaelio’s laugh is sincere for all that it catches on the edge of the tension McGillis can see curling the other’s empty fingers against the table before him. “You are strange about books,” he says, finally subsiding to the soft of the chair pulled back at the other side of the table. “One would think you had never seen one before in your life. Didn’t you get enough of tutors when you were young?”

“Perhaps mine were simply more pleasant than yours,” McGillis suggests, safe enough in this teasing to glance back up to Gaelio. The prince is watching him, as he always is, his head tipped to the side and his smile warm enough to more than undermine any claim he might make to frustration.

“Maybe you just don’t have enough exposure to better things to do with your time,” Gaelio says, and braces his elbow at the arm of his chair so he can prop his chin in his hand. “Carta’s ball didn’t seem to interest you any more than riding did. Would you prefer archery? Or perhaps something calmer, like music? Say the word and I’ll scour the kingdom to provide you anything.” He speaks as if the words are teasing, as if he doesn’t mean them in absolute truth; it’s only the shadows of his eyes that give away his sincerity, that turn friendly banter into more truth than McGillis suspects Gaelio knows. McGillis keeps watching him for a moment, considering the clear of that blue, the shifting shadows in the depths below; and then an idea presents itself, a remnant of a childhood dream so long-buried he had forgotten it was there, and he coughs into a laugh before he can think.

“The ocean,” he says, the words offering themselves to him as quickly as he reaches for them, as if they’re an extension of Gaelio’s invitation in themselves. “I’d like to see the ocean.”

Gaelio blinks. “Just that?” he says, sounding taken aback. “Have you never been?”

McGillis shrugs. “My estates are landlocked,” he lies. It’s easier to find the words for that than for the honesty he just offered up. “I was intending to make for the port town myself before my tour of the country was cut short by a most fortuitous accident.” He couples this jibe with a smile to soothe the edge from any hurt it might do, but Gaelio is already laughing.

“A tragedy indeed,” he says. “Is that all that has you restless? You should have told me sooner that I was keeping you from your goal, I would have remedied the lack immediately.” He leans forward over the table again, but this time it’s just to brace his hands at the surface so he can push himself to his feet. “I shall see to arranging an outing at once.”

Gaelio turns to make for the door. McGillis watches him go, parsing the relief of movement in the speed of the other’s action, in the clear happiness to be doing something more than sitting still and quiet in the peace of the library. He can almost see the plans forming themselves in Gaelio’s mind,
can imagine the sumptuousness of the travel that will surely result if he lets the other go; and words rise to his lips, forming themselves to the shape of his voice before McGillis even realizes he’s going to speak them.

“Let’s go alone.” Gaelio stops with his hand on the door handle, his head turning to meet McGillis’s gaze as his eyes widen to offer blue-eyed shock at the other’s words. McGillis presses his lips tight together and swallows as if that will let him call back the too-hasty impulse of his words; but Gaelio is staring at him now like he’s waiting for direction, and McGillis can’t help himself from reaching out to fill the plea for command in those clear eyes. “Just you and me. We can bring a meal with us and make the travel by horseback.”

Gaelio’s lashes dip over his brilliant stare. “I’ll have to take guards with me,” he says, but it’s an apology and not resistance, and McGillis is already reaching out to lay claim to the submission implicit in Gaelio’s tone.

“We’ll sneak out of the palace.” This is foolish, absurd in idea and worse in speech, but Gaelio looks breathless and bright with excitement and McGillis’s mouth is running away with the both of them. “If we leave before dawn you can order a stableboy to silence and we can slip past the guards at the gate while they’re changing their shifts. With only us we can be back by the dinner hour; if we take any others it’ll take well into the night before we’ve returned to the palace.”

Gaelio’s throat works. His fingers are still on the doorhandle but McGillis thinks he’s entirely forgotten he’s holding it. “You’re asking me to place responsibility for my safety solely in your hands for a full day.”

“I am,” McGillis says. He doesn’t look away from Gaelio’s eyes, doesn’t blink to break the connection between them. “Do you trust me?”

Gaelio stares at McGillis for another moment, his mouth soft and eyes wide. Then his lips curve, a smile shaping itself to his face even as his gaze lingers in the soft warmth of flattered surprise. “Of course I do,” he says, the words coming easy to lips that have never known betrayal, to eyes bright on childlike innocence as he looks at the lie McGillis has made of himself. “I’ll go anywhere with you, McGillis.”

_Fool_, McGillis thinks.

“Good,” McGillis says, offering Gaelio a smile before he turns back to his book. “I won’t let you down.”

It’s easier to lie to those eyes when he’s not looking at them.
The sun is just at its peak when McGillis and Gaelio reach the end of the forest.

The morning passed quickly. McGillis had expected to make easy work of the hours of travel between the palace and the coast -- he’s taken better to riding than he expected, and Carta’s regular invitations to the both of them for more of the same have given him the experience to handle a trip of this length with relative grace. With Gaelio close at his side and overflowing with the reckless energy of his disobedience, McGillis finds himself smiling more than frowning as they make record time through the dappled sunlight of the forest and the golden hours of the morning. Gaelio is more alive than McGillis has ever seen him before, as if exchanging his fine garments for the simple clothing of one of the stableboys they ordered to silence this morning has stripped him of all his usual need for politeness, and he’s bursting with the thrill of it, laughing over the simplest of things as if the world around him has become a more beautiful place just for the change in his perspective. It’s easy to smile with him, easier to laugh than it has ever been before; McGillis keeps glancing sidelong at the other, imagining Gaelio seated at one of the benches in the inn where McGillis spent so many years of his childhood, imagining him a commoner instead of the unreachable royalty he is. It’s easier to picture than he thought it would be, and more alluring than he expected; it makes Gaelio seem human, makes the bright of his eyes and the ease of his laugh appealing in their own right more than as accessories to the wealth and privilege he was born to. They are dangerous thoughts McGillis is entertaining, as the edge of his idle fantasy skirts the corners of his speech and strips politeness from his tongue; but Gaelio just smiles wider, and laughs louder, and by the time they are emerging onto the grassy hill just before the expanse of the promised ocean McGillis finds the prince’s name coming more easily to his tongue than Gaelio’s title.

“It’s just up here,” Gaelio is saying now, as he heels his horse into the lead so he can show McGillis the way. His hair is tousled around his face from the hours of riding and a recent short-lived race through the shadowy paths through the forest; the heat of his body has eased away the creases in his borrowed clothes until now the simple brown fabric fits him as if he has always worn it. His hair looks the brighter by comparison, the curl of it catching the light to shine like amethyst as they come out into the direct midday sun. “You can look right down on the beach from up here!” He looks back over his shoulder, flashing a smile bright enough to be an invitation all its own back at McGillis. “Come on, then!”

McGillis does. The offer is too direct to refuse; and after all, he wasn’t lying about his wish to see the ocean. He’s heard stories of it from those sailors who wander in from port in search of better food or prettier women; for a time he thought of joining one of the crews himself, of selling himself into indentured servitude as a cabin boy or cook’s assistant at one of the larger towns. He found his place at the inn instead, and he’s been building his life on land ever since; but the stories of the water lingered in the back of his mind, a curiosity he has dreamed of seeing since. He can taste the salt in the air now, a strange, bitter tang at his nose and in the back of his throat when he breathes in; he fills his lungs with it, taking in the full experience of the moment, and heels his horse forward to join Gaelio at the top of the hill. Gaelio is smiling at him as McGillis approaches, his eyes seeming to sparkle brighter the nearer the other draws; and then McGillis crests the hill, and looks down to the water below, and his attention to Gaelio gives way entirely to shock.

It’s bigger than he knew. He’s heard the stories, of course, has seen the illustrations in those lord’s libraries; but it’s one thing to hear tales of water stretching to the distant horizon and another to see it so clearly before him. The water seems endless, a vast, impossible swath of blue lapping at the land as if it intends to crest up and over it; for a moment McGillis is dizzy with it, as if he’s looking down from the height of some endless tower rather than just the rise of a grassy hill. Gaelio makes a sound
next to him, the shape of a laugh warm and delighted in his throat, but McGillis can’t even turn for that, for the first moment of gaping out at the endless blue before him.

“Is it all you dreamed of?” Gaelio asks from alongside him. “I’m glad I got to bring you here, if you wanted to see it so much.” His horse prances, restless at the sight of the water; Gaelio takes a moment to bring his mount back under control while McGillis goes on gazing out at the ocean before them. “How far inland are your estates, that you’ve never made it to the seashore?” McGillis blinks, jarred back to himself by the need to defend his lie, to shore up the details of his untruths, but when he turns his head Gaelio is just smiling at him, the expression warm enough to melt the question to rhetoric.

“You look impressed,” Gaelio tells him. He’s looking at McGillis instead of at the water; McGillis doesn’t understand how he can keep his focus on anything other than the ocean before them for long. “I’m glad I finally found something to please you.”

McGillis rocks back, startled into a reaction in spite of himself by the other’s words. “But of course,” he says. “Your treatment has been nothing but generous, I have enjoyed every day since I met you.”

“Mm,” Gaelio hums, and shakes his head without looking away from his focus on McGillis’s face. “But not like this.” He reaches out over the distance between them, moving too quickly for McGillis to flinch away; or maybe it’s that McGillis doesn’t think to draw back before Gaelio’s fingers are touching to his forehead, the heat of them pressing friction to the space between the other’s brows. McGillis’s eyes go wide, his mouth comes open on surprise, and Gaelio laughs, his focus fixed on the weight of his fingers against the other’s skin.

“You have a crease here, usually.” His fingers drag, his touch slides; the contact feels like a burn, like the weight of a seal pressing down into wax to stamp it into a mirror of its own form. “It’s gone now.” His fingers linger, just for a breath; then he draws his hand back and turns away at once to reach for his reins where they’re lying slack over his horse’s neck. “Shall we go down to the beach? There’s a path around the side of the hill, we should be able to ride right down onto the sand if you’d like.”

McGillis closes his mouth with deliberate force. Gaelio’s head is turned down over his hands, his hair is falling to curl against the side of his cheek, but McGillis can still see the curve of the other’s lips as he smiles at his hands, as happiness too warm for restraint breaks over his face. That ache in McGillis’s chest is back, the pain as of hunger for something more than food, a craving for something beyond physical sustenance; but Gaelio isn’t looking at him, and McGillis is grateful to that, at least. He ducks his head in a nod, even knowing Gaelio won’t see the gesture; it’s a relief just to move, to have some kind of physical action to underscore the meaning of his words.

“Yes,” he says. “I’d like that very much.”

“Good,” Gaelio says, and he turns to urge his horse around to backtrack in the direction they came. “Follow me, it’s just this way!”

The path down to the beach would be alarming, McGillis thinks, if they were going any slower. The angle is sharply tilted, enough to send dust and pebbles skidding in a shower before them as they move; but Gaelio is as reckless on horseback now as he was the day they met, and he takes the slope at nearly a gallop, laughing bright enough to pull a smile onto McGillis’s lips in spite of himself. He should hold back, he knows, should take the unsteady footing slowly and carefully in consideration of his own safety as much as his horse’s motion; but he leans in instead, tipping in close against the line of his horse’s neck, and he heels his mount forward to chase after the curl of Gaelio’s hair vivid in the wind of his motion. Gaelio looks back over his shoulder, the white of his teeth flashing like diamonds, and McGillis is grinning all over his face without thinking, tipsy on excitement and with
his heart fluttering like wings against the inside of his chest. He follows Gaelio down the path, their horses skidding and sliding in a cloud of dust as they reach the beach, but Gaelio is leaning forward into an outright gallop, urging his horse to speed to leave the billow of dirt behind him. McGillis is hard on his heels, catching the rhythm of his own mount’s movement by feel as they struggle into traction against the strange density of the sand underfoot, but what Gaelio has on him in experience he makes up in instinct as he fits himself to his horse’s actions. The sand flies away beneath them, he and his horse together lunge into motion, and they’re all tearing across the smooth of the beach, salt-spray burning at McGillis’s eyes and the sea wind catching at his hair and a smile like he’s never worn before pulling against his lips.

He doesn’t know how far they go along the sand. Gaelio veers out into the surf, splashing sprays of bitter water back towards McGillis in his wake, but McGillis keeps pace, ducking low against his horse to protect himself from the sand and water flung up by Gaelio’s horse’s hooves and urging them to greater speed in their impromptu chase. He wonders if they won’t keep riding all the way across the edge of the beach, if they’ll continue on for miles in the spray and the sand and the salt tanging bitter against his lips; but finally Gaelio rocks back and draws rein with his hair tangled around his face and his eyes bright with delight. He dismounts as McGillis is still pulling up alongside him, swinging down and from his saddle to land heavily against the soft wet of the wave-soaked sand underfoot; McGillis moves as quickly as he may manage to follow, thinking more now of easier speech than of the impoliteness of maintaining a position above the crown prince. Gaelio certainly doesn’t look like the prince of the realm at the moment; he’s windswept and breathless, his cheeks ruddy with the cool of the air and his hair sticking to the sweat against his forehead as surely as his borrowed clothes are clinging to his body. He’s panting for air as McGillis’s boots hit the sand, but he still musters a grin before he loops his reins over his horse’s saddle and lets his mount free to wander.

“How’s this?” Gaelio asks, spreading both arms wide to encompass the whole of the scene around them as McGillis follows his lead in looping off his reins and smacking at his horse’s flank to stir it into movement up to the drier part of the beach. Gaelio is standing on the wet sand, his boots sinking in by an inch; his smile is as brilliant as the sun as he beams at McGillis. “Ocean enough for your tastes, McGillis?”

McGillis looks out past Gaelio’s shoulder at the expanse of the blue beyond him, endless and shining in the overhead light. It takes his breath just to see it, just to stare out at something so vast and formless; it’s like unclaimed territory, like a wilderness that holds itself apart even from the proprietary spread of Gaelio’s outstretched arms. He stares for a moment, letting the vastness of it rush over him, feeling the fragility of the earth under his feet, of the sand shifting even with the rush of the wind coming off the white-capped waves before them; and then he looks back to Gaelio, still with his back to the water so he can gaze at McGillis instead.

“Yes,” he says, and lets himself smile without any restraint on it at all. “Thank you, Gaelio.”

McGillis doesn’t mean the words to carry such weight. They’re just words, as easy to manipulate to his ends as any; but he can see the flutter in Gaelio’s lashes, can see the tension of the other’s smile give way to soft heat as Gaelio looks at him. Gaelio’s hands tremble, his arms drop towards his sides as if in surrender; when he speaks even his voice is shaky, struggling for command as if he’s lost his grip on the dominance that is his birthright.

“I’ll give it to you,” he says, speaking in a rush, as if he’s asking for a favor rather than offering one. “What do you say, McGillis?” When he strides forward it’s at once, moving as quickly as his boots can grant him traction on the sand to cross the distance to where McGillis is standing. His hands reach, his fingers close around McGillis’s own to draw the other’s hands towards himself as if he intends to pull McGillis to him too, as if there’s anywhere to go. “I’ll grant you this stretch of beach,
and the land behind it too. You could build an estate here, within sight of the ocean, you could come here every day if you wished.”

McGillis rocks back against his heels, feeling his footing as unsteady as if he’s standing atop one of the crashing waves instead of on the surface of the beach. Gaelio’s eyes are wide, his mouth is soft; it is hard to force a resigned smile in the face of that, harder still to put words to what is a rejection, however kindly stated. “I don’t think it’s your country to go giving away just yet.”

“It will be,” Gaelio says at once. He takes a half-step in, impossibly close; McGillis can see the individual lashes over his eyes shift as Gaelio’s attention falls over his features, can see the flash of white as Gaelio’s teeth catch and pull against his lip for a moment of uncertainty. “It will be mine, someday. There’s no one here to stop me anyway, there’s no one for miles and miles. If I say it shall be done it shall be. I’m a prince, aren’t I?” His hold on McGillis’s hands tightens; McGillis can feel the pressure of Gaelio’s fingers clinging close to the rhythm of his heartbeat thudding in his wrist, can feel his pulse crashing against the other’s thumb with as much force as those distant waves throwing themselves down into the blue of the ocean around them. The sky is shining, the ocean is endless, and all McGillis can see is Gaelio’s eyes, bluer and deeper than both.

“I’ll give you anything,” Gaelio says; and the words fall with sincerity, with honesty easy from those lips that have never learned to shape a lie. “What do you want, McGillis?”

McGillis looks into those blue eyes, looks at that soft mouth. Gaelio’s expression is as open as his offer, his attention fixed on McGillis in front of him as if there’s nothing that could hold his focus so well as the other. He has the whole of the country before him, the ocean and the forests and the shining walls of the castle they slipped from this morning; and it’s McGillis he’s looking at, his hands clutching at the other’s with a desperation McGillis wonders if Gaelio has ever felt before this moment. There’s no one around them, no interrupting sister and no silent guards and no watchful servants; and McGillis can feel the world tilt away under him, as if they left gravity behind them along with Gaelio’s beautiful clothes, as if perhaps he really could take the whole of the kingdom from Gaelio’s open offer. His hands tighten, his fingers clutching with sudden force around Gaelio’s in his; and McGillis leans in sharply, ducking forward over that too-small distance as Gaelio is still hissing a startled inhale at the pressure. Gaelio’s eyes go wide, his mouth drops open; and McGillis turns his head and captures the surrender of those soft lips against the press of his own.

There’s a moment of hesitation, a breath’s worth of a pause. Gaelio’s fingers in McGillis’s hold flex for a moment, tightening against the other as if he intends to match the pressure of McGillis’s grip; but he’s never known true need, and when McGillis tightens his grip accordingly Gaelio’s hold goes slack with capitulation in his own. McGillis can feel the huff of Gaelio exhaling against his cheek, can see the flutter as Gaelio’s lashes dip into shadowed surrender; and he’s letting go, dropping his grip on the other’s hands with one of his own so he can reach up instead to sink his fingers into that wind-tangled hair, to brace Gaelio still against the press of his mouth. Gaelio’s mouth comes open against his own, his lips parting as if in invitation, and McGillis takes without waiting for more to lick in against the heat of Gaelio’s mouth with certain force. Gaelio makes a sound against him, something low and anxious with want, and McGillis doesn’t even think, this time, before he lets Gaelio’s other hand go to capture the other’s head between his palms, to curl his fingers to fists in violet hair and lock Gaelio to stillness while McGillis swallows that sound down his own throat. Gaelio’s hands come up, his palm pressing to McGillis’s chest, his fingers curling up around the back of the other’s neck, but McGillis doesn’t let his hold ease, doesn’t loosen the brace of his hands as he lays claim to Gaelio’s offer.

He’s never tasted anything so good in his life.
McGillis is confined to his quarters as soon as he and Gaelio return to the palace.

This isn’t a formal declaration. By all that they’re told it’s simple concern for his well-being that brings about the offer of a change of clothes, and a bath to soak the chill of the wind from his skin and rinse the salt-stick of the ocean from his hair; but McGillis knows an order when he hears it, however prettily it may be dressed up, and he knows the look in the eyes of the untitled guards who escort him to his quarters and take up positions outside the door with the clear intent of keeping him there. His quarters are on the second floor, too far for an easy escape out the window and to the freedom of the earth below; but McGillis isn’t looking for an escape as yet, anyway. He’s confident he could invent some means of retreat if he needed to, if he were truly in any kind of danger; but he is in his quarters, after all, not a prison cell, and that means whatever anger he and Gaelio have roused in the king and queen by their unauthorized trip is insufficient to override the assumed rank he bears. He takes advantage of the bath instead, stripping off the simple clothes that aided in their departure this morning with more relief than he ever expected to feel in losing attire as sturdy as it is functional, and he sinks himself into the steaming heat of the water, lingering in the immediate physical comfort of the moment so he doesn’t question his own recklessness in continuing to linger, or why it is, exactly, that he’s so unwilling to leave the palace grounds.

He’s expecting the knock on the door long before it comes. The hour is late, McGillis thinks the time must be slipping on towards midnight; it was past sundown when they rode through the palace gates, and he’s been long enough out of the bath that the water is cold and his hair is nearly dry against his forehead. But McGillis can’t sleep, he knows any attempt at rest will be futile before he makes it; and he knows he’ll be having another visitor tonight, in any case. He’s sitting at the edge of the windowsill when he hears the rap at the door, the sound of it so tentative it hardly carries to him; it’s only because he’s listening for it that he hears it over the crackle of the fire burning in the hearth. McGillis unfolds from the sill, his heart picking up with the same adrenaline that coursed through him all afternoon as if it’s just recalling itself back to the present, but when he moves forward it’s carefully, padding across the thick rugs and polished floors on bare feet that hardly whisper to tell of his approach to the visitor on the other side of the door. There’s another knock as he draws closer, a little louder and fast with nerves, this time, and as McGillis draws close he can hear the whisper that goes with it: “McGillis?” hissed close against the line of the door in its frame. “Are you awake?”

McGillis doesn’t answer in words. It seems easier to reach for the handle of the door, to pull at the weight of it until the latch gives way; and then he’s drawing the door open, and Gaelio nearly topples into his arms as the support under the palm he has pressed to the door drops away all at once. He stumbles forward, almost over the threshold and into McGillis’s room directly; it’s only McGillis letting his hold on the doorhandle go to reach out and catch at Gaelio’s elbow that stops them from tumbling to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs together.

“Ah,” Gaelio gasps, that one sound spilling from his lips like it’s been startled out of him. “McGillis.” He lifts his head, his eyes lock on McGillis’s face; his cheeks flush to pink at once, his mouth catches onto a smile that even the brace of his teeth against his lip does nothing to restrain. “You’re still awake.”

“I am,” McGillis says. His hand is still holding against the weight of Gaelio’s elbow; Gaelio’s arm is resting almost precisely atop his, the prince’s fingers are brushing against the loose fall of McGillis’s sleeve. McGillis’s attention wavers from Gaelio’s eyes, dropping to the flush of the other’s mouth; he wonders if the part of those soft lips looks as bruised-dark to everyone else too, if the print of his mouth against Gaelio’s is as clear for all other eyes as it appears to his own. He hopes it’s not. He
wants to crush his mouth against it again.

McGillis takes a breath through his nose, trying to collect himself back to the present: his hand on the doorway steadies, his legs brace him still. “Did you need me for something?” His gaze slides past Gaelio’s shoulder and up to catch at the shadows of the guards bracketing the entrance to his quarters; there are more, now, another pair standing on the far side of the corridor, ostensibly granting the prince some privacy but still well within eye and earshot of the two of them. When McGillis looks back to Gaelio he’s careful to keep his gaze on the other’s eyes. “Your Highness.”

Gaelio shakes his head, the motion so quick with certainty that it’s as an entirely a giveaway for the adrenaline flushing in his cheeks as an outright statement would be. He bites his lip again; McGillis has a brief, insane moment to wonder if that’s deliberate, if he’s trying to pull McGillis’s attention back down to the inviting curve of his lips. “I just wanted to see you,” he says, in a tone better suited for the closed doors of a bedroom than the hallway he’s currently in. McGillis can feel his face warm, has to press his lips tight together on whatever response he might think to give, but if Gaelio notices the tension in his expression it does nothing at all to temper the softness in his own. His attention is sliding over McGillis’s face, as lingering as a touch; McGillis can almost feel fingers drawing against his jaw, over his nose, across the arch of his cheekbones. Gaelio’s head tips, his lips curve on a smile; when he huffs a laugh McGillis can feel the warmth of it. “Father is furious with me.”

“I owe him an apology,” McGillis says. “It was I who persuaded you into our escapade.”

Gaelio’s laugh is louder, this time, it spills from him as if he can’t figure out how to hold it back. “I was willing to be persuaded,” he says. His fingers at McGillis’s sleeve shift; McGillis is aware of the weight of every one of them against the soft of the fabric against his skin. Gaelio’s lashes dip, his gaze goes heavy as he looks up at McGillis. “It was my doing as much as yours.”

Gaelio’s words barely manage subtlety at all. McGillis is certain any of the guards around them would know what the prince is referring to if they could see the angle of his lashes, if they could watch the color at his mouth. McGillis ought to smile politely, ought to duck his head into distant gratitude for the prince’s visit and excuse himself to bed; it’s what he would do with any of the young women he used to tutor, it’s what he would muster for Carta or Almiria or anyone else so visibly ready to throw themselves into his arms and a scandal at one and the same time. But his feet don’t move, his breathing doesn’t steady, and when he moves his hand it’s only to settle his fingers closer against Gaelio’s arm, to shift his hold into a clasp that should look like support to an audience and feel like a caress to Gaelio. McGillis’s attention drops down in spite of himself, his gaze flickering away from Gaelio’s eyes and to Gaelio’s lips instead, and it lingers there as he takes a breath and drags speech free from the pressure at his chest. “Are you in great trouble?”

Gaelio shakes his head. “No,” he says, in a soft tone better suited for intimacies than the conversation of royal ire. “I’m to be confined to the palace grounds under escort for a few days. He’ll have forgotten in a week, I’m sure.”

McGillis’s mouth quirks onto a smile without him thinking of it at all. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Yes,” Gaelio’s fingers tighten on McGillis’s arm, Gaelio’s weight rocks forward towards his toes. He’s so close that McGillis can hear the sound of the other swallowing, can see the motion work in Gaelio’s throat even by the dim illumination of flickering firelight. “You will stay,” he says, and it’s not quite a question and not entirely an order but something between the two, pleading and hopeful at once. “Won’t you, McGillis?” Gaelio rocks forward closer, his forehead bumps against McGillis’s own, and McGillis knows they have an audience but he can’t see them, he can’t see anything but the firelight playing over Gaelio’s face and the shadows layering themselves in the wake of the other’s
lashes and along the rise of his cheekbones. “Stay here with me.”

McGillis should say no. Nothing about that has changed; the hours he spent losing the daylight to the give of Gaelio’s mouth under his on that distant beach have only underlined that fact. He is more than playing with fire, now: he has reached out to immerse himself in the flames, has stepped forward to offer himself to their heat. This will not end well, for himself or for Gaelio, and there’s far worse than a bruising throw from a carriage waiting for him at the end. He should say no: or he should say yes, should smile and nod into the ease of a lie and strip his fine bed of its sheets as the door closes behind Gaelio, should tie them to a rope and let himself down the side of the palace and slip away to be lost in the shadows of the night. He can vanish, can become just another one of those commoners that Gaelio looks through and be absolutely, permanently safe. All he has to do is lie: the first trick he learned, the best skill he has.

“I will,” McGillis says, and the truth burns his throat to ash even as Gaelio breaks into a brilliant smile, even as Gaelio lifts his hand from his side to catch at McGillis’s hair and tips his head to stifle his laugh with the impulse of a kiss against the other’s mouth. McGillis shuts his eyes, and tightens his hold on Gaelio’s arm, and lets himself be kissed with careless indulgence; his heart is pounding by the time Gaelio pulls away, and it’s not just fear coursing to such flame within him.

“Good,” Gaelio smiles against his mouth, the reckless happiness of someone who has never been denied anything he truly wanted. His fingers tighten, his hold fixing McGillis where he stands for a moment; and then he lets go and pulls away to step back to a safer distance. He is glowing with happiness, the whole of his face bright enough to make up for the ill fit and crude cut of the borrowed clothes he’s still wearing, and McGillis has never felt the distance between them so keenly. It’s easy to duck into a bow, to fold himself into the respect due to Gaelio’s title, and McGillis still has his head tipped down when he takes a breath and finds speech for himself.

“Goodnight, Your Highness.”

“Yes,” Gaelio says, his voice as audibly bright as his expression. “I’ll find you in the morning.” There’s the sound of a footstep, the scuff of Gaelio falling back from the doorway; McGillis looks up from under his hair as he straightens to stand upright once more. Gaelio is beaming at him, all but radiating happiness as McGillis meets his gaze. “Sweet dreams, McGillis.” McGillis tips his chin in acknowledgement of this; and then the shadows of Gaelio’s guards are stepping forward, standing close enough to block the prince from view as they urge him into a turn. McGillis watches the shadows of their broad shoulders for a moment as they maneuver Gaelio to move away down the hall; he’s still watching when Gaelio glances back to him, sneaking a last look from under the tilt of his lashes and the curl of his hair as if he thinks it won’t be noticed. It’s perfectly obvious to McGillis, as he’s sure it is to those silent forms on either side of his doorway, but he can’t help smiling in response to the flicker of Gaelio’s lips on delight. Then one of Gaelio’s guards ducks in to pull the prince’s attention aside, and McGillis turns his head and backs away into his room to ease the door shut in his wake. He presses the weight into the frame, urging it closed until the latch clicks into place; and then he tips forward, his hands still braced at frame and door alike, and presses his forehead to the wood while he breathes deep against the ache of adrenaline coursing such heat through him.

McGillis’s bed stays tidy, his sheets unused for sleep or escape either one; and by the time the dawn breaks through the windows of his borrowed quarters, all there is to see is himself, staring into the dying embers of the fire and thinking of the taste of violets on his tongue.
“I suppose there is some pleasure to be had in attending an event in the role of a guest rather than a host,” Carta declares, gesturing out at the wall of silk and laughter and music entirely surrounding them. “It’s not really to my taste, but it’s not unenjoyable.” Her head angles down, her gaze comes up to catch and linger against McGillis next to her. “And of course, it allows for the freedom to choose my preferred company.”

McGillis musters a smile, the most polite one he can find under the circumstances. “You do me too much honor, my lady.”

Carta tosses her head at that, the same way she does at every carefully-framed demurral McGillis has given her tonight. “I will assign honor where I see fit,” she says, in a tone so haughty it nearly obscures the way her gaze is lingering on McGillis’s mouth as she speaks. “Unless you intend to stand in opposition to my decision?”

McGillis shakes his head. “No,” he says. “I wouldn’t dream of it, of course.”

“Good.” Carta snaps shut the fan she’s been idly waving with enough force that the ribs of it crack loud against the inside of her wrist. McGillis’s gaze follows the motion as he wonders if the force will be enough to raise a bruise against her arm, but Carta’s sleeves clasp her tightly from shoulder to wrist, and if she feels the pain of the impact it doesn’t show in so much as a flutter of her lashes over her gaze. When she tips her head to the side the motion is as peremptory as the lift of her hand to offer her fingers to McGillis. “Shall we dance? It is a ball, after all, one is expected to make a proper showing.”

“Ah,” McGillis says. He should accept, he knows -- everything Carta has said runs along the precise paths of propriety, even if she is seizing the far edges of them as her status allows her to, and aside from that her clear interest is to his benefit as much as his credit. It would be an easy matter to seduce her, he thinks, and in her position as the head of her household she has no one to call her back from the headstrong lead of reckless infatuation; but when McGillis lifts his hand it’s only to brace against Carta’s palm instead of to clasp the offering, and when he ducks his head it’s with apology slumping at his shoulders more than acceptance. “Do forgive me, my lady, I’m afraid I’m not familiar with the steps to this dance.”

“You could learn fast enough,” Carta says, but the words are rhetorical more than insistent, and when McGillis dips farther in refusal she pulls her hand away from his at once. “Very well,” she says, in a voice far cooler than what went before and iced over, McGillis thinks, to hide the quiver of hurt on the last word. “I’m sure I can find someone else more willing to take on the challenge.”

McGillis nods. “I do apologize.”

“You shall simply have to owe me,” Carta declares, turning away in a sweep of skirts as McGillis straightens. “I expect you to find me when you find your mood to dance more in tune.”

McGillis’s mouth twists on a smile in spite of himself, amusement he’s glad Carta doesn’t see. “As you command, my lady,” he intones, and ducks into another bow to hold while Carta whisks herself away into the crowd in search of a more willing partner. McGillis stays where he is for a moment, out on the fringes of the crowd and away from the smooth-polished floor of the ballroom; and then he straightens once more, his smile fading as easily as he drew it into place as he takes stock of the situation in a moment of rare peace.
The ball at the Issue estate pales in comparison to the one around him now. Carta’s gathering had been crowded with people, an event custom-made to show off the extent of her manor and the connections her status buys her; this is something else again, with a different structure to the gathering but saying just as much if not more. Carta’s ball had been expansive, where the sheer number of people were intended to speak as loudly to her point as any one of the guests; here McGillis suspects every attendee carries a title of note in their own right, to say nothing of what power and influence they may wield beyond simple names. He’s already spoken tonight to a visiting diplomat from one of the countries across the ocean so far away it might as well be another planet and offers a similar potential of untapped riches, a very young man nervous in his clothes but surrounded by an array of guards enough to hold off any true threat from a distant cousin to the royal line, and an unassuming woman standing in the back corner of the room with a smile at her lips and such an unreadable expression that McGillis is absolutely certain she’s an informant for a noble household, or a visiting realm, or perhaps the royal family themselves. The currents of power flow strongly here, sweeping like waterfalls along the stairs and curling into eddies against the motion on the dance floor, and McGillis is drifting over the top of them, a leaf twisting and turning across the surface while he keeps from being toppled over and dragged down to drown. It’s a glorious opportunity, with the chance to lay a network of connections to almost any corner of the kingdom; and yet when McGillis’s gaze slides over the crowd, it’s the violet hair and too-sharp laugh of the crown prince that draws his attention.

Gaelio is in a far corner of the room, backed up against one of the enormous glass windows and surrounded by a cluster of women and a few men to boot. His clothes are finer than anyone else’s in the room, dyed to that royal shade of purple and embroidered with intricate patterns of gold that are barely visible under the rich white fur lining the edge of the fashionable cape he has thrown over one shoulder. He’s been polished into the form of a picture, his hair swept back and his fingers adorned with rings; he’s even wearing a crown, for the first time that McGillis has ever seen. He is striking even from a distance, as if he’s radiating the power that he will inherit when he takes the throne; McGillis has never seen him so uncomfortable. His laugh is too bright, his mouth is too red, and even the heat in the room can’t excuse the flush of intoxication staining his cheeks towards crimson. McGillis flinches as Gaelio upends another glass of wine, downing more than half of it at a go, and he turns aside to find a better place to rest his attention than the struggles of the prince.

The princess seems a likely option. She is as well-dressed as Gaelio, in similar styling in spite of her youth; McGillis hasn’t seen her move since she was shown in, tiara-clad head held high and her hand bracing at her brother’s outstretched hand. She’s perched on a chair, now, one high enough to let the full weight of her skirts hang over her shoes, and if she has a pair of young men making polite conversation they duck away as soon as McGillis approaches, looking more relieved than otherwise for the excuse to absent themselves.

“Your Highness,” McGillis says, speaking with full politeness in consideration of their surroundings as he ducks into a proper bow. “You are a vision amidst the array of your subjects.”

“Mackie,” Almiria says, sounding far less formal and far more relieved than McGillis suspects she ought. The princess’s expression is nearly pained as McGillis straightens to look at her; she looks pale underneath the careful sweep of color that has been laid over her white-powdered face, and her mouth is trembling with childish unhappiness that even the demands of her rank cannot wholly allay. “I’m so glad to see you. Stay and keep me company?”

“Of course,” McGillis says, and steps forward to claim the seat alongside the princess. “Your Highness cannot be wanting for suitors tonight, are you?”

Almiria’s painted mouth twists, veering sharply towards a frown for a moment before she smooths herself back to doll-like beauty. “No,” she says. “Everyone is very polite and very complimentary
and they all look over their shoulders when they think I’m not looking.” She ducks her head down and picks against the gold thread in her skirt with one gloved hand. “They’d all rather be dancing with the noble ladies.” There’s a pause. “You’d probably rather be dancing too, wouldn’t you, Mackie?”

McGillis knows what he’s meant to say to that, too. “I would rather be with Your Highness than leading any other woman in the room.” It’s even true, for once, if only by a technicality; at least it makes it easy to form a smile to offer to Almiria when she looks up tentatively.

“Truly?” she says, and bites against her lip in shy pleasure. “You’re always so nice, Mackie.”

McGillis ducks his head into the sketch of a bow. “It’s my honor to serve,” he says, speaking the familiar words without thinking about them at all.

Almiria heaves a sigh. “I wish Gaelie were as nice as you,” she says, sounding almost plaintive. When McGillis looks back at her her head is turned, her gaze cast away across the room to where her brother is standing. McGillis follows her line of sight, too quick to seize this ready-made opportunity to claim another glimpse of Gaelio. The prince is smiling right now, his teeth flashing white as he gestures overwide with the half-full glass of wine in his hand; his cape flares with the action to swing against his shoulder and almost against the glass of the window behind him. “He’s usually in a good mood for balls but he barely said anything to me at all, even though I am wearing a new dress.” Almiria smooths her hand over her skirts and McGillis blinks, and realizes he’s staring, and looks away and back to the princess’s expectant look up through her lashes.

“Ah,” he says. “It’s lovely.” He considers the weight of it, the cut of the waist and the flare of the skirts. “Is that the one you purchased in town?”

Almiria’s smile is bright with simple happiness, a child’s version of Gaelio’s own innocent cheer. “You remembered!” she says. “I knew you would. Yes, I had them alter it for this party especially so it would match Gaelio’s. Isn’t it nice?”

“It’s very pretty,” McGillis says on autopilot. “It suits you well.”

“Thank you,” Almiria beams. “The seamstress says the color would bring out my eyes just like Gaelio’s coat does for his.” McGillis’s attention slides away again, carried on the impulse of Almiria’s words to seek out her brother again across the room; when he turns his head to look Gaelio is watching him too, his gaze cutting right through the crowd around him to fix full on McGillis. His smile is gone, stripped down to better match the shadows in his eyes; he still has a glass of wine in his hand but the angle makes it clear he’s forgotten it. They stare at each other for a moment, their focus making a single line of attention across the width of the room; and then Gaelio moves suddenly, jerking his head away as he gets to his feet in one clumsy movement. His entourage rocks back, startled by this sudden motion, but he doesn’t seem to see them at all; he shoves his wineglass sideways towards one of the noblewomen without looking as he strides forward and towards the door. She takes it, her eyes wide with shock before she remembers to be offended at being treated like a servant, but Gaelio doesn’t look back at her; he’s stumbling towards the wide double doors, his footing unsteady enough that it’s only the natural clearing of attendees in his path that keeps him from outright collision. A murmur goes through the room, dozens of voices rising to a single note of something between concern and judgment, and McGillis is on his feet before Gaelio has stumbled out of the doors, rising without thinking as if the sound has pulled him into motion.

“Gaelie!” Almiria cries. It’s only the sound of her voice that reminds McGillis she’s there at all; it’s hard to look away from the doors and down to see the princess’s brows knit on concern as she looks to where her brother just vanished. “Is he alright?”

“I’ll check on him,” McGillis says, offering some half-thought excuse for his abrupt departure, but he
doesn’t wait for Almiria’s permission before moving to the shadowy corners of the room to make his
way the more rapidly to the front doors. The crowd is clustered in the center, tending towards the
bright-lit middle rather than the dark spaces where the servants move; it’s easy for McGillis to step
into the shadows and all but vanish as well in spite of his elegant clothes. The servants move aside,
ducking into bows as he approaches, but he doesn’t pause to explain or to make small talk. His
attention is on the doors before him, his focus entirely given over to following Gaelio as quickly as
possible, until the crowd is only just beginning to murmur the edge of judgment as he slips past one
woman’s vast sweeping skirts and rounds the corner of the doors to step out into the night.

It’s not hard to find the prince. The moon is full and standing nearly straight overhead; the glow of its
light casts everything to clarity even with the lateness of the hour. The air is chill enough to chase
away the other partygoers; as it is McGillis’s gaze tracks Gaelio’s stumbling movement immediately.
Gaelio hasn’t made it far; he’s veered off to the right, half-following the gravel of the paths winding
through the garden, but his steps are unsteady and he’s moving slowly, like he’s walking more for
the sake of the movement that out of any real end goal. McGillis takes a step forward, intending to
call out, maybe, or just to stride forward and catch him up; and then Gaelio’s foot catches on an
upraised planter box, his uncertain balance gives way, and he topples forward with the boneless
grace of the deeply intoxicated.

“Gaelio!” and McGillis is moving, bolting forward before he has thought through the motion, before
he realizes what he’s shouted. He can see even as he approaches that Gaelio is picking himself up, or
at least pushing himself up onto his knees, but there’s a tremor to his movements, and even once he
makes it off the gravel he doesn’t lift his head, just stays leaning forward over his hands braced
against the path as McGillis slows his pace as he closes with the other. “Your Highness, are you
unwell?”

Gaelio turns his head to look back over his shoulder, squinting hard like he’s trying to place
McGillis. “Huh?” His face is still very flushed, his mouth is dark; his gaze is visibly hazy, like he’s
having trouble holding his focus to McGillis before him. “McGillis?”

“Yes.” McGillis comes alongside Gaelio, dropping to a knee next to the other as he does. “Are you
unwell?”

“McGillis,” Gaelio says again, and breaks into a smile that spreads across his whole face. “I’m glad
you’re here.” He lifts a hand to reach out, to touch at McGillis’s face; but he sways even as he
reaches, and what McGillis assumes was intended as a caress drops to a clutch against his sleeve
instead as Gaelio’s smile melts, as the color under his flushed skin drains from his face. He blinks
hard, his eyes visibly flicker out-of-focus; and then he tips sideways and sick onto the gravel path
in front of him. McGillis huffs a breath through his nose, sketching the outline of a sympathetic laugh
at this consequence of those too-hasty glasses of wine, and he settles himself a little more
comfortably to kneel on the path alongside Gaelio. McGillis reaches out with his other hand to draw
free the precarious weight of the other’s crown and set it safely aside while Gaelio vomits up the
excess of wine he’s drunk in the last few hours.

It takes the prince a few minutes to collect himself. McGillis doesn’t rush him; the air is cold but the
chill feels good compared to the too-much warmth indoors, and it’s not as if there’s anything he can
do to hasten the passage of this. He just stays where he is, as comfortable as he can make himself
while he waits for Gaelio to come back from the wave of nausea he’s caught in; after a moment he
reaches out to catch against the trailing curl of Gaelio’s hair and stroke it back behind the other’s ear
with idle intent. It’s a simple motion, without any conscious thought behind it, but when McGillis
moves again it’s to repeat it, to slide his fingers in and against the other’s hair for what comfort the
contact can offer while Gaelio collects himself.
The vomiting stops, eventually. Gaelio doesn’t move right away; he stays still, his head ducked forward and his eyes shut while he gasps for air. His face is in shadow, McGillis can’t get a read on his expression, but the back of Gaelio’s neck is clammy with sweat when McGillis slides his hand back to press against the bare skin there, and there’s an ease to the other’s breathing that says the anxious adrenaline of nausea has given way to relief. McGillis tightens his hold against Gaelio’s neck for a moment to offer a warning before he speaks. “Feel better?”

Gaelio’s laugh is weak even without the edge of bitterness it carries. “Physically, at least,” he says. “My dignity is going to take somewhat longer to recover, I’m afraid.”

“It’ll return with the morning,” McGillis assures him. He loosens his hold against Gaelio’s neck; his hand comes up as if on its own accord to slide through the other’s hair and stroke it back, even without the excuse of Gaelio’s illness to guide his touch. “I think you’ll find your admirers happy to forgive their prince a glass or two of wine.”

The sound Gaelio makes cannot be called a laugh by even the most charitable of listeners. “Don’t I know it,” he says. He rocks back over his knees to drop to sit heavily against the gravel alongside McGillis but he keeps his head ducked down so the weight of his hair falls in front of his face to shadow the moonlight from telling of his expression. “They’ll be just as happy to fawn over me tomorrow as they were tonight, so long as I retain the title that so holds their interest.”

McGillis’s mouth twists on a smile that he can feel stop well short of his eyes. “I hardly think you’d be content doing away with your position just for a night of peace.”

“What do you know?” Gaelio snaps, turning to frown hard at McGillis. “Maybe I would. It can hardly be worth this.” McGillis doesn’t say anything, just gazes at the other’s expression; but Gaelio’s mouth softens, the tension of frustration in his features giving way even as his gaze slides down and over McGillis’s face.

“No,” he says, that one word sounding like a surrender. “That’s foolish, I know. I shouldn’t wish such things even in…” and he grimaces, flinching as if from a blow as he ducks his head forward. “I’m just so tired of it, McGillis. I’m supposed to be choosing a bride, I’m supposed to be engaged already and I just—” He breaks off sharply and draws his knees up towards his chest as he reaches out to wrap both arms around them and press his forehead down. It’s a childlike motion, better suited to a boy than to the man Gaelio is, but there’s something sharply sincere about it, as if McGillis is gaining a glimpse backwards in time to the child Gaelio was, growing up pretty and spoiled and alone in this vast, echoing expanse of a castle.

“They don’t see me,” Gaelio says against the fine embroidery of his clothes, dragging the words until they sound nearly a sob against his lips. “All they want is to be the next queen of the country. None of them really care about me at all.”

McGillis looks at Gaelio: the curl of his hair, the hunch of his shoulders, the tension at his hands clutched around himself. It’s a foolish thing for the other to complain of: selling happiness for power is something McGillis has been doing since he was old enough to have anything of merit worth offering, and it’s a trade he’d hardly hesitate to make again. Gaelio has no idea what he’s talking about, no sense of how fortunate his life has been that this is a choice worth balking over, that warmth and food and a roof over his head don’t hang in the balance. But there’s honesty in those clutching arms, and in that bowed head, and however petty Gaelio’s concerns may be something in them twists against McGillis’s heart, something like sympathy aching against the inside of his hollow chest like it’s trying to fill the void he’s made of himself. He stares at Gaelio, at the prince of the country stripped so bare even under the weight of his royal clothes; and he opens his mouth, and he speaks.
“I do.”

Gaelio’s head comes up at once, his gaze swinging up to latch onto McGillis’s face with the speed of a drowning man clutching for an outstretched hand. His cheeks are flushed, his mouth is trembling, but his eyes are enough to run through McGillis like a spear. McGillis’s skin pricks, shivering with discomfort under the weight of clothes that don’t belong to him, of a title stolen from the lies he offered to those bright eyes; but when Gaelio’s mouth shifts it’s with a smile, as warm with simple trust as the one he gave McGillis the day they met. He lifts his hand from around his knees, loosening his grip as the tension in his shoulders gives way, and when he clutches at McGillis’s free hand his palm is warm against the chill of the other’s fingers.

“Thank you,” Gaelio says, gratitude as clear on his voice as affection is in his eyes. “You’re a true friend, McGillis.”

McGillis has never had to struggle as hard for a lie as he does to return the innocence of Gaelio’s smile.
Gaelio is out of commission the next morning. McGillis expected as much -- all the rank in the world isn’t enough to save one from the morning-after headache of too much wine -- but if Gaelio’s present discomfort is ordinary enough the quiet that results from it is not. The palace goes silent, voices drop to hushed murmurs as if the prince is on his deathbed instead of just suffering the effects of his own indulgence, until McGillis starts to feel the pressure of the consideration like a weight crushing down against the air itself. Even the sound of Almiria practicing her piano is muffled, like she’s touching the keys with care to keep the sound from travelling too far beyond her practice room; McGillis has paced within a few doors of the space before he catches the sound of music, and even then it’s too soft for him to identify the song. He pauses in the hallway, thinking about ducking in to offer her a smile, if only for the selfish satisfaction of seeing how quickly he can dissuade her from her studies by his mere appearance; but the idea of exerting his known power pales even in his imagination, until he’s frowning instead of smiling at the possibility. He turns away instead, giving his back to the music room and retreating to the silence of the rest of the palace, and he cuts out into the morning cool of the gardens in an effort to shake the sound of his footsteps echoing like drumbeats off the walls around him.

He stays outside for most of the morning. The gardens are lovely, and there’s far more sound filling the space outside -- Gaelio’s effect doesn’t extend to nature, at any rate, and all the silence of the gardeners does nothing to muffle the chirp of the birds or the rustle of the wind through the trees. There might be more interesting subjects in the library, McGillis knows, he could lay claim to this span of uninterrupted freedom to delve into some of the more interesting texts; but he keeps pacing over the garden paths instead, listening to the crunch of the gravel under his boots and trying not to think about where his mind keeps wandering. He doesn’t want to think about the quiet of the library begging for interruption, doesn’t want to think about the way his heart beats faster at the thought of the door coming open and Gaelio smiling at him from the doorway; so he doesn’t, he looks out at the sky and the trees and the flowers and he thinks about anything other than the tend of his idle thoughts.

The messenger finds him at the edge of the orchard, sitting on one of the smooth-polished benches and looking up at the arc of the branches overhead. There’s no one else in sight, which is the primary reason McGillis chose this location; it seems the most likely position from which he might be able to lay hand to some part of himself that seems to have slipped free of his hold over the last weeks in the palace. He’s gazing at the leaves overhead, idly tracing over the soft green of new-starting fruit just beginning to work its way towards ripeness, when there’s the sound of footsteps approaching with a crisp, certain stride. McGillis knows it’s not Gaelio -- the bright of the midday sunlight would be agony to a wine-induced headache, and Gaelio has never had need to walk anywhere at a pace faster than an idle saunter -- but his heart still speeds, his breath still catches, and when he turns to look it’s with more hope than rationality.

It’s not Gaelio. McGillis doesn’t know the name of the young man now approaching; the most familiarity he can claim is to recognize the other’s face from the handful of royal audiences he’s merited since his arrival, and the man’s gilded livery would have marked him out as one of the royal heralds in any case. He’s not waiting for welcome -- another indication of his relative rank, at least when he’s carrying a message from those he serves -- and McGillis has barely turned to see him before the other draws to a crisp turn and ducks forward into a bow exactly as polite as it is distant.

“Lord McGillis Fareed,” the herald says, speaking with the same intent focus carried on the sound of his footsteps. “His Majesty King Gallus desires an audience with you at your earliest convenience.”
It’s phrased as a request, but McGillis doesn’t ask for clarification before he’s rising to his feet almost as quickly as the herald finishes speaking. “Certainly,” he says, his words calm even as his heart races with the start of adrenaline, of possibility and danger and excitement and threat commingling to burn warmth across his cheeks and catch at his breathing. He presses his lips together and breathes out slowly; by the time the herald is straightening McGillis’s expression is perfectly calm, without so much as a flicker of an eyelash to give away the self-conscious guilt he can feel as if his lips still bear the visible print of Gaelio’s. He ducks his head and lifts a hand to gesture the herald on. “Lead on.”

The herald obeys at once, moving to return back down the path the way he came, and McGillis falls into step behind him, head lifted on pride enough to grant the illusion that he is following rather than being led. His heart is racing, his mind flickering over the array of reasons he might merit a royal summon, few of them good; but when he speaks again his tone is steady, his words almost bored, as befits his constructed role. “Is this to be a formal discussion? I’ve been wandering the gardens the whole of the morning and I’m afraid my present clothes are hardly suited for royalty.”

“No,” the herald says without even looking over his shoulder to consider McGillis’s clothes thus indicated. “His Highness has requested an informal discussion to precede the possibility of a more official pronouncement.”

McGillis’s forehead creases on confusion that goes utterly unseen by the man leading him through the hallways of the palace. Half of the possibilities he is turning over are undone by the first of the herald’s statements, and the other half hardly fit with the ‘official pronouncement’ referenced. He reaches for subjects as he follows the herald through the halls, attempting and dismissing possibilities alarming and pleasant alike, but by the time they’re drawing up in front of a pair of well-polished doors, all he has managed to do is run his imagination dry.

The herald steps forward as soon as McGillis has stopped to lay hand to the door and pull it open; the bow he offers this time is far deeper, and he only straightens from it halfway before he sweeps an arm out to gesture towards McGillis standing out of sight on the other side of the door. “The Lord Fareed, as Your Majesty requested.”

“No,” the herald says without even looking over his shoulder to consider McGillis’s clothes thus indicated. “His Highness has requested an informal discussion to precede the possibility of a more official pronouncement.”

McGillis comes forward to lay hand to the door and pull it open; the bow he offers this time is far deeper, and he only straightens from it halfway before he sweeps an arm out to gesture towards McGillis standing out of sight on the other side of the door. “The Lord Fareed, as Your Majesty requested.”

“Of course,” booms a voice from inside, warm and rich with the assumption of obedience that comes with such elevated rank. “Come in, come in.” The herald straightens and steps to the side, and McGillis comes forward as calmly as he can manage to step through the doorway and into the presence of the king himself.

King Gallus is a broad man, with the same violet hair that so marks his children out as the royalty they are. He must stand of a height with Gaelio, and with significantly more breadth across his chest; but he’s seated now, reclining back in what appears to be no more than a chair, albeit a heavily decorated one. He greets McGillis with a smile that spreads all across his face in echo of Gaelio’s easy delight; but where his son’s eyes glow with warmth Gallus’s are darker, holding back from the expression at his lips as he looks McGillis over.

“Lord Fareed,” he says, and gestures expansively towards the chair set at the far side of the table he’s sitting at. There’s a book open before him; he pushes it away by an inch as McGillis comes forward to obey the implicit invitation of that hand. “We trust you’ve been enjoying your stay here in the palace.”

McGillis comes forward to settle himself at the edge of the chair across from the king with as much illusion of comfort as he can manage. “Of course,” he says. “Your Majesty has been most generous, I have nothing but praise for everything I have encountered.”

“Indeed,” the king beams. “We have heard quite a bit of your own praises as well. Our son seems particularly charmed by the addition of someone willing to lead him into trouble.”
McGillis doesn’t flinch only because he’s already braced for this line of questioning, and because Gallus’s eyes haven’t hardened into true intent yet. “I’m afraid I must beg Your Majesty’s forgiveness for my recklessness,” he says, dropping his gaze in a show of sincerity. “I had intended to make a visit to the ocean as part of my travels, and Gae--His Highness has been such pleasant company since my arrival.”

“So you saw fit to spirit him out of the castle?” Gallus rumbles, and then promptly undermines the threat of his own tone with a booming laugh. “We’re sure that took all of a breath of effort. Our son is restless lately, he feels the weight of his responsibilities keenly. A little mischief now and then is a good way for him to let off steam.” Gallus reaches out to rest a beringed hand against McGillis’s shoulder. “Have no concerns on that front, Lord Fareed. We didn’t call you here to chastise your influence on our son.”

McGillis considers this, and the implications of this, for a moment; and then he takes a breath and lifts his head to meet the king’s gaze fully. “If I may ask, Your Majesty, why was I called?”

The king’s eyebrows jump towards the weight of the gold crown set across his temples; his hand draws away from McGillis’s shoulder as he leans back in his chair. “You are reckless,” he intones. “We see why Gaelio is so drawn to you.” His smile widens enough to crinkle at the corners of his eyes and the moment of tension in McGillis’s chest gives way even before the king lets a laugh break free of his lips. “You may be exactly the fresh spirit this kingdom could use.”

McGillis clears his throat. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” he says. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“It’s quite a simple thing,” the king says. He lifts a hand from the arm of his chair to his face to stroke idly against the pale of his beard. “Our son is quite fond of you already, and you seem to have struck Almiria’s fancy as well.” Gallus’s hand comes up to sweep over his mouth and down against his beard; his smile is still clinging to his lips but his eyes on McGillis are dark and considering. “In the prince’s present unwillingness to choose a bride for himself, we are thinking of offering a betrothal to secure the line otherwise.”

It takes McGillis a moment to parse this. It shouldn’t -- he has more than enough experience with this, enough personal familiarity with being treated like an object to recognize the signs in someone else. But he’s been softened by his stay in the palace, lulled into some false sense of security by the opulence and comfort around him, and for a moment he can’t even make sense of what it is the king is offering with such casual disregard.

“You mean--” McGillis starts, and then closes his mouth tight while he takes a certain grip on his speech before continuing. His heart is racing, his skin is going cold; it’s hard even to find words to wrap around the structure of what he wants to say. “Your Majesty is offering a betrothal to the Princess Almiria?”

“She is quite young,” the king says, consideration on his tone but without any real concern in his eyes. “We would only make the announcement of it now, with the ceremony to follow in a few years. But she is quite taken with you, and in the present peace there’s no need to make use of a political alliance. A nobleman from a neighboring country is a reasonable match for a younger sister, after all. We don’t believe you to be presently affianced elsewhere, is that correct?”

“I am not,” McGillis says. His thoughts are whirling, his mouth is dry; it’s hard even to find words to wrap around the structure of what he wants to say. “Your Majesty, I’m afraid the difference in our status--”

“Is nothing of note,” the king says, in a tone that cuts off this protest before it’s well begun. “Your company is pleasing to our daughter and a boon to our son. Any matters of rank and title can be
overcome. We are the king, after all.”


“Our forgiveness,” the king says, waving a hand to brush this aside. “We hardly expect you to understand the intricacies of ruling as yet, of course, but Gaelio tells us you are a quick learner. As Almira’s husband you will serve as excellent support to us all while remaining a comfort to the crown prince.” The king leans back in his chair and clasps his hands together to beam at McGillis. “We will make the formal announcement tomorrow, but we wished to offer you the benefit of knowing in advance so you may prepare.” The king leans forward and drops his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “We believe you may find a visit to the palace tailors to be quite advantageous, under the circumstances.”

“Of course,” McGillis says. His voice is working on autopilot now, he hardly knows what he’s saying at all. “I thank you.” He braces his hands at the arms of his chair to push upright only to stop short, already halfway out of his seat. “My apologies, Your Majesty. If I may…”

“You are dismissed,” the king says, still smiling as he waves McGillis towards the door. “Perhaps you might drop in on Gaelio to see if he’s yet recovered. We’d like to convey the news to him as soon as he is feeling himself once more.”

“I shall,” McGillis says, and ducks forward into a bow. “Thank you very much, Your Majesty.” He straightens and turns to move towards the door; the king reaches out for his book to draw it back towards himself. When McGillis glances back from the doorway Gallus is already leaning in over the pages, his attention evidently entirely returned to the text before him having completed the negotiation of his daughter’s future in one fell swoop. McGillis only looks at him for a moment; then he turns away to step out and into the hallway of the palace so he can turn and begin striding over the distance of the polished halls before the door is well shut behind him.

He doesn’t yet know what he’s going to do when he gets there, but he knows where he’s going, royal orders or no.
Impulse

McGillis isn’t gentle about knocking on Gaelio’s door. It’s a heavy slab of wood, polished to a dark shine that seems to swallow noise; something lighter would be lost to the weight of the barrier, he thinks, drunk up like water on sand to leave nothing to carry his intent to the man within. But it’s not just a desire to be heard that rattles his fist against the wall of Gaelio’s bedroom door: it’s rebellion, more than anything else, a lashing out against the quiet, and the weight, and the pressure McGillis can feel crushing him where he stands. He has just been offered the hand of a princess, has had his future laid out before him with royal grace by Gaelio’s own father: and McGillis has never felt so suffocated in all his life.

“Go away.” Gaelio’s voice is petulant, even through the barrier of the door between himself and McGillis; McGillis can hear the sound of pain clear in the edge on the other’s voice. “Unless the palace is burning down I don’t want to hear it.”

McGillis squeezes his eyes shut and leans forward to press his forehead to the polished wood. It takes him a moment to clear his throat; he has to swallow twice before he’s sure that a sob won’t tear free of his throat when he opens his lips. “Gaelio,” he manages, finally, when he thinks he can trust himself. “It’s McGillis.”

There’s a moment of quiet from inside, neither protest nor acknowledgment from the prince within; then a patter of footsteps, the rhythm off-balance and stumbling but clearly hasty all the same. McGillis draws back from the door, straightening his shoulders and pulling his expression back into something like calm, and the door comes open at once to let the light in the hallway spill into the shadows of the room within. Gaelio squints into the light, flinching from the illumination with a speed that speaks to the headache he must still be nursing, but his grimace gives way to a smile before McGillis can even open his mouth to apologize, his expression softening as rapidly as he lays eyes on the other before him.

“McGillis,” Gaelio says, and lets his hold on the door go to reach out instead. His fingers catch at McGillis’s hand, his hold tightens to press affection against the other’s skin; McGillis lets him, his hand slack in the warmth of Gaelio’s hold. Gaelio doesn’t seem to notice; he’s shaking his head and lifting his other hand to push his tousled hair back from his face. He looks like he’s just tumbled himself out of bed, between the mess of his hair and the loose white shirt draping around his shoulders; McGillis lets his gaze slide down and fixes his attention on the angle of Gaelio’s collarbone as a safer point to rest his focus than on those wide blue eyes staring at him. “I’m glad to see you.” He sounds painfully sincere, as open with his words as he is with his expression; McGillis wants to flinch with sympathetic fear to such patent vulnerability. “What are you doing here?”

McGillis opens his mouth to answer, to offer some response hovering appropriately over the line between flirtatious and polite, with enough of the latter to lend plausible deniability to the former but heat sufficient to fluster Gaelio’s eyelashes and win the gust of a laugh from the other’s lips. He’s not thinking about his speech any more than he thought about his movement -- he still doesn’t know why he’s here at all -- and it’s into the empty space of his frantic thoughts that honesty stages a sudden revolt.

“I wanted to see you,” McGillis hears himself say, and that wasn’t at all what he wanted to admit and hardly something he even knew he was feeling, but it’s enough to knock Gaelio’s pain-tense expression wide open on shock. McGillis flinches from his words, feeling the weight of them turn bitter against his tongue, but Gaelio is leaning in without waiting for more, tipping in and even taking a step forward, as if the few inches of distance between them are too much to be borne.
“I’m glad,” he says at once, speaking with breathless haste like he’s trying to lay claim to this sudden admission before it slips through his fingers. “I’ve been feeling terrible all morning but it’s good just to see you.” His arm comes up, his free hand reaching out to touch against the back of McGillis’s neck with unthinking affection; McGillis has to bite his lip to keep from cringing from the contact, has to lock his shoulders in place to keep from leaning farther into it. Gaelio’s leaning forward, invading McGillis’s personal space with the easy grace of one born to sovereignty; McGillis can’t make himself pull away before Gaelio’s forehead is touching his. He can see the other’s lashes dip, can watch them flutter heavy against Gaelio’s cheeks; when Gaelio gusts an exhale the shudder of it presses to McGillis’s mouth like a touch. “McGillis.”

McGillis lifts his hand to grab against Gaelio’s wrist, to clutch his fingers tight against the angle of the other’s arm reaching over his shoulder. He intends to push him away, intends to hold the other steady while he retreats to something like a safe distance again; but his strength fails him on contact with Gaelio’s skin, like all the power in him is drained away just by the friction. His fingers tighten, his grip on Gaelio’s hand clutching at him flexes, and when he opens his mouth the words that tear free of his chest are as novel to his own ears as to Gaelio’s.

“Let’s sneak out,” he says, barely thinking to lower his voice to the whisper such a statement demands. “Come out with me. I’ll show you where I learned how to dance.”

Gaelio draws back by a few inches, but his hands don’t move; the retreat is just so he can look at McGillis, so he can blink wide-eyed confusion at the other. “At your home estate?” he asks. “Those are days away even by carriage, you don’t mean to go all the way back there do you?”

McGillis bites back the grimace of self-directed anger at his own slip, at this carelessness so inexcusable if he intends to continue his deception; but then, he’s not sure he does, in this moment all his thoughts are turned to a single point, a single evening, a single hour. “I meant someplace like where I learned to dance.” He tightens his hold on Gaelio’s hand, brightens his smile to pull the other’s attention away from the confusion creasing lines into his forehead. It works, at least in the moment: Gaelio’s gaze flickers from McGillis’s eyes down to his mouth, lingering there for a long moment before he pulls himself back to the other’s stare, and even then he looks more heat-dazed than suspicious. “I told you I learned in a common room. There must be some inn around here we can go to for the evening so I can show you what it’s like.”

Gaelio huffs a laugh, but he sounds more breathless than skeptical. “I’ve been to inns before. Just to visit as the prince, but--”

“Not as the prince,” McGillis says. “As travelers. We’ll dress like commoners, we can go to one of the inns on the far side of the city and pretend to be just one of the masses.” He curls his fingers tight around Gaelio’s and pulls as if to physically urge the other into his suggestion. “No titles and no crowns and no balls. Just you and me. Just for a night.” McGillis lets his gaze drop, lets himself lean forward fractionally; it’s a deliberate imitation of Gaelio’s earlier motion, as if McGillis can’t keep himself away from the pull of Gaelio’s mouth. When he speaks it’s with his voice low in his throat and quivering over the appearance of want. “Please, Gaelio.”

“Of course,” Gaelio says. He sounds dazed and looks more so, as if he’s been hypnotized by McGillis’s words, as if he’s been bewitched by the other’s proximity. McGillis can feel the shift of Gaelio’s fingers against the back of his neck, can watch the tilt of the other’s head as his gaze lingers against McGillis’s mouth. “Of course, I’ll...when do you want to go?”

“Tonight,” McGillis says, and there’s no need to struggle for the intensity in his voice over that word, the sincerity is rather too much for him to restrain. It’s desperation on his tongue, anxiety straining in his shoulders; from the way Gaelio’s lashes flutter it passes for desire instead of the barely-restrained
panic it is. “This evening. Tell everyone you’re ill, that you still have a headache, that you can’t
come down to dinner and you don’t wish to see anyone, and I’ll come for you.”

Gaelio’s breath hitches over itself, catching in his throat as if on shock, but he’s nodding too, ready to
give himself over at once to the insistence of McGillis’s words. “Yes, yes, okay.” His gaze comes
up, sliding over McGillis’s face with as much attention as if he’s pressing his fingers against the lines
of the other’s features. “What about...what should I wear?”

“Something simple,” McGillis tells him. “The simplest clothes you have. I’ll bring a cloak to cover
your hair.” His heart is racing, his words are tripping over each other; he should stop, should shut his
mouth and pull back from this idea and this offer and this mad, foolish plan, but he can’t make
himself let go and he can’t make himself stop talking. “Wait for me here, Gaelio.”

Gaelio ducks his head into a nod, the motion rushed with his haste to demonstrate obedience. “I will.
I’ll be right here, I won’t leave my quarters until you arrive.”

“Good,” McGillis says; and then he does what he shouldn’t, what he can’t keep himself from doing,
and he lifts his head to kiss against Gaelio’s mouth for a breath of time. Gaelio’s lips go soft under
his, surrendering into the open suggestion of pliancy, but McGillis doesn’t lean in to take it, doesn’t
back Gaelio into the shadows of his bedroom as he wants to. There are too many possible observers,
too many servants with eyes to see and tongues to tell, and so he pulls away almost as soon as his
lips touch Gaelio’s, leaving them both with no more than a glow of friction to bruise their mouths to
red.

“Tonight,” McGillis says, offering the word like a promise, like the vow it is in truth; and then he lets
his hold go, and he pulls himself free of Gaelio’s hands, and Gaelio’s mouth, and Gaelio’s
magnetism. He turns at once, pivoting on his heel and fixing his gaze down the hallway as quickly as
he starts moving; it’s the only way, he thinks, to get himself away from the temptation he can feel
thudding like an open flame through his veins.

If he keeps looking at Gaelio, he’ll never be able to make himself leave.
The inn is awash in sound even before they make it through the front doors. McGillis can hear it from the end of the street, where they dismount the pair of horses he slipped free of the stables in preparation for his and Gaelio’s ride from the palace; he could follow it with his eyes shut, he’s sure, finding his way through the city streets with the easy grace of childhood under his feet. He doesn’t have to think about where he’s going, doesn’t have to make a decision about where they are headed; the music draws them, his promise and Gaelio’s fever-bright eyes beckoning them forward until McGillis doesn’t even bother glancing at the name of the inn before he tosses the reins of his horse to the stableman lounging next to the door. Gaelio follows his example, albeit with a little less comfortable certainty in his motions, but McGillis doesn’t wait for the other; he’s stepping forward instead, drawn into the warmth and noise of the inn as if he’s on a lead that only grows tighter the shorter it becomes.

The space inside is familiar, as familiar as the inn where McGillis spent so many years of his childhood. The low ceiling, the cramped walkways, the roar of sound and heat and humidity; even the tang of alcohol in the air is nostalgic, as if it were lifted straight from the floorboards that McGillis’s young feet stumbled over. McGillis doesn’t pause, doesn’t so much as bat an eye as he leads Gaelio through the door in his wake; but he can feel the sense of belonging, as if the grip of the past is reaching out to drag him from those polished halls he’s been playing in and back to the streets where he truly belongs.

“Oh wow,” Gaelio breathes. He’s speaking softly but he’s so close to McGillis that the words are clear all the same. “McGillis, this is incredible.”

“Don’t say my name,” McGillis says without turning around to look at Gaelio’s face. “We’re in disguise.” He takes the lead, moving quickly through the crowd and towards the back corner of the inn, where the tables have been pushed aside to make more space for the enthusiasm of the dancers filling the main space; Gaelio is left to trail behind him, a little more clumsy in navigating the crowd without McGillis’s streetrat speed. By the time he’s found his way back to the other’s side McGillis has laid claim to the corner of a table, in the darkest corner of the inn he can find. The surface before him is sticky, the floor dusty where the halfhearted attempts at sweeping didn’t reach, but the light is worse over here and that will help to cover what identifiable details remain in Gaelio’s face with his brilliant hair covered by a cloak.

Gaelio doesn’t appear at all alarmed. His eyes are bright, his face turned out towards the crowd; even when he sinks to sit on the bench forming a corner with McGillis’s his gaze is directed outward, towards the swirl of dancers and the off-key thrum of the music. His whole expression is alight, his languid headache of the morning entirely forgotten; he looks warm, bright, as if some part of his self that has lain dormant for long years is being called awake by the rough handling of their present surroundings.

“This is amazing,” he says, his voice a little too bright and a little too awestruck even as he leans in conspiratorially towards McGillis. “Is it always like this in common inns?”

McGillis breathes out hard through his nose in what is very nearly a laugh and turns to follow Gaelio’s gaze. “Loud, you mean?”

McGillis might be trying to restrain his laughter; Gaelio is under no such compunctions. His amusement bursts free into the space around them, warm enough to draw a flicker of the attention McGillis is trying to shed with their heavy cloaks and nearly-casual clothing. “Not just that,” Gaelio says. “I’ve never heard music like this before. And there are so many people.”
“There are people in your ballrooms too,” McGillis says without looking away from the ripples of motion filling the room. “Many dozens more of them than could ever fit in these walls.”

“It’s not the same,” Gaelio protests. “They’re all nobles and diplomats and lords and ladies. These are…”

“The common folk?” McGillis suggests. There’s a bite on the back of his tone, an edge he doesn’t intend before it breaks free, but it’s lost to the roar of sound around them, or maybe Gaelio is too distracted to pick up on the implication. The prince just laughs instead, the sound ringing so loud McGillis can’t help but think it must be recognizable, that someone will know him for who he is just from that sound alone; but no one turns, hardly anyone so much as glances their way. It’s only McGillis who feels that sound in the marrow of his bones, who feels the pull of it like magnetism dragging at his attention; and when he finally capitulates to look back he knows what he’ll see even before he turns his head to see the single-minded attention Gaelio is turning on him as well.

“It’s wonderful,” he says; and he’s reaching across the table without hesitating, stretching out over the distance between them to touch at McGillis’s arm, to close his fingers around the slack weight of the other’s hand resting against the table. “Thank you for bringing me here, McGillis.”

McGillis looks into Gaelio’s face: his wide eyes, his brilliant smile, the all-in delight glowing in his face shadowed not at all by the obscuring weight of the hood pulled far forward over his features. He looks radiant with happiness, like it’s filling his veins in place of blood, and McGillis can feel his tight-stretched resistance give way like a leather tie snapping under too much pressure. His hand closes around Gaelio’s, his fingers clutch pressure at the heat of the other’s hand in his; and he’s reaching up and out, stretching over the distance of the table to fit his fingers into the shadows lying between Gaelio’s face and the edge of his cloak. His hand presses to Gaelio’s hair, Gaelio’s eyes go wide for a moment of startled reaction, and then McGillis is tipping his head, and shutting his eyes, and crushing his mouth hard against the soft of Gaelio’s own.

There’s no hesitation in his mind, no uncertainty in his thoughts. He shouldn’t be doing this -- shouldn’t be doing this here, shouldn’t be doing it like this, should certainly not be doing it with the crown prince -- but all the reasons why he shouldn’t just push him in closer, tip him farther over the table and tighten his fingers on Gaelio’s hair. He’s bruising his mouth against Gaelio’s, urging closer as if he intends to stage a rebellion against the very rhythm of the other’s breathing, and Gaelio is responding as quickly as McGillis knew he would, lifting his hand to McGillis’s shoulder and parting his lips and giving himself up to McGillis’s want with his usual unthinking abandon. It’s enough for Gaelio that he wants this, enough that McGillis’s mouth is hot on his and McGillis’s hold in his hair is insistent; and McGillis is possessed by something wild and stupid and reckless, until he doesn’t care what happens in the next minute so long as he can have this, here, now.

He doesn’t know how long they’re allowed to continue. He’s not listening to the voices raising around them, isn’t listening to the sound of the crowd giving over their dancing for a chorus of catcalls and jeers; every shout just brings him in closer, every lewd suggestion urges him to press farther into Gaelio’s mouth, to try to catch everything the other is offering against the drag of his tongue. Gaelio is clutching against McGillis’s hand, is whimpering into McGillis’s mouth and tipping in to the press of McGillis’s thumb at the soft space just behind his ear; and then there’s a voice, so near and so loud even McGillis can’t ignore it, and a force pulling against the weight of his cloak to drag him back. McGillis lets go with a hiss, frustration too keen in him to not be given voice, and when he turns to glare up at the innkeeper it’s with lordly self-assurance and street-urchin savagery both blazing behind his eyes.

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“Apologies for interrupting,” the innkeeper says, meeting McGillis’s glare with the steadfast composure of every business owner McGillis has ever met. “I don’t hold with whoring out on the
common floor.” He snaps a towel over his wrist with force enough to punctuate the words into the edge of a threat. “If you don’t want to buy one of the options upstairs, you can get you and your toy to a room or you can get out of my inn.”

“Fine,” McGillis says. His heart is racing with speed enough that he feels dizzy and near-drunk; he can’t tell if it’s fury or arousal running so hot in his veins. He doesn’t know if it makes a difference. He surges to his feet, standing with such speed that he knocks the bench behind him back by a foot in spite of the patrons sitting at the other end, and reaches to push back the hood of his cloak with as much haughty petulance as he can find in himself. “We’ll have a room, then. I trust you have one available, good innkeeper?”

The innkeeper takes a half-step back, apparently more cowed by McGillis’s show of pretension than by his evident anger. “Of course,” he says, his gaze skipping from McGillis to Gaelio’s still-shadowed face and back again. “I would hardly have offered if I--”

“Good,” McGillis says, and pulls hard at Gaelio’s hand to urge the other to his feet. “Then we shall retire at once.” And he strides forward to push past the innkeeper and lead Gaelio forward through the room. The crowd parts for him, giving way to his assumption of power even as their audience murmurs put-upon shock and a few hecklers shout from against the walls; McGillis doesn’t deign to so much as glance at them. He cuts straight across the room, carving a path through the dancers without concern for the couples that dodge to the sides to get out of his way, and by the time he’s climbing the stairs the innkeeper is hard on Gaelio’s heels and speaking loud to offer directions.

“We have a pair of rooms,” he says, almost shouting as he struggles to match McGillis’s hasty pace up the stairs. “There’s one on the left here, though the bed is somewhat smaller--”

“We’ll have the other,” McGillis says without waiting for the last of the man’s explanation.

“Ah,” the innkeeper says. “Very well, my lord.” He pushes forward to come up level with Gaelio still trailing in McGillis’s wake and lifts a hand to point down the narrow hallway. “It’ll be the fourth on the right, near the end of the hall. Milords.”

“Good,” McGillis says. “See to it we have no interruptions.” And he strides forward down the hallway, moving so quickly that Gaelio stumbles at the renewed pace. McGillis keeps going, still holding Gaelio’s hand clasped tight in his own; he doesn’t turn around, even as he comes forward to the door indicated and reaches to wrench the handle open.

It’s hardly a large room. There’s space for a double wide bed in the center, and a washbasin set up in the corner atop a fragile-looking table, and not much else; McGillis thinks they would be unable to move at all if they had any luggage with them. But they don’t, after all, they have nothing more on them than the clothes they’re wearing and the heat of each other, and McGillis is turning at once, pivoting on his heel to face Gaelio as quickly as the other stumbles forward to follow him into the room. Gaelio falls back, retreating as if on an unspoken cue as McGillis steps in to back him up against the door, and then McGillis is reaching out to push back the hood of the other’s cloak, and brace his hands at Gaelio’s head, and lean in to lay claim to the other’s mouth.

Gaelio submits to McGillis’s touch. This is hardly a surprise -- he has been nothing but pliant from the first moment McGillis touched him, when he clasped Gaelio’s hand in his and urged the other back and across the smooth-polished parquet floor of the Issue ballroom. But McGillis is wound tight on panic, and strain, and all the thousands of truths he is holding unspoken against his tongue, and in the war raging in his head Gaelio’s submission feels like an overt victory. His hands curl to fists in Gaelio’s hair, his leg presses hard into the space between the other’s thighs, and when he rocks forward and up Gaelio is left to moan openly against his mouth, his lips parting over heat as helpless as the tremor in his legs and the clutch of his hands as he grabs at McGillis’s shoulders. McGillis
doesn’t retreat, doesn’t flinch back from his forward urging; Gaelio’s response is no more than encouragement, the desperate hold at his cloak and shirtfront no more than open want. He presses closer, capturing the part of Gaelio’s heat-open mouth with the weight of his own, and the next time he rocks himself forward it’s with deliberate intention to pull another of those full-body shudders from Gaelio again.

McGillis doesn’t know how long they stay there. He’s acting on instinct, moving on something bone-deep and as reflexive as the motion of a starving man reaching for food; and Gaelio gives as rapidly as McGillis reaches, melting back against the door as if McGillis’s touch is stripping him of strength just for the contact. His hand is curling against McGillis’s neck, his hold is looping close around McGillis’s waist; when McGillis arches in to buck the other back against the door Gaelio groans outright into his mouth, giving voice to the heat McGillis can feel flushing hard against the resistance of his thigh. McGillis knows that sound, knows this pliancy, has tasted this surrender; but everything is different, now, inverted and undone by the pace of his own heartbeat and the rush of his own breathing. He’s moving on his own desires, now, rocking forward in answer to the demands of his own form more than the surrender of Gaelio’s; and Gaelio is responding, fitting himself to McGillis’s demands before McGillis can think to pull back into the restraint of acceptance desire. This is past flirtation, past suggestion, past all reasonable bounds of propriety and rationality; and McGillis wants nothing more than to push onward, farther, further, to crush Gaelio back against the door and wring pleasure from him with the full-body press of his existence against the other’s.

It’s Gaelio who finds words to speak, in the end. McGillis has lost them, has given away his coherency somewhere against the heat of Gaelio’s lips and the taste of his skin; when Gaelio gasps a laugh McGillis feels the sound of it thrum under his lips, where’s he’s trailed down against the angle of the other’s jaw and along the line of his throat. Gaelio presses his lips together, swallows hard enough that McGillis can hear as well as feel it, and when he does speak his voice is breathless, quivering in his throat like autumn leaves threatening to give way to the wind of an oncoming storm. “McGillis.”

McGillis growls a note of protest against Gaelio’s throat. It takes conscious effort to keep from opening his lips, from setting his teeth against the curve of pale skin and marking the other with bruises deep enough to scar him as McGillis’s own. “You want to stop.”

Gaelio’s breath rushes from him so hard McGillis can feel it ruffle in his hair. “No,” he gasps, and the sound of that refusal: hot, shaky, flush with want; goes through McGillis’s entire body like a flame scorching through a tracery of lace. “No, I.” His hand tightens at McGillis’s cloak, his arm flexes for a moment as if to pull the other closer, and then he lets his grip go to reach out and gesture. “There’s a bed, McGillis.”

McGillis has to take a moment at this. He knows the layout of the room, he took stock of it when they came through the door; but all his flirtations never went any farther than desperate kissing, the seduction of his touch never reached for more than the weight of skirts and the tension of bodices. He’s played this game before, he knows how to skirt the edge of decency and pull away before toppling over; but he’s lost the line, his mind is clouded into a distraction he can’t seem to free himself from. Gaelio’s skin is like wine, sweet and rich and dizzyingly intoxicating, and McGillis wants nothing more than to have more of it, to drag loose that obscuring cloak and pull that silk shirt free of those clinging breeches and fit his hands to the angle of those sharp hips before him, to kiss his way down against the flutter of breathing riding the space between Gaelio’s collarbones. It’s the same force that dragged him forward across the table downstairs, that undid his intention for subtlety and swept him through the center of the common room on a tide of noble pretension, and it’s that desire, now, that curls his hand to fist Gaelio’s cloak at the back of the other’s neck so he can drag him away from the door and around towards the indicated bed.
Gaelio lands hard. For all that he was the one who pointed it out he seems as startled by the bed hitting the back of his knees as if he had never seen it at all; his balance gives way, his legs fold from under him, and he falls back to the mattress with a gust of an exhale as if McGillis had slammed a fist into his stomach. But he’s smiling in spite of his rough landing, grinning wide and reckless with unabashed delight, and when McGillis leans in to follow him down Gaelio reaches up without hesitation to catch his fingers into the other’s hair. His pull is unexpectedly hard, or at least harder than McGillis ever received from the young ladies he has halfway seduced before; it overcomes his already-shaky balance to send him falling fully atop the prince sprawling over the sheets below him. Gaelio doesn’t seem to mind that either, judging from the throaty groan he spills over McGillis’s parted lips, and McGillis is moving without waiting for invitation or permission.

His hand catches at Gaelio’s hip, his fingers seize to brace the other in place, and when he moves forward it’s with the rough elegance of a cresting wave to push himself hard against Gaelio beneath him, to grind the tension of his body down against the resistance of the other’s. Gaelio spasms under him, his head going back and his throat coming open on a moan of incoherent heat, and McGillis shifts his knee to brace against the sheets and move again. His thoughts are spinning, as wild and heady as if he is as drunk as the hecklers they pushed past downstairs; but there’s no thinking to the movement of his body now, no logic to the curve of his spine and the rough thrust of his hips. It’s all instinct, reflex tight in his thighs and curling in his fingers and gasping at his lips, and under him Gaelio is glowing with color, his cheeks stained to wanting red and his mouth open and wet with invitation and the whole of him shuddering in pliant, immediate answer to every motion of McGillis’s body against his own. McGillis’s attention fixes against the curve of Gaelio’s neck, his gaze sticking to the pale soft of the skin just under the other’s ear, where a few strands of dark hair are clinging to sweat-damp pale: there’s nothing special about it, it’s no more than he’s seen in any of those overloud ballrooms or after one of Carta’s enthusiastic rides, but just in this moment McGillis thinks he’s never seen anything as erotic as the flutter of Gaelio’s pulse, the angle of Gaelio’s jaw, the curl of Gaelio’s hair against the rough cloth of the sheets below them.

“McGillis,” Gaelio gasps, his voice breaking over the heat of his lips and the shudder of his breathing. McGillis can see the shape of his name humming in the tension at Gaelio’s throat as if he’s reading the letters off the page of a book, can feel the sound of the syllables humming down his spine with all the weight of a royal command. He ducks in at once, pinning Gaelio down to the bed with hips and chest and mouth, and it’s while Gaelio is whimpering himself into heat under the crush of McGillis’s mouth to his jawline that McGillis frees a hand to force his fingers into the nonexistent space between their bodies. There’s nowhere for him to go, he’s too close to Gaelio and they’re both moving with too much raw instinct to pause even for this, but McGillis doesn’t need dexterity or elegance to catch his fingers into the laces at the front of Gaelio’s pants and jerk hard to wrench them loose. Gaelio’s breath hisses past his parted lips, Gaelio’s legs flex to buck up against McGillis over him, but the laces are giving way too, falling open to McGillis’s rough movement as surely as Gaelio himself, and that’s all McGillis really needs. He grabs at a handful of Gaelio’s white shirt to drag it up and loose of the other’s pants and jerk hard to wrench them loose. Gaelio’s breath hisses past his parted lips, Gaelio’s legs flex to buck up against McGillis over him, but the laces are giving way too, falling open to McGillis’s rough movement as surely as Gaelio himself, and that’s all McGillis really needs. He grabs at a handful of Gaelio’s white shirt to drag it up and loose of the other’s pants, desperation taking the place of grace, and no sooner is the fabric falling free over the stutter of Gaelio’s breathing in his chest than McGillis is shoving his hand back down, urging in against the flutter of strain in Gaelio’s stomach and down over the delicate skin at his hip to slide under his waistband and inside the loosened weight of his pants.

McGillis can feel Gaelio’s body go taut as his fingers push down, as his touch presses hard against hot-flushed skin. There’s a quiver that runs through the other’s body, a spasm as if of surprise in the hands clutching against McGillis’s shirt and in the fall of his hair, and under McGillis’s mouth Gaelio’s throat strains to work over a groan loud enough that McGillis is sure it will carry through the thin walls of the inn around them. He ought to hush him, ought to press a hand over Gaelio’s mouth and stifle the heat in the other’s throat to muffled whimpers, but when he pulls up from the other’s neck to look down it’s to appreciate the flutter of desire in dark lashes, to see the unthinking
part of Gaelio’s lips over his moan of pleasure as McGillis palms inelegant friction against the length of his cock. The motion is awkward, rushed and clumsy with the uncomfortable position and McGillis’s own precarious balance, but it doesn’t matter: Gaelio is as responsive as any of the noblewomen so ready to throw themselves into McGillis’s arms, more so, even, as McGillis watches his lashes flutter without any trace of the self-conscious conceit the ladies put on. There is no intention to Gaelio’s reactions, no study to the reflex that is straining at his legs and seizing at his fingers; he is all instinct, careless of his rank and unthinking of their situation, responding to McGillis with as much instant satisfaction as of a man much younger and less versed in the ways of the world. It makes McGillis’s breath catch, to see that open want printed in the unfeigned color flushing Gaelio’s cheeks, to feel the unpretending heat of desire pressing hard against the weight of his palm, and in that moment, in that heartbeat, he has never wanted anything so much as this.

McGillis drags his hand free of Gaelio’s pants, abandoning his clumsily offered friction outright while Gaelio is still shuddering beneath him. Gaelio’s eyes come open, his heat-shadowed gaze struggling for traction at McGillis’s face, but for the first moment he can’t even find words for his protest, can do nothing but gape wordlessly at the loss of the other’s touch. McGillis reaches for Gaelio’s hip to close his hold against the sharp line of bone under the skin, to drive his thumb into bruising friction, and Gaelio gasps a breath and fumbles himself into some grasp of speech. “McGillis,” he says, and his hand in McGillis’s hair is coming loose, his fingers easing their fisting hold as his palm slides down instead to trail against the other’s cheek and stroke over the line of his jaw. Gaelio’s gaze follows his touch, his attention falling with helpless heat; McGillis can see tenderness in the part of Gaelio’s lips, in the huff of an exhale like he’s anticipating a kiss. “What are you doing, why--why did you stop?”

McGillis doesn’t answer aloud. He watches Gaelio watching him, tracks the dip of the other’s lashes and the soft, too-gentle curve of his lips; and then he rocks his weight back over his knees, and he pulls hard at Gaelio’s hip to force the other up and over onto his stomach. Gaelio turns at once, even as he huffs an exhale of startled heat; his knee catches at McGillis’s thigh, the impact digging into the ache of a bruise, but McGillis hardly feels it. He’s too caught in the surge of heat rushing through him, in the warmth of power tingling through his fingertips and straining against his shoulders, and in front of him Gaelio is sprawling over the rough dark of the sheets without protest except to turn his head and look back over his shoulder. His eyes are wide, his cheeks as flushed with expectant heat as the damp part of his lips, but McGillis doesn’t linger in the expression on Gaelio’s face. He’s occupied with other concerns at the moment, as he shifts his weight to straddle Gaelio’s knees so he can pin the other down beneath him before he braces a hand at Gaelio’s back and leans sideways over the bed to strain for the drawer in the table alongside the bed.

“McGillis,” Gaelio manages as McGillis is pulling the drawer open and fumbling blind for the bottle he sincerely hopes to find inside. His voice is shaky, like it’s showing the cracks of heat McGillis has dragged into the other’s body; McGillis can feel Gaelio trembling in time with the same, can feel the tension of anticipation and arousal and uncertainty quivering in the line of the thighs pinned still between his own. “What are you doing?”

It’s a stretch to reach the drawer. McGillis can barely cover the distance as he is; any farther and he’ll need to get off Gaelio entirely so he can properly investigate the room. The thought grits at his teeth, hisses in his throat with completely irrational resistance, and he strains as far as he can go. His shoulder aches, his back twinges; but his fingers find a curved surface, and the victory is more than enough to make up for the strain. He clutches at the bottle as he straightens to return to his original position kneeling over Gaelio pinned before him, his attention fixed to the stopper of it rather than the question in those blue eyes looking back at him.

“I’ll show you,” he says as he wrenches the stopper free and turns the bottle over to spill oil over his
fingers and palm. He’s too hasty with it, it spills over his wrist and drips to soak into the fabric of Gaelio’s pants, but McGillis doesn’t bother to collect the extra. He shoves the stopper back into place and drops the bottle to the side of the bed, and then he’s reaching out to curl his fingers into the waistband of Gaelio’s pants and pull the clothing down and free of the other’s body. The fabric slides free at once, as submissive to McGillis’s demands as Gaelio himself, and in front of him Gaelio’s breath catches over an inhale of whimpering heat as McGillis lays him bare. His mouth comes open, and McGillis reaches to weigh a hand at Gaelio’s hip to brace him steady while he fits the dripping wet of his touch in against the shadows between Gaelio’s thighs.

Gaelio moans when McGillis’s touch presses against him. McGillis can feel the shudder that runs through the other’s body as his fingers drag slick over the sensitive skin just behind Gaelio’s balls, as he pushes hard to urge heat out into the other’s form. He’s not being as gentle as he could be, the instinctive haste of his childhood is urging him to too much speed; but Gaelio is quivering under him, his whole body going hot just for McGillis’s touch. It’s dizzying to feel the power of it, to be able to watch Gaelio’s shoulders tremble in time with the drag of McGillis’s fingers rubbing against delicate skin. McGillis can’t look away, can’t pull his gaze back from the flex and drag of Gaelio’s body quivering with involuntary tension under the weight of his clothes. His fingers press, his touch urges slick against Gaelio’s entrance; and Gaelio opens for him at once, the strain in his body giving way in perfect time with the huff of air that spills from his lips. McGillis’s skin goes hot, his cock twitches against the inside of his still-fastened pants, and when he pushes deeper it’s with instinct on the gesture, with the fever-hunger of his long-past childhood. Gaelio is capitulating, even this most intimate of spaces laid bare for McGillis’s touch, for McGillis’s taking; and McGillis seizes on a breath, and clenches his hold tighter at Gaelio’s hip, and he takes.

Gaelio is unbelievably responsive. McGillis’s fingers are slick with oil and his touch is certain, as unflinching as the force of his hand pinning Gaelio down to the sheets, but even so Gaelio opens for him without being told, almost without the urging of McGillis’s touch at all. It’s like he’s been keeping himself ready, as if all these weeks and days and hours have been steeping surrender into the very core of his being, until when McGillis touches him Gaelio blossoms into heat like a flower in the sunlight. It’s a strange response, McGillis thinks, from someone who is meant to take control of a country, from someone who has been raised his whole life to rule; but with his fingers working into the giving heat of Gaelio’s body beneath him McGillis can’t imagine anything else. He’s seen this already, in the shadow of Gaelio’s lashes and the soft of his lips and the line of his shoulders; he’s felt this, before, with the sound of Carta’s ball humming in his ears and Gaelio answering all his demands with the same pliant grace he offered up for McGillis’s taking on that quiet beach. Gaelio might have been born to rule, might have been trained to it from his youngest days; but his nature is that of a follower, a subject, and McGillis knows all too well how unshakeable nature is.

The other possibility -- that it’s more a function of Gaelio’s partner than Gaelio himself that wins this surrender -- McGillis doesn’t let himself think of at all.

It takes a few minutes. Even with Gaelio’s willing submission and McGillis’s unflinching lead the instinctive strain of the other’s body demands time and persuasion before it gives way entirely. But McGillis doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t slow the insistent pace of his thrusting fingers, and finally Gaelio is panting across the bed before him, his cheeks flushed to red and his lips parted and his gaze distant and hazy, and there’s no tension in him at all. McGillis takes another motion forward, as deep as he can get his fingers to go, just to be sure; and then he huffs a breath, and slides his fingers back so he can reach for the front of his own pants and tug roughly at the laces holding them shut.

He doesn’t bother stripping his clothes off. His shirt hangs loose around his hips when he drags it free of his waistband, the front of his pants open for the pull of a hasty grip; it’s enough to have the fabric pushed aside, enough to grant himself access to close his hand around the length of his cock and stroke what remains of the oil up and over himself. Gaelio is breathing hard, deep lungfuls of air
that strain against his shoulders as his fingers tense on anticipation; McGillis wonders vaguely if the
flush now suffusing the other’s face spreads down his shoulders, if the dip of his back and the insides
of his thighs are stained to that same rose-pink of heat. He could find out, if he took the time to pull
back from his position over Gaelio’s knees, if he paused for the few minutes it would take to drag the
fall of Gaelio’s shirt up over his head and strip him of his boots and the tangled mess of his half-loose
pants; but McGillis can feel himself on the precipice of danger already. He doesn’t know what he’d
do with the whole of Gaelio’s body laid out before him, with the angle of the other’s knees cradling
his hips and the weight of bare arms curling around his neck; he doesn’t know how he would ever be
able to pull himself free of the prison of Gaelio’s affection if he let himself have so much. He should
leave now, should have left days before, should never have brought Gaelio here, now; but he did,
and he has, and his heart is racing too fast on desire for rationality to override him now. So he ducks
his head instead, he fixes his gaze on Gaelio’s shoulders instead of on the hazed-over want of those
blue eyes, or the pale of that highbred skin, and when he presses himself forward it’s by feel more
than sight. His cock slips over Gaelio, the head of it dragging against slick skin for a moment of
misalignment; and then McGillis hisses frustration, and Gaelio gasps an exhale, and when McGillis
rocks his hips forward it’s to thrust forward and into the give of Gaelio’s body before him.

He was ready for the heat. Gaelio is flushed over every inch of his skin that McGillis can see; even
just around the urging of the other’s fingers he was radiant to the touch, glowing until McGillis could
feel the warmth clinging to the oil slick against his fingers. But McGillis’s cock is thicker than the
two fingers he was using, and aching with the sensitivity of arousal, and in the first moment of
connection it’s the friction that steals his breath, that pulls the air from him in a groan so far down in
the depths of his chest there is no space for dissembling, no room for anything but honest desire on
his tongue. He feels like he’s going blind, like his vision has simply blanked out to leave him staring
wide-eyed and unseeing at the man before him, but his hearing is still registering, and so he hears the
high, straining whine in Gaelio’s throat as they come together. McGillis’s whole body is taut with
sensation, with heat rippling up his spine with such force he can’t even parse it as pleasure for a
moment; and under him Gaelio is quivering, clenching hard around McGillis with helpless tension to
match the drag of his fingers at the sheets. McGillis’s hand is seizing hard at Gaelio’s hip, his fingers
digging in bruise-deep against the pale of the other’s skin, and he can no more make himself ease his
hold than he can help the reflexive movement of his body as he rocks back by an inch to thrust
forward and press deeper into Gaelio beneath him. Gaelio’s head goes back, his throat spills a moan
that cracks to desperation, and McGillis can feel the flex of the other’s body beneath his as Gaelio
tightens in involuntary response to his action. The sensation of it spikes up his spine, tenses in his
shoulders and groans in his chest, and when he moves it’s to curve forward, to tip himself in and cast
Gaelio in his shadow as his hips draw back and stroke in to press deep into the shuddering surrender
of Gaelio around him.

McGillis doesn’t think. There’s pressure at his chest, an ache against his ribcage like a fist crushing
against him until it’s hard to catch his breath, until his eyes are burning and his throat is closing up;
but he doesn’t think about those any more than he thinks about the sound of Gaelio’s voice breaking
onto desperate moans with each of his forward thrusts. Somewhere the rest of the world is waiting,
eyes and ears enough to see them, to hear Gaelio, to pull McGillis back to the life he shook himself
free from; but McGillis fixes his gaze on the rumpled weight of Gaelio’s shirt, and he focuses his
whole attention on the physical sensation burning through him, and he moves with a speed that
verges onto panic with every gasp of his breathing in his chest. Desperation is sharp as a knife in
him, adrenaline is tightening his grip where he’s holding Gaelio’s hips bracketed to perfect stillness
before him, and still the friction drags hotter over him, burning through him like a fire trying to eat
him up from the inside out. It’s not enough, he thinks dizzily, nothing will ever be enough, he’s
going to come apart before he can manage any kind of satisfaction; and then Gaelio gasps, and
strains, and grates out “McGillis,” and McGillis is looking up before he can think.
Gaelio is still where he was, still lying on his stomach across the sheets where McGillis shoved him when he couldn’t stand to face the temptation of those kiss-swollen lips and those heat-hazed eyes. His hair is tangled by the pillows or McGillis’s fingers or his own desperate motion, McGillis doesn’t know the cause; but it’s caught behind his ear, and pinned under the loose collar of his shirt, so when McGillis looks up he sees the full force of Gaelio’s eyes on him at once. Gaelio is no more composed than he was before -- rather less so, McGillis thinks, judging from the slack weight of his jaw and the heavy shadows of his lashes half-covering his eyes. But he’s pushed up onto an elbow, his shoulders up off the sheets so he can twist around and look back at McGillis, and there’s a want just in the tip of his shoulders, in the desperate strain of his body as he tries to look back to see McGillis moving over him.

“McGillis,” Gaelio gasps, and he falls heavy to his shoulder so he can press his weight to the bed and free his other hand to reach up and out. The angle is awkward, McGillis can feel the effort of it in every line of the other’s body under him, but there’s no question what he’s reaching for even before his fingers skim against the line of McGillis’s face. McGillis’s heart skips, his eyes go wide, and before him Gaelio’s lashes flutter, Gaelio’s throat works on a swallow.

“McGillis,” he says again, repetition giving familiar syllables a weight they’ve never held before, a power as of spell at the lips of a magician. Gaelio’s knuckles press against McGillis’s skin and linger there for a moment to spill heat from one body to the other. “I love--”

McGillis doesn’t think about moving. His hands are desperate at Gaelio’s hips; he doesn’t think he could consciously let them go if he tried. It’s instinct, self-preservation, maybe, that brings his hand up from Gaelio’s skin to grab at his hair instead, to push him down against the bed and steal those words from his lips into almost-pleas instead. McGillis’s whole body seizes tight at once. For a moment the tension is too much, he can’t breathe, can’t think, can’t see; and then it breaks, giving way to a rush of heat through the whole of his existence, and McGillis hears himself gasping over a sound like a sob as he comes. The sensation surges through him like a wave, like the whole of that faroff ocean crushing through him at once to sweep aside his past, and his present, and his future, to wipe him clean of everything that was once McGillis Fareed to leave only satiation in its wake. For a moment he’s still, his body shaking and his breath rasping and his whole self humming with a single note of contentment; and then Gaelio stutters over a breath under him, and McGillis jolts back into himself at once.

“McGillis,” Gaelio whimpers as McGillis eases the pressure across the other’s shoulders so he can brace a hand at the sheets and push himself up and over the tremor of the other’s body beneath him. Gaelio’s head is still turned to the side, even if his hair is falling over his face now; McGillis can see the part of his lips with too-vivid clarity, can see the effort of want there as Gaelio takes a breath. “Please, McGillis, I want…”

McGillis rocks back over his knees, steadying his balance back under his own control. When he pulls out of Gaelio the other’s breath rushes from him as if at a loss, like the absence of the other is more pain than relief. Gaelio starts to turn, twisting against the sheets again as he lifts his head to look up at McGillis, to turn the wanting blue of those summer-bright eyes up towards the other, and McGillis ducks his head, and fixes his gaze on Gaelio’s shoulders, and reaches to push his fingers down against the space between Gaelio’s hips and the sheets beneath them. Gaelio’s cock is hot to the touch, swollen hard with need against the rough texture of the sheets beneath them, and McGillis doesn’t need elegance to close his hand to a fist against the solid heat of it. Gaelio jerks under him, his shoulders arching back as his voice gives way to a groan, and McGillis fixes his gaze back to the
safety of Gaelio’s shirt and sets about drowning the other’s speech in pleasure.

It doesn’t take long. Gaelio is hot already, flushed pink against the back of his neck and over what skin McGillis has already laid bare; with his legs and shoulders trembling with desperation McGillis thinks even the clumsiest touch would be enough to pull him over the edge he’s reaching for. With the force of McGillis’s hold working roughly over him he’s done for almost as soon as the other begins; his head comes down, his breath rasps past his lips, and McGillis can feel the pressure building under his touch with every stroke he takes. McGillis doesn’t look up, doesn’t slow the pace of his movement, and within very little time at all Gaelio’s shoulders are tensing, his fingers are curled to fists, his breath is whimpering in his chest. McGillis can feel the impulse of his hips as Gaelio rocks himself forward in desperation for more; and he twists his hand, grinding pressure in over the other’s length, and he can hear the give of Gaelio’s tension in the broken groan that pulls free of the other’s throat. Gaelio’s cock twitches, his hips buck forward, and McGillis pulls him through the heat of his orgasm without bringing his gaze up from the rumple of the other’s shirt or slowing the pace he’s set. It’s only when Gaelio shudders with the last jolts of pleasure that McGillis stills his motion, and lets his grip go, and rocks back to the end of the bed. He stays there for a moment, looking at Gaelio before him, hearing the pant of overheated breathing in the air; and then Gaelio shifts towards him, turning his head to look back up at McGillis behind him, and McGillis pushes away without lingering in the brief moment of eye contact.

There’s enough to occupy his attention to begin with. His clothes need to be pulled back into order, his pants tied up and his shirt tucked back in; McGillis’s hands are shaking, with the aftereffects of relief or building panic he’s not sure which. He makes for the washbasin instead of the bed to rinse his hands and splash water against the heat of his face and over the mess of his hair. He lingers in front of the foggy mirror for a few minutes, catching his breath and smoothing his expression at one and the same time, and he doesn’t look around when there’s the sound of movement from the bed behind him as Gaelio collects himself to sit up. McGillis keeps his attention safely on his own clothes, on the tremor of his hands and the fall of his hair, and by the time he’s turning back around he feels like he has some measure of his facade back in place.

Gaelio has put himself back together too, for the most part. His hair is still a mess, still showing the marks of McGillis’s hold too clearly to be disguised, and his shirt is falling loose around his hips, but he has his pants back in place, and if the color staining his cheeks is enough to suggest their indulgence at least he’s ostensibly decent. He lifts his head as soon as McGillis turns, his gaze swinging up to meet the other’s as if McGillis had shouted his name. For a moment they’re left staring at each other, McGillis clinging to the composure on his expression even as he feels it crumbling and Gaelio with his confusion and satisfaction and desperate affection printed as clear over his face as words in a book. McGillis can see Gaelio’s eyes go soft, can watch the curve of a smile start at the dip of the other’s mouth, and he can feel his own expression threatened more by this than by any of the blows he suffered as a child, all his defenses laid waste by the obvious, unhesitating adoration so clear in Gaelio’s eyes on him.

“McGillis,” Gaelio says, and his voice is as bad as his eyes, it quivers in the back of his throat like fluttering wings demanding freedom, like the rhythm of a heartbeat coming too fast on anticipation. He presses his lips together, ducks his head forward as he swallows; and McGillis can’t look away from him, can’t escape even when this option is handed to him directly. He’s caught in the dark of Gaelio’s lashes, his breath tangled against the catch of the other’s, and he can’t stop the words he knows are coming. “I--”

There’s a knock at the door. Gaelio’s head turns at once, his eyes going wide with the first shock of guilty panic; McGillis shuts his, feeling the tension in his chest give way to the chill of unlooked-for relief. It’s only for a moment; then he’s turning, striding forward to the door to take the distraction it offers without even waiting for Gaelio behind him to pull his cloak back up and around his shoulders.
and the bright of his hair.

“What,” McGillis demands as he pulls the door open to fix his glare on this unwanted visitor. “I thought I told you, no interruptions” but his words are failing, his speech is dropping away from his lips as he sees the stranger: because it’s no stranger at all, not when that heavyset face and stocky form are as familiar as if they’re stepped forward from his childhood.

“McGillis,” Conel gasps. His eyes are wide, his mouth open; he’s staring at McGillis as if he has never seen him before, as if he’s drinking in the sight of him like a long-lost son. “They swore it was you but I never thought—what are you doing back in this part of town? I thought you were well clear of all this as soon as that first lady carried you off to her estates.”

“Conel,” McGillis says. His blood is like ice in his veins, he feels he should be breathing frost into the air. “I’m only here for the night.”

“Ah, of course,” Conel says, grinning broadly as he lifts a finger to tap against the side of his nose. “Better to indulge in vice where it’s meant to be, is that it? I suppose it’s better than getting caught and thrown back out on the streets. You’ve come a long way from that street rat in the rain, haven’t you?”

“What’s going on?” That’s another voice, bright with strain from over McGillis’s shoulder; McGillis tenses but Gaelio is already coming forward from the bed, he can hear the sound of the other’s boots against the floor. “McGillis, do you know this man?”

Conel scoffs a laugh. “I’d say so,” he says, looking back to McGillis with a grin spreading over the whole of his face. McGillis supposes it’s intended as friendly; it looks like nothing so much as spreading malice to him. “I all but raised him. Not much of a father but better than he had when he was out on the streets. He always did carry himself like he was a young lord, but I never thought it’d—” and then Conel’s attention finally comes away from McGillis’s face to over his shoulder, to linger at Gaelio next to him. McGillis can see the older man’s expression of warm amusement give way to shock, can see the chill of recognition widen in the other’s eyes and part his too-talkative lips.

“You,” Conel manages; and then he looks to McGillis, his expression still open on horror. “His Highness?”

“It’s none of your concern,” McGillis hears himself say past ears ringing with terror, with the spreading awareness of what is coming for him. “You must be mistaken. Goodnight.” And he swings the door around and shut, taking advantage of Conel’s shock to get it closed before the other can get a shoulder or a boot in the way of the motion. McGillis turns the lock, as if it will do him any good to keep Conel’s words out now; and then he takes a breath, and he turns to face Gaelio with his blood like ice in his veins.

Gaelio is staring at him, his eyes wide on confusion. His mouth is still soft, still holding to some part of that affection flushing his cheeks to pink, but there’s something uncertain behind his eyes, the very start of a crease between his brows. “Who was that?”

McGillis feels himself very cold, as if he’s back on that street in his memories again, as if water is trickling down his spine to steal all the living warmth from his skin. He parts his lips and lets a lie form itself on his tongue. “I don’t know. He must have mistaken me for someone else.”

Gaelio’s forehead creases deeper. “He knew your name,” he says, speaking slowly like he’s working through the words. “You knew his name.”

“An innkeeper,” McGillis tries. “I visit the city to spend time among the lower classes, to pass as one
of them for the span of a night. You said yourself it’s entertaining, to give up your title for an
evening.”

“You said you were visiting,” Gaelio says. His mouth is giving up its softness, McGillis can see it
hardening even as he watches. Clouds of suspicion are sweeping in over the blue of Gaelio’s eyes;
that crease is digging itself deeper with every breath. “You said you were a foreigner. How does an
innkeeper from this city know your name?” McGillis stares back into Gaelio’s storm-stricken eyes,
speech stolen from him by the impossibility of an explanation; Gaelio’s frown drags at the corners of
his mouth as he takes a step forward.

“You never talk about your estates,” he says. “You don’t have any servants with you. You’ve never
mentioned your home country.” Every statement comes with the thud of his boots against the floor;
by the third he’s nearly to the door, the dark of his eyes pinning McGillis in place where he stands.
“He called you a street rat.” Gaelio makes the words the curse they are, the phrase twisting on
disgust on his tongue. “Who are you?”

McGillis stares at Gaelio’s face: the hard line of his mouth, the set of his jaw, the shadows coalescing
behind the liquid hurt of his eyes, and he doesn’t say anything. Gaelio’s forehead creases hard, his
mouth drags onto a frown, and when he reaches out it’s to make a grab at the front of McGillis’s shirt
to fist his hands into the fabric and drag the other in towards him.

“Tell me,” Gaelio demands, his voice breaking over the words until McGillis can’t tell if he’s crying
or shouting. “Damn it, McGillis, tell me the truth” and he shoves, forcing McGillis back hard against
the door behind him. McGillis’s shoulders hit, his balance slips out from under him; and he feels
himself trapped, feels the bars of the cage he’s been sensing all night tightening around him.
Everything is spilling free at once, his lies and half-truths and unvoiced sincerity all collapsing on
him like a house build on unsteady foundations; and with nothing else to turn to he reverts to instinct.

“Let go of me,” McGillis hears himself say. He grabs at Gaelio’s wrist to push resistance against the
other’s hold, to wrench the other’s grip away from him, but Gaelio’s melting submission is all gone
now and McGillis can’t get traction from his awkward position.

“Tell me,” Gaelio says again, and he’s leaning in closer, so near McGillis can feel the heat of the
other’s hiccuping breathing against his mouth. “How many lies did you tell me?” McGillis sets his
jaw and shoves against Gaelio’s shoulder; the only movement between them is for them to both
stumble sideways, still locked tight together by Gaelio’s unflinching hold. Gaelio’s tears are
overflowing, they’re spilling tracks of wet over the high flush in his cheeks; his breathing is coming
ragged, his hands are trembling at McGillis’s shirt.

“McGillis,” Gaelio sobs. “Just tell me the truth.” His hand comes up, his palm presses to McGillis’s
cheek; and it’s in that contact, that touch still gentle even now, with his eyes welling with tears and
his breath stuttering on emotion, that McGillis can feel his resistance give way and his instinct take
over.

He moves fast. There’s no thought to it, no need for consideration; even after long years his body
remembers this as easily as it remembers how to breathe. Gaelio’s too close; a foolish mistake, one
no one from the streets would make, but an opportunity all the same. McGillis brings his head
forward sharply, swinging closer before Gaelio has time to parse the motion; Gaelio’s greater height
puts McGillis’s forehead on level with his nose as he comes forward. The impact thuds through his
head, throbbing like a sudden compressed headache; but McGillis can feel the other’s face give way
to the blow and knows himself victorious even before Gaelio gasps an inhale of pain and stumbles
back and away. His grip is gone, his hand is coming up to press to his face instead, but McGillis
knows better than to leave a fight half-finished. His hand comes up from his side, moving whip-
quick as his fingers curl into the weight of a fist, and when the blow connects just off-center from the other’s nose Gaelio’s head goes back with the force of it. He goes stumbling back with reflex too underutilized for him to overcome the need to retreat from the source of pain, his feet so clumsy that his boot catches at one of the uneven floorboards beneath him. He goes down hard, toppling backwards and out of range of any attempt McGillis might make to grab at him, and when his head hits the end of the bed it’s with a crack that McGillis can feel jolt sympathetic pain into the back of his teeth. Gaelio’s eyes roll up, his body goes slack, and when he crumples to the floor it’s with all the boneless inelegance of unconsciousness.

McGillis stands staring at him for a moment. His fingers are still curled to a fist at his side; his forehead is still aching with the force of slamming against Gaelio’s cheekbone. There’s color bleeding out under the other’s skin, the side of his face and his eye swelling already with the proof of McGillis’s blows; he’s very still where he fell, his limbs pinned awkwardly beneath him. McGillis can’t see the shift of breathing under the loose of Gaelio’s shirt; he’s not sure he is breathing at all. For a span of time he just stays there, frozen in place by what he’s done, by the full impact of his mistakes bearing down on him; and then he turns, and he unlocks the door, and he stumbles out of the room without looking back.

Conel is still standing in the hallway; he starts forward as McGillis comes out, giving voice to some question that McGillis can neither listen to nor give an answer. McGillis pushes past him without speaking, almost without looking, to stumble speed down the stairs and around the corner into the bustle of the kitchen. The cooks stare at him, one makes a grab for his sleeve; but McGillis drags free of her hold, and pushes past the rest, and ducks out the back door onto the midnight shadows of the back alley. There are people here, too, the street urchins like that McGillis once was himself and a few older beggars or robbers; but something in his face must scare them off, because none of them stand in his way as he strides down the alleyway to reach the main street, his pace quickening with every step he takes.

He’s running by the time his boots touch the smooth path of the main street, bolting forward into the night as if he has anywhere to go, but he doesn’t let himself slow.
It’s strange to be back on the streets.

McGillis was expecting that. He’s thought of this before, occasionally at first and with greater frequency as the weeks passed and his lie grew deeper and deeper around him; it’s a kind of fantasy he indulged in, when the soft of a plush bed and thick blankets were too much to let him slip into sleep and he could do nothing but lie awake amidst the opulence of his royal chambers and think of his trajectory through life. He wondered how hard it would be to go back, how deep the luxury he’s been living in would seeped into his bones, whether recent history or longstanding instinct would win out.

It’s something of both, as it turns out. His reflexes took over for him after his first haphazard sprint from his rooms ran itself to gasping exhaustion enough to slow him to a halt in the shadows of an alley. He shed his coat first thing: the weight of it is a comfort he is sorry to lose, but the quality stands out too clearly in the darker corners of town. He’d be likely to get a knife in his ribs in hopes of money he doesn’t have even before the royal guard caught up to the giveaway of his untorn clothing; so he abandons the coat, and leaves his shirt undone, and walks through every puddle he can find to smudge away the shining bright of his well-polished boots. That does its part, for the start; a night spent huddled in the corner of an alley does much for the rest, to rumple his hair out of its tidiness and to stain his clothes past recognition. By the time the dawn breaks grey and cold McGillis is sure no one who saw him now would connect him to the well-dressed nobleman who has been at the prince’s side for these last weeks. He still needs to get out of town, to lose himself in the countryside as rapidly as he can; he has done violence to the prince, aside from everything else, and that will bring pursuers after him no matter how well he has lost himself amidst the lower classes.

He doesn’t think about the details of that. His attack is enough to earn him a hanging, even if he were lucky enough to escape such a fate just for the lies he has told to all four members of the royal family; but there’s another possibility too, one that chills McGillis’s blood far more effectively than the bite of the wind cutting through the thin linen of his shirt. The guards may be looking for a murderer, now, more than just a low-born attacker; but that thought strips such strength from McGillis’s body that he thinks of dropping to his knees, of giving up his escape outright. He can’t give in, not after all this time, not after how far he’s come; so he pushes aside the memory of Gaelio’s still body on the floor of their room, and he ducks his head to fix his gaze on the dirt before him, and he keeps moving.

He can’t run forever. He hasn’t slept, has barely been able to stop moving for the tension of his own anxiety picking apart the threads of sanity in his mind, and he’s nowhere near the borders of the city by the time it crushes down on him. The sun is rising on the far side of the stormclouds sweeping in, casting the world into a grey haze that seems more oppressive than the dangers of the night ever proved, and McGillis’s steps are so unsteady he thinks he’s spending more time stumbling into the corners of alleys than actually making forward progress. He has to rest, he has to claim a few hours of sleep if nothing else; and with his pockets empty of any kind of money and his face too recognizable to plead for charity, he’s unlikely to get anything better than a cold corner for his bed. The city is stirring around him, a few furtive children slinking past him with suspicion in their eyes for his too-clean clothes and adult drunkards blinking confusion at his rumpled attire, and McGillis can feel paranoia laying claim to him past the point of help. He’s exhausted, hungry and cold and more tired than anything else, and finally he turns a corner and stumbles himself forward into the shadows at the farthest end of an alley.

It’s not one of the more comfortable parts of the city -- the wind runs parallel to these streets and cuts
straight down to whip and pull at even the heaviest of coats for anyone who lingers at the end of the pathway -- but at least that means there’s no one there to take notice of the McGillis’s exhaustion-drunken frame stumbling forward to collapse against the wall at the farthest extreme. There’s a measure of fear at the back of his thoughts -- he has nowhere to run if he gets pinned down here, he will be done for if someone comes looking while he’s asleep -- but he’s too tired to fight the pull of rest, and at the moment being captured feels like it might be a relief just for having his end finally upon him. McGillis drops to sit against the cold of the rough paving stones underfoot, draws his knees in close against his chest as a futile attempt to block some measure of the wind as he presses his hands up under the edge of his shirt to stave off dangerous chill from his fingertips; and then he drops his head back against the cradle of the wall behind him, and he falls asleep with his shivering as a lullaby.

He dreams of Gaelio. He should have expected that: the wind keeps him from falling properly asleep, cheats him of any but the most shallow attempts at rest, and his thoughts are whirling around that fixed point, picking against the moment of Gaelio’s slack collapse over and over and over again like idle fingers working over a wound. McGillis’s fingers curl against his skin, his hand echoing the memory of that blow that shoved Gaelio away, that forced him to a greater distance; his eyes track the splash of blood that was never there, his ears invent a scream that breaks apart into no more than the whistle of the wind. His memory tilts sideways to throw off reality and brings his fist crushing into Gaelio’s face over and over, smashing apart the shape of the other’s features into blood and bruises and pain; the rhythm of the blows gives way to dizzy memory, to the snap of McGillis’s hips and the whimper of Gaelio’s breathing as the other moved into him. McGillis hears Gaelio’s voice invented in the air around him, memory tangles and interleaves the two, until he can’t tell the difference between screams and moans, until Gaelio’s pleas for more bleed fever-hot into begging for McGillis to stop, to stop hurting him, to stop touching him, to stop stop stop. Everything is dark, shadows turning to red and cold biting into the line of McGillis’s jaw and the hiss of his breathing, and Gaelio is like ice under his touch, his skin going cold even as McGillis moves into him in desperate pursuit of his own selfish satisfaction. McGillis can’t breathe, he’s shaking and he’s drowning and there’s a rope around his neck, pressure clutching bruises to stain dark at his skin as his fist bursts purple against Gaelio’s cheek, and he gasps a breath, and chokes against the wet in his throat, and jerks himself awake with a surge of adrenaline.

He’s still in the alley, still folded in on himself as if to catch the tremors running through him against his own self. His hands are like ice but his chest is no better; he’s chill to the touch, like all the heat in his body is trying to contract in around the thundering pace of his heart pounding in his chest. His clothes are wet: his shirt is clinging to his shoulders and his pants are damp and his hair is dripping against the back of his neck, soaked through with the effect of the rain falling from the clouds overhead. It’s the rain that caught in the back of his throat; he’s coughing against it now, his body fighting back with instinctive force against this most recent attack on his survival in the only way it can. McGillis doubles forward against the support of his knees, ducking his head to press close against his legs as he coughs desperately against the wet at the back of his throat; even once the fit has passed he stays where he is, folded in close against his knees and breathing hard for air while the rain trickles over his scalp and down the back of his collar. He still feels tired, his muscles are aching with knots and his skin is stinging with the pain of the cold, but he keeps his eyes open, keeps staring at the grey light of the day while he fights back the clinging weight of dreams from his mind.

He still feels hazy by the time he gets to his feet. His mind is awash with adrenaline and fear and creeping exhaustion, and his dreams cling to the skeleton of memories to gain shape in the back of his mind. But surrender has never been something he understood, and staying in the cold of the alley any longer will be that, either to discovery by the guards who are surely hunting him or to the deadly comfort that too-much cold would bring. So McGillis braces a numb hand against the ground under him, and pushes himself to his feet, and if he stumbles over his balance at least it’s into the wall instead of collapsing back down to the street below him. He stays there for a moment, feeling his
heart pounding protest in his chest and letting the dim illumination of the day burn away the first part of his dreams with the force of the present; and then he takes a breath, and he straightens from the wall, and he moves forward into the closest thing to a run he can manage. It’s too slow, more of a stumbling shuffle than anything like a true attempt at escape, but it’s movement, and it keeps him from falling the way he thinks anything slower would.

The street is empty when he emerges from the alley, clear of any eyes but those cast down to the hopeless chill of open, empty palms. No one so much as glances at the soaked-through wet of his hair, or the clinging weight of his shirt, or the breathless shivers that are wracking his shoulders in spite of his best attempts to ease them. McGillis looks out at the street, trying to determine the direction to the borders of the city, trying to reach for the memory of a map, a name, something to guide him to the relative safety of a foreign country; and then he gives it up, and he turns at random, and he begins to stumble down the uneven paving stones with the clumsy, struggling gait that is the best he can muster for himself at the moment.

He doesn’t care where he goes right now, so long as he can persuade his feet to carry him farther from the specters of his unconscious.
Chilled

McGillis’s pursuers are catching up.

He knows it. He can feel it like a touch at the back of his neck, like a chill wind crawling amidst the rumpled weight of his clothes. Murmurs follow him through the streets, whispers of gossip spill from the open windows of inns and pass from one ducked-forward head to another while McGillis slips behind the crowds unseen and untracked, at least for now. No one looks at the ragged shadows at the corners of the streets, certainly not when they’re expecting someone who successfully passed himself off as a lord for long weeks in the palace; but it’s only a matter of time, McGillis knows, until the patrols finally look closely enough to see past the dirt and sleepless exhaustion in his face to match him to the smiling Lord Fareed who never existed as anything other than an illusion.

He would flee the city, if he could. The countryside is lush enough that he could likely keep from outright starving, and he’s far more likely to lose himself in a foreign country where his insult to the royal family and assault on the crown prince are a point of general interest instead of traitorous betrayal. But there was a guard contingent waiting at the borders of the city when he made his way there, stern-faced men who peered intently into the expressions of everyone asking for passage out of the walls, and McGillis had no illusions about his ability to avoid such intent focus. It must have been Conel’s fault, he thought vaguely, as he lingered in the shadows barely in eyeshot of the gates and watched the guardsmen interrogate a merchant with a cart full of barrels; it’s the only way the news could have travelled so quickly, to establish a perimeter around the city before McGillis got himself free of it. He can’t even find it in himself to be angry at this near-betrayal; betrayal requires a basis of trust, and he’s never had that for any of the men and women of his childhood acquaintance. It’s his own betrayal that weighs heavy on him, the thought of Gaelio’s eyes wide and liquid with tears of hurt, until finally McGillis has to turn away and walk blind towards the main part of the city just to fight off the urge to turn himself in that comes over him.

He has no plan. He has no comrades, no supporters that might be willing to risk themselves to smuggle him out of the city, and on his own, with no money and no help, all he can do is pass the time until he is inevitably caught. It might be easier to turn himself over at once, to save himself the strain and struggle of fleeing his certain capture, but McGillis knows too well what end will be waiting for him, and his survival instinct is too keen to let him voluntarily put his head into the hangman’s noose. So he keeps running, stealing or scavenging for what food he can lay hands to and sleeping only when his exhaustion drags him down to it, and whenever he wakes it’s from nightmares so dark and horrifying that he’s happier to drag himself to his feet and continue running if only to shed the inventions of his own mind.

It’s the rain that is the worst. That has changed not at all since McGillis was a child: it’s still the slow, clinging weight of damp that saps his strength the most quickly, that most surely undoes his resistance. The weather hasn’t cleared since his first bolting rush for freedom; it’s as if it’s trying to pin him to the ground under the weight of the clouds, as if having darkened the blue of the prince’s gaze the sky refuses to give him that color back in any context. It seems appropriate, in the haze of McGillis’s exhausted thoughts, until he keeps trudging through the falling rain rather than looking for cover of even a minimal sort. It’s a punishment of its own, he tells himself as the illumination of the street fades, as the grey dims towards black; it’s no more and no less than he deserves for what he’s done. He can hope for no better from the life he’s stubbornly extending, he himself chose to rate this higher than the simplicity of death; and there’s a voice, a shout of “Oi!” so close that McGillis’s heart goes to ice in his chest.

He ducks back at once, darting sideways to hide himself in the shadows alongside the corner of a
building with instinctive speed. It’s only once he’s there that he dares to glance up through his rain-wet hair at the source of the voice. He’s braced for an onslaught of guards, for the giveaway scowl of a sharp-eyed innkeeper; but there’s no one looking at him, no one stomping forward to grab at his arm and drag him away to justice. McGillis blinks, wondering for a moment if his dreams haven’t swept up to lay claim to his waking hours as well as his sleeping ones; and then a door shifts, there’s a swinging arc of lamplight, and his attention comes forward to where the weight of a stable door is moving to disgorge a shadowed figure.

“It’s coming down in buckets,” the form says, speaking in the same loud voice McGillis heard before. “Let’s go inside and see if Cook won’t give up a sip of sherry to warm us up.”

“You have no imagination.” That’s another voice from inside the stable; it’s very shortly followed by another stableman, somewhat shorter and heavier set than the first. There’s a the lift of an arm, the glint of light off glass; the first man scoffs as the second lingers in a long swallow of the liquid inside the bottle in his hand. “We’ll get better than that if you can keep her distracted for a few minutes. I know where the port is tucked away, she’ll never notice a glass or two missing.”

“As if it’s ever a glass or two with you,” the first man says, but he’s moving forward all the same and the other is following without hesitating, even if his steps are rather unsteady from drink. They make for the back of the building before them -- an inn, McGillis realizes, as he bothers to notice the sound of voices and laughter from within -- still occupied in their own conversation rather than in looking behind them to either McGillis or the stable door left unfastened and ajar.

McGillis waits until the pair have pulled open the door to the inn and stepped forward to be caught in the glow of warmth and light and sound within. The door shuts again, blocking McGillis and the rain both away from the humanity inside; McGillis stays very still for a span of minutes, staring at the door and waiting to see if it will come open again. It’s only after it’s stayed shut while his heartbeat eases from the rush of adrenaline that hit him at that first voice that he finally turns his attention aside: not to the door of the inn, but to the stable like an invitation.

It’s warm inside. There’s just one lantern left hanging by the door, the light within fitful and dim in the expansive space; but there are a handful of horses in their stalls, and if they fill the space with the heavy animal smell of their presence it’s clean enough to be no more than humid. McGillis appreciates that humidity just at the moment; he’s damp enough as it is, it’s hardly as if he’s going to get more wet, and the heat aches painful relief against his numb fingers and chilled skin. There’s no one else to see in the space around him, no sign of human presence; he suspects the stablemen won’t be returning tonight, or if they do will be so intoxicated that they won’t be looking too closely at a dark shape in the back corner of the stable. There’s a roof overhead, and dry straw heaped in the corner of the space he sees as he comes forward; right now McGillis can’t imagine anything more comfortable than this exact location. He can’t make himself turn and retreat back out to the rain and the dark and the cold; all he needs is one good night’s sleep, one span of hours uninterrupted by cold or by the nightmares that have plagued him. Everything will be easier in the morning, he’s sure, maybe with a little rest he’ll even be able to lay hands to a scheme that will allow for his continued survival; and then the door to the stable creaks open behind him, and McGillis is turning so fast his balance gives way and he nearly falls.

“Hello?” The voice is different than either of the two stablemen McGillis has just seen retreat inside, untouched by alcohol or rough slang either one; but he knows it just the same, as surely as he recognizes the touch of a high-class accent even under the irritation on the sound. “Do you have space for another?” McGillis is locked in place, frozen staring at the half-open stable door; he ought to duck for cover, ought to press himself into the shadows, but he can’t move, can’t even think. There’s recognition in his head, a familiarity to that tone and those vowels, but his mind won’t place it, it refuses the impossibility even as a name rises to his lips. The door pulls wider, a figure steps
through; and McGillis’s breath rushes out of him in spite of himself as the crown prince himself steps through the door.

Gaelio looks different. He’s dripping with water, for one thing, as drenched to the skin as McGillis feels himself to be; his hair is stuck down to his head to strip away any of the elegant styling McGillis always saw him bearing before. His clothes are different too: he’s wearing plain livery, as if he intends to pass himself off as a royal guard instead of the prince himself. But mostly it’s his face that McGillis is staring at, the spreading purple and red staining the whole of his cheek and shadowing over his eye with the imprint of McGillis’s blows: and still he’s himself, unmistakably and unquestionably, alive and real and here instead of the ghost McGillis’s mind has made of him.

Gaelio hasn’t seen him yet. McGillis is standing in the middle of the stable, too certainly illuminated to be overlooked as soon as he moves: but Gaelio is squinting against the light, and frowning frustration, and McGillis looks far different than he did when Gaelio last saw him. He might be able to pass himself off as a stableman, with the dirt staining his white shirt to grey and his hair cast dark by the wet and the shadows; and it’s the only thing he can think to do, now that it’s come to this.

McGillis takes a breath and takes a step forward. “Aye, my lord,” he says, letting the sound of the street drag rough over his tongue again as he ducks his head forward to hide his features. “What’ll you--”

McGillis can tell the moment Gaelio sees him. It’s in the catch of breath the other takes, the sharp seize of an inhale he grasps from the humid heat around them. McGillis’s words die in his throat, his desperate attempt at subterfuge collapsing half-formed, but his sudden silence is no giveaway, not when Gaelio is already speaking. “You.”

McGillis looks up. He can’t help it, he can’t resist the sound of that word: pain and shock and relief and heat all at once, loading that one sound with all the force of a blow. Gaelio is staring at him from the doorway, his eyes wide and his lips parted; he’s not looking at McGillis’s wet hair, not looking at the other’s filthy clothes. His gaze is fixed on McGillis’s face, staring straight into the other’s eyes, and McGillis finds himself captured, there, as surely as if Gaelio’s stare alone is better than a prison for fixing him in place.

Gaelio’s the one who moves first. McGillis can’t get his feet to shift, can’t get himself to so much as blink; he’s held fast where he stands so long as Gaelio is staring at him with the bright of his eyes dulled to shadow by the lighting. It’s only when Gaelio strides forward across the stable floor that McGillis can so much as gasp an inhale, a ragged, desperate sound of something between panic and relief, and he’s only just starting to take a step backwards when Gaelio catches up with him.

“McGillis.” Gaelio’s voice is breaking, cracking high and painful in the back of his throat, but he’s moving too, faster than McGillis expected, faster than McGillis can track. His fist collides with the side of the other’s face, snapping McGillis’s head to the side and exploding a surge of pain against the line of his jaw; with his feet already unsteady McGillis falls at once, giving way to the blow as he topples backwards to land hard at the dusty floor beneath him. The impact knocks the wind out of him and leaves him wide-eyed and stunned for a moment, but Gaelio doesn’t wait for him to collect himself. He’s following McGillis down, landing hard enough at the ground that McGillis can hear the thud before Gaelio’s weight comes down atop him, and then there’s a fist in McGillis’s shirt, an arm dragging him up and off the floor, and when he blinks his vision back into focus it’s to look up into the anger twisting Gaelio’s wide-open expression into something hard and hurting.

“How dare you,” Gaelio grates out. His fist hits McGillis’s cheek, the opposite side this time; McGillis’s head is knocked to the side, his breath rushes from him in a gust of pain. Gaelio’s fist at his shirt shakes as if to demand his attention. “How dare you lie to me.” Another blow, this one a
backhanded smack that leaves McGillis’s face burning with the impact; McGillis can’t get his hands up in time even as he tries to lift them between his face and the hits Gaelio is scattering down on him.

“I trusted you,” Gaelio says, and there’s an edge to his words that hurts more than anything else, worse than his fist slamming into McGillis’s ribcage or his knuckles bruising McGillis’s nose. “I thought you were my friend, McGillis. I thought I could count on you, I thought you cared about me, that you—” His voice breaks off, his breath hitches; his blows stop, his fingers at McGillis’s shirt ease. McGillis blinks hard, trying to pull clarity back to his pain-hazed vision as Gaelio’s hold on his shirt loosens to drop him back to the floor. He lifts his head, turning to look up through his lashes at Gaelio over him; the lighting is poor and all from over Gaelio’s shoulders, but it’s still enough to see the crease at the other’s forehead and the sharp line of his brows drawn together as he struggles an inhale past audible tension in his throat.

“Was it all a lie, McGillis?” Gaelio’s voice is raw, the words are brittle at his lips; McGillis can see his shoulders shaking, can hear the threat of tears on the other’s speech. “Was any of it true at all?”

Gaelio’s not holding him down anymore. McGillis could break free, probably; all the formal training the other has had won’t have prepared him for the tumble of street fights, where winning matters more than nonexistent rules. McGillis could curl his hand into a fist, could land a blow against the swollen bruise of Gaelio’s broken cheekbone; the pain would be enough to let him break free, and once he’s at the door he’d be free again. But Gaelio is tipping forward, his shoulders angling down like he lacks the strength to hold them upright, and there’s something strange in McGillis’s chest, an aching pressure like his relief at Gaelio’s survival is trying to choke him to claim his life in exchange for the other’s. His fingers loosen, his arm goes slack, and when he moves it’s only to let his hands fall to the ground at his sides, to give in the last desperate defense he might have mustered. Gaelio chokes over a sob over him; when he lifts his fist again McGillis doesn’t try to dodge the blow, just lets it crush against the side of his head and knock his vision out-of-focus again. Gaelio’s other hand lifts, his palm coming in for another slap; but there’s no strength to the blow, and when his fingers land at McGillis’s face they are so forceless as to slide into a caress instead. Gaelio tips forward, his fist uncurling to press flat to the floor over the other’s shoulder to hold himself up, and when he hiccups over another sob it comes with heat at McGillis’s cheek, as Gaelio’s tears fall to join with the rainwater damp at his bruised skin. Gaelio tips in closer, crying in truth as he catches McGillis under the cage of his arms, and McGillis stares up at the pattern of light playing at the roof of the stable without seeing any of the illumination at all.

The heat of Gaelio’s emotion burns McGillis like a flame, but his relief at the other’s survival is almost enough to make him feel warm.
Gentle

The palace dungeons are cold.

McGillis didn’t expect anything else. His experience has been limited to the opulent quarters above, with roaring fires and radiant laughter and illumination to cast even his own common birth to the seeming of gold if not the reality of it; but he has lived his life too close to the ground to be under any illusions about the shadows that weight the foundations of the castle. He is given no official audience, no formal judgment for his crimes and no chance to ease the rain-soaked shivering that has gripped the very marrow of his bones; he goes straight from the horse he is thrown over to the dark walls of a cell. There are torches set into the walls, crackling with force enough to promise continued illumination enough to offset the chance of escape, but the bars of the cell itself are heavy enough to stripe the floor with their shadow, and McGillis doesn’t try to seek out the light as the door swings shut behind him. He just moves in towards the wall, finding a corner with the blind instinct of a childhood on the streets spent searching for even minimal cover from the cut of the wind, and he wraps his shaking arms around his wet clothes, and he shuts his eyes to hide from reality for the span of at least a few hours.

He doesn’t know how long he’s left there. There’s no way to tell the passage of time without the illumination of sunlight; the only judgment he might be able to make of morning and evening would be through his own sense of exhaustion, and that is so bone-deep he thinks he could sleep for days and still wake groggy and drained. He feels like he’s been running forever, like he’s spent his whole life trying to escape this ultimate fate; to be finally out of options, to have himself so inescapably trapped, is very nearly a relief. He knows where he’s bound, knows what will become of him: his good will is spent, his connections are gone, there is no one coming to save him and nothing he can do. It’s over at last, even if the final moments of his life are dragging into the length of uncounted days; and McGillis shuts his eyes, and gives up the cold shadows of reality for what comfort he can find in sleep.

There’s no expectation of visitors. The rest of the cells appear to be empty; either that, or their occupants are as breathlessly silent as if the weight of walls around and over them are crushing the sound of their existence from the air around them. There are guards at the door, sometimes speaking to each other in low voices that don’t carry to McGillis’s distant point; other than that there’s nothing to break the monotony of the quiet. McGillis’s clothes dry eventually, even in the oppressive weight of the dark air where it seems nothing must ever change; his face swells, bruising with the marks of Gaelio’s blows to ache a dull, throbbing hurt that stirs McGillis’s dreams towards the edge of nightmares and distracts him from any reasonable train of thought. His face is filthy, smeared with mud and sticky with sweat and crusted with dried blood from against his hairline, where one of Gaelio’s blows tore the skin to bleed sluggishly into his hair, but he has little enough water to quench the immediate physical need of thirst, and McGillis can’t find it in him to care enough to tidy his appearance. He leaves it, retreating back to what comfort he can find from his childhood memories of this same hopeless resignation, this same dark-lit misery, to bleed hours into each other and outline the shape of days around the pain of his body nearly enough to match the endless, vast ache at the inside of his chest.

He doesn’t look up when the door opens. The guards change occasionally, as their shifts end or they request a break; the timing is irregular enough that McGillis couldn’t make sense of it if he tried, and he lacks the energy to make the effort. It’s easier to keep his head down, to let the sound at the door wash over him like a wave lulling him down into the depths of the ocean he has sunk himself in; and then there’s a voice, “I command you to let me pass,” and McGillis’s head comes up to jerk his attention towards the sound of those words in spite of himself.
He can’t see the speaker for the first moment: the illumination at the doorway is too much, the glare too bright for his dark-adjusted eyes. He has to blink to clear the tears from his gaze, to have to squint against the glare of torchlight; it’s only as the door comes closed that he can finally manage something like vision again, and by then there are footsteps moving down the corridor loud enough to announce the approach of the visitor in any case. McGillis’s shoulders tense, his arms tighten around his drawn-up knees; and then the lock to his cell is turning over, the door is squeaking open with the protest of rusty hinges, and Gaelio Bauduin is stepping forward and into the narrow space.

He looks better than when McGillis last saw him. His clothes are cleaner, for one thing: he’s dressed as a prince again, with the pristine white of his silk shirt to speak to his position even in the absence of an embroidered coat or cape. And his injuries are tending towards healing; his cheek is still bruised an ugly purple, and his eye still shows the marks of McGillis’s fist in red against the outside line of bone, but his head is wrapped in a bandage pristine enough to speak to the care he has been subject to since his return to the castle. McGillis can’t keep himself from staring, can’t find it in him to pull his gaze away from the sight of Gaelio standing over him; it’s too much to resist, when his nightmares still throw forward the memory of the other cold and still on the floor before him, when his waking mind has hardly caught up to the reality of Gaelio’s survival. There’s a relief to seeing him again, regardless of his reasons for being here, a sharp ache of pleasure so keen it verges on the edge of hurt, and then Gaelio steps in closer and drops to a knee in front of where McGillis is huddled into the corner.

McGillis doesn’t flinch back. He would, he thinks, in another time, with another person; but it’s still too breathtaking to have Gaelio so close to him, to have a fragment of even a stormy blue sky in the other’s eyes in the shadows that are his world, now. He would fight back against anyone else, he’s sure, regardless of what he had done to merit their censure; but McGillis swallowed back resignation to this before the door clanged shut behind him, and when Gaelio lifts his hand McGillis shuts his eyes in expectation of the blow to come.

There isn’t one. Gaelio’s gloved fingers are gentle, careful out of all keeping with the set wall he’s made of his expression; he touches McGillis’s face so lightly the friction of the contact is more heat than pain, even against the weight of the bruises swelling against the other’s face. McGillis opens his eyes again, more startled by that touch than he would have been by pain; but Gaelio isn’t looking at his eyes at all. His gaze is fixed on the press of his fingers with enough determination to weight the gesture with absolute intent, and McGillis doesn’t bother trying to get his attention. He can only stand to look at Gaelio for a minute anyway, to consider the swollen dark of the damage his own blows did to the handsome lines of the other’s face; and then Gaelio shifts, and McGillis casts his gaze down and away as the other gets to his feet and turns back towards the door.

There’s a conversation, brief and too soft for McGillis to hear the details over the pounding of his heart in his chest. He wonders if Gaelio is going to leave, if he’s going to step out of the cell never to be seen again; or is he sending out orders for the execution McGillis surely has awaiting him on the far side of those heavy bars? Is he hoping for an apology, is he looking for revenge, is he trying to drive home the point of his own uncaring? McGillis doesn’t know, his thoughts are too sluggish to make a guess; and then there’s the sound of footsteps again as one of the guards returns from where Gaelio sent him, and a murmur of “Your Highness” with a bow as he hands something over. Gaelio takes it without speaking at all, without giving McGillis any hint of what he’s thinking, and then he turns around and McGillis can see the bowl and clean white cloths in the other’s hands.

Gaelio doesn’t speak even then. He picks his way back across the cell, his attention on the floor as he approaches and kneels in front of McGillis; he hesitates for a moment before grimacing and draping the bandages across his lap as apparently the cleanest place for them. McGillis blinks, struggling to make sense of this even with all the information right in front of him, and then Gaelio sets the bowl down, and drags his gloves free with painful haste to toss them aside, and McGillis realizes his
intentions a moment before Gaelio reaches out for the wet cloth in the bowl of clean water.

Gaelio is gentle with him. It’s more than McGillis deserves, he knows, more than he has ever expected from anyone; there’s a softness to Gaelio’s touch, a care with his dirty skin and caked-in blood that McGillis has never had anyone take with him before. In another circumstance it would be something to be savored, a luxury akin to silk against skin and the heat of a fire on a winter night; as it is it feels like violence more than McGillis can bear, a tender agony that slips past his well-learned defenses to bleed the life out of his heart beating in his chest. The water is warm, the cloth sliding across his skin is gentle in Gaelio’s guiding touch; and McGillis has to shut his eyes, has to set his mouth to keep from giving way to the tears that are rising like a wave in that far-off ocean where he first tasted the heat of Gaelio’s lips against his.

It feels like it takes a lifetime; it feels like the span of a few breathless heartbeats. McGillis can’t count them, can’t track the seconds slipping by; all he can do is stay still, is pretend himself a statue as cold and distant as marble under the press of Gaelio’s touch and the weight of Gaelio’s attention. There is a softness to the damp cloth, a measure of simple physical comfort gained by the warmth of the water and the feel of clean skin, but they are more than matched by the pain inside McGillis’s chest as Gaelio’s fingers clean away the blood drawn by the last of his touches and press clean bandages against half-healed injuries. The cell is cold around them, the dim of the lighting and the resistance of the floor more than enough to prove their location, and yet McGillis finds himself toppling backwards in memory to the give of the bed in that inn, to the moonlit curve of a garden pathway, to the glowing warmth of a crowded ballroom. Gaelio’s touch is guiding him backwards, unravelling the attachments of time and space to draw him into memories too bright and warm for one such as McGillis to inhabit, and by the time he’s drawing his hands away from the press of the bandage against McGillis’s aching head McGillis’s cheeks are wet with more than the damp of the cloth Gaelio has drawn against him. He ducks his chin forward as quickly as Gaelio lets him go, breathing slow through his nose to hide the catch of pressure at the back of his throat, and in front of him Gaelio pulls back to get to his feet.

There’s silence for a moment. McGillis can feel Gaelio’s eyes on him, can feel the force of the other’s attention clinging to the top of his head and the shadows of his face; he doesn’t look up, can’t trust himself to lift his head. He doesn’t know what he might say, doesn’t know what he might plead for, what he might apologize for; and there’s no apology that can undo what he has done, no words he can offer that Gaelio will possibly believe. He gave away his right to those the moment they met, when he smiled at Gaelio’s misunderstanding and let himself topple into a lie; the least he can do is to accept the consequences of that with the noble grace he has learned to feign so well.

“That’s it,” Gaelio says. His voice is strange; McGillis doesn’t know if it’s hurt or fury so straining at the back of his other’s throat. “That’s all I can do for you.” It’s not a farewell, exactly; it’s not truly directed at McGillis at all, so far as he can tell. It has too much of an edge on it, has too much of hurt under the words. McGillis keeps his head down, keeps his eyes shut, and after a long moment there’s the sound of the door dragging open and the patter of polished boots striding away. McGillis doesn’t move as he listens to Gaelio walking away, doesn’t look up at the clang of his cell door swinging shut again; he stays very still, and very quiet, and he lets the darkness close in around him while he breathes slow through silent tears.

He thinks an execution might have been easier to face.
The next time someone comes to McGillis’s cell, it’s to take him out of it.

McGillis doesn’t try to fight. The guards that come to lay hands on him are larger than the usual ones, broad across the shoulders and outfitted with expressions as steely as their armor; they look ready to deal with a mass murderer rather than the overambitious street urchin McGillis is now known to be. McGillis might be amused by the excessive security in other circumstances; at the present, all he can do is remember Gaelio kneeling on the floor of his cell, working in uninterrupted silence to wash and bandage the wounds McGillis more than deserved to have from him. McGillis wonders what Gaelio had to do to gain that level of privacy for them, what he had to demand to give up the hovering presence of the guards McGillis apparently merits; but it hurts too much to think of Gaelio, it aches far more than the dull throb from his bandaged eye, and in the end McGillis ducks his head in overt surrender and follows the guards wherever they see fit to take him.

He’s more than half-expected to be led straight to the gallows. He’s anticipating the cool of the air, looking forward as much as he can to the fresh of the living world around him for the last few minutes before he leaves it; but he’s not taken outside at all, at least not to start. He’s led up a short flight of stairs instead, out of the dungeon and into a small side room outfitted with a tub full of water, and a block of heavy soap, and another pair of dour guards at the corners of the room. McGillis doesn’t need to be told to peel his filthy clothes off his body and come forward to step into the lukewarm of the water; he thinks he might have made the attempt anyway, barring one of the men around him actually stopping him. None of them make any motion to do so, any more than they protest when he reaches for the soap; it’s only when he’s starting to rise from the water that one finally does, and then to say “Wash your hair too” with an assumed dominance that manages to stop McGillis halfway to his feet.

McGillis pauses, one hand at the edge of the bath and his uncovered eye fixed on the guard who has spoken. The man in question is on the left of the door, scowling into the distance over McGillis’s head like he doesn’t see him at all; there’s nothing to distinguish him from the other three except for the fact of his speech, but that’s better than anything else McGillis has had to go on so far. McGillis lowers himself back to the water without looking away, slowly as if he is being held at swordpoint, before he lifts a hand to touch against the dirty weight of his hair and the bandage wrapped around it. “And my wounds?”

The guard nods. “All of it,” he says, still with that frown at his lips to strip any illusion of sympathy from his speech. This is a task, clearly, and not one he is intending to enjoy at all; McGillis can feel himself becoming more of a burden with every question he asks. “His Majesty does not wish you to be presented before court looking like you’ve come off the street.”

McGillis wants to laugh, sharp and brittle and without any amusement. There’s an absurdity to the request, to taking a man held in the dungeons and demanding that he make a show of something other than what he is for the approval of some puffed-up courtiers; but the information implicit in the
command is enough to win his obedience. He takes a few minutes to unwind the bandage from his head, focusing all his attention on the present instead of the past effect of gentle fingers winding the fabric around him, and when he looks to find somewhere to set the wrappings one of the guards comes forward to take them. McGillis surrenders them without being told and tips back to submerge himself in the water, bruised face and dirty hair alike, and he lets himself move without thinking through the habit of cleaning himself while his mind wanders elsewhere.

He’s to be brought to court. That’s a far cry from his expectations; but then, everything about this has been, so far. He expected to be hunted like an animal to begin with, expected to die beaten and bloody on some forgotten street along with what memories he has of the crown prince’s indiscretions; it’s what he would do, he thinks, if he were the royal family. He assumed his stay in the palace dungeons was only a temporary reprieve; he has had no illusions about what is waiting for him upon the other side of that heavy door. But there’s no need for him to be brought before the court for that, and less for him to be inoffensively clean; he would have expected there to be some satisfaction instead in leaving him as filthy and bloodstained as possible, to make the distinction between the lordship he pretended at and the street scum he is unmistakably clear before he was rendered the punishment due to him. This makes no sense, even as a cruel variety of joke, and by the time he’s rinsed the soap and the grime from his hair and face he is no closer to understanding than when he ducked under the surface of the water.

There are no answers for him when he emerges. There’s a towel waiting for him to dry his skin and hair, and a comb to smooth the locks of the latter into obedience; there are even clean clothes, well-fitting breeches and solid boots and a shirt washed to a shade of white McGillis has never seen any but nobles wear. It’s linen instead of silk, to be sure, and there’s no embroidered coat to go with it; but it fits as well as the pants, as if made specifically for him, and McGillis puts it on with a growing sense of confusion as the fabric settles over his shoulders and chest. The only thing left to mark him out for what he is are the bruises mottling his face to green and swelling uncomfortably against his eye; but there are no bandages to replace the ones Gaelio brought, and the guards don’t give him a chance to ask for such before one steps in to clasp his wrists in shackles, and another lays a heavy hold on his shoulder, and all four of them come forward to escort McGillis out of the dungeons entirely.

The light is painful against his eyes. They haven’t stepped outside, haven’t even seen so much as a window, but the corridors into which McGillis is led are so brightly illuminated that his eyes burn and water until he’s as reliant on the hand at his shoulder for guidance as to keep back any foolish ideas of running. The force is steady enough to keep him moving forward, to urge him into action even while his mind is struggling for traction on what’s happening to him and his eyes are fighting with the more immediate issue of sight; by the time he’s reclaimed some measure of vision for himself from the tracks of damp across his cheeks they’re well out of the dungeons, so far progressed into the castle that McGillis has no guess of where they are. The hallways seem vaguely familiar, like they’re whispering of some once- or twice-repeated path he traversed during his time as a guest here rather than a prisoner; but his situation is so changed now that he can’t remember where they lead enough to make a guess as to the direction of his forced footsteps. The walls seem to bear down on him, as if judges standing ready to render down his just desserts in the form of an instant burial where he stands; McGillis doesn’t more than glance at them before he ducks his head, and sets his jaw, and fixes his attention firmly to the line of the floor leading away in front of him. He doesn’t deserve to be back in these halls, he can feel his imposition like a burden now that it is known to all around him; but he has no other choice, so he keeps walking forward to whatever fate is awaiting him.

They draw to a halt in front of a pair of doors, McGillis and all his entourage. The entrance is vast, so enormous McGillis can hardly imagine the doors giving way for just one person; but then, he’s not to be allowed to pass through them alone, as immediately becomes clear. The guard behind him doesn’t relinquish his hold on McGillis’s shoulder, even as two of the others come forward to heave the
doors open; the last steps forward in advance of their entrance to take up a position at the side of the
doorway. There is no announcement, no declaration of McGillis’s identity; but there doesn’t need to
be, in the breathless silence that awaits him.

The room is full. There are dozens of people within, perhaps hundreds, all dressed in the fine clothes
suitable for a royal court. There’s not a word, not a breath; just stares, eyes fixed on McGillis in his
shackles and his plain clothes and not the forgiveness of a smile on a single face. McGillis glances at
the crowd before him, his attention flickering over familiar features, vague acquaintances and some
who might have called him friends once; Carta meets his eyes for a moment before she turns her
head away to huff judgment. She’s the only one who breaks eye contact; everyone else stares back at
him with all the haughty self-assurance of nobility being gazed upon by peasants. Their expressions
expect submission, expect surrender, like they’re just watching to see when McGillis will duck his
head and give up his overblown fantasy of worth; and something in McGillis stirs back to life, some
manufactured self-confidence too deeply ingrained for even the thought of Gaelio to overcome. He
stares back, meeting those eyes without flinching, without giving in, without surrendering; and then
he lifts his chin, and he steps forward to draw his guard in his wake without being pushed to it.

The crowd clears before him, pulling back to make a path for him to follow. There are frowns, now,
scowls to meet the haughty self-assurance McGillis is making such a show of, but McGillis doesn’t
look at them, doesn’t meet any of the stares around him. He’s not here for this crowd, none of them
are here to speak to him; as far as he’s concerned the room might as well be empty except for himself
and the guard behind him. He comes forward deliberately, with a steady pace that doesn’t allow the
least stumble in his movement, calm and composed as he brings himself forward for royal judgment.

The whole of the family is waiting for him. There’s the king Gallus, sitting like a stone in his ornate
throne; there’s no trace of the smile that he offered so freely at their last meeting, no indication of the
foolish ease that so characterized the transaction he offered. He is cold, now, as distant and frigid as a
statue as he gazes down at McGillis before him. The queen is at his side; McGillis has barely spoken
to her, but she’s mustering something like hurt in the narrow lines of her sickly-pale face as if she
feels his betrayal personally. Almiria is next to her, her head ducked down to hide at her mother’s
skirts and her shoulders trembling with emotion too much to be contained even for an event of this
magnitude; and on the other side of the dais, standing with his shoulders absolutely straight and his
gaze cast out over the heads of the crowd around them, is Gaelio, garbed in a coat as much
embroidery as it is fabric and the fading marks of the bruises McGillis left on him. He isn’t looking at
McGillis. He doesn’t look like he’s actually in the room at all as much as caught out of time to stand
as a symbol in front of the vast crowd of silence nobility; but then Gallus clears his throat, and
McGillis’s attention is pulled away from the prince and to the king.

“McGillis Fareed,” Gallus intones. His voice is deep and low, pitched to carry clearly over the
assembled crowd; in the quiet of the room it is like a bell tolling, until McGillis thinks he might be
able to hear the echo chasing itself back across the distance of the hall. “You have been called here to
receive royal judgment for your crimes both against the nobility here assembled and against ourselves
and our royal family.” There is a pause, grand and terrible as Gallus gazes down at McGillis before
him; McGillis holds his gaze without flinching. There is nothing the king can offer in his expression
that’s worse than that blank distance in his son’s.

“You have contrived to seem a lord,” Gallus says at last, speaking as if every word is a drumbeat.
“You have laid claim to titles not your own and presented such constructions to the whole of the
lords and ladies here arrayed. Your deceit has lowered the seeming of the title you claimed to be
yours and left those here victims of your ill intentions. You have practiced this same deception upon
the royal family as well in attempting to lay claim to the hand of the Princess Almiria for your own
betterment and in seducing the affections of the crown prince to secure your standing within the
court.”
Gallus’s head comes up. His eyes were dark to begin with, his expression stony, but now a greater shadow falls over his face, as if a stormcloud is forming within the expansive sweep of the ceiling overhead. “Further: you have seen fit to abuse the prince’s trust in you in secreting him out of the palace walls on multiple occasions, exposing him to danger and your own machinations before making an attempt on his life in pursuit of your own well-being. It is only thanks to the noble efforts of the common folk that we retain our prince’s life after your cruel and heartless betrayal of the trust and affection you lured him into.”

There is a moment of ringing silence. McGillis doesn’t look away from Gallus’s face any more than he says anything in defense or confirmation. The king’s tone hardly asks for support and McGillis knows too well how true the words are; any protest he might attempt fails even in his own mind, and it would do him no good now in any case. All he has left to him is to stand as tall as he can, and hold his gaze steady on the king’s even as his head rings with anticipation of the sentence about to fall on him. He has never had anything but the appearance of nobility on his side, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to give it up now.

Gallus clears his throat. “For your crimes you deserve death,” he says bluntly. There’s a hiccup of a sob from Almiria pressing to the queen’s skirts; other than that the room is breathlessly silent. “For ourselves, we would like nothing so well than to end your manipulations at the gallows where they ought to have led you.”

“However.” Gallus’s hands tighten at the arms of his throne; his mouth twists as if on something unpleasant. “It seems your efforts to steal unwarranted affection for yourself have not gone entirely in vain. Prince Gaelio has pled eloquently on your behalf to set aside the damage done to his royal person in considering your punishment.”

There’s a murmur through the crowd around them, a whisper of shock that McGillis can feel like a chill against his skin as dozens of heads turn, as attention jumps to Gaelio standing on the dais. McGillis feels himself cold as if with a wind, as if the damp of his bath is turning to ice against him as all the crimes of his own doing reflect back to weight shame against the tight-set shoulders of Gaelio, set on the dais to be seen and scorned for his own pity. McGillis looks back to Gaelio, helpless to the impulse to look up at the other’s face as his own facade cracks and gives way; but Gaelio is still looking up, his jaw set even as his mouth trembles, even as his face flushes dark with the shame of his father’s words. McGillis blinks hard, his vision hazing over as his eyes swim with the burn of sudden tears; Gallus is speaking again but McGillis can hardly hear the words for the ringing in his ears.

“You are sentenced to exile from this land for the duration of your natural life,” Gallus intones. “You will be escorted to the border of the city and set out upon the road. Should you ever again set foot within our realm the life of McGillis Fareed will be forfeit to any who should care to claim it.”

There’s a roar in the room, the sound of dozens of voices offering protest and shock and judgment at once; or maybe it’s just McGillis’s hearing that is ringing like the ocean as the shock and bitter relief and painful gratitude tear him back and away from the present. Gallus lifts a hand and gestures back towards the doors. “Take him away.”

The guard drags at McGillis’s shoulder, pulling sharply enough that McGillis stumbles and all but falls as he’s forced backwards and towards the door again. He can’t look towards the exit, can’t find a way to break his gaze from its subject, and then the guard steps between him and the dais, and shoves ungently at him, and McGillis is turned and prodded forward in spite of himself, herded back towards the door so the crowd of nobility can close in between him and the royal family. His vision blurs, tears overflowing to steal the sight of the humanity blocking his vision of the group at the front of the room, and he ducks his head to hide his face behind the fall of his hair and claim what privacy he can for the rush of emotion in him.
In the whole of Gallus’s speech, Gaelio didn’t so much as glance to see McGillis looking at him.
McGillis is granted more leniency than he expected.

This was clear even when he was standing in the throne room, with no more punishment weighting down upon him than the meaningless stares of the nobility clearing a space around him as if keeping out of the path of an infection. McGillis is obviously meant to feel the shame of the moment, to bear the burden of the dishonor of his true nature the way his lordly self would have; but he's not a lord, in this or in anything, and he’s long since grown accustomed to the judgment of the high-born. It hurts less than blows, and chills less than rain; even the revulsion in the king’s once-friendly gaze barely touches him. There is something of pain in the sound of Almiria’s muffled sobs, some measure of guilt that McGillis can feel like a wind stealing against the length of his spine; but even that is distant compared to the sight of Gaelio standing on a pedestal before the crowd, his lips pressed tight together as if every one of those stares that roll off McGillis like water is a physical blow stabbing into him. McGillis feels strange, dizzy and distant from himself even as he is led from the room; it’s as if his body has become no more than a weight, a lead chain to tie him to the earth. He’s not a person in that room, not a living thing to any one of those eyes; he’s an animal, a disgrace, something too low and crawling to be noticed that dared to play at humanity. Worse: he’s a weapon, stripped of consciousness and feelings of his own, molded into the club Gallus wished to use upon his son as punishment for treating McGillis’s life as something worth saving. The idea turns McGillis’s stomach and burns bile at the back of his throat, until even when he’s standing in a courtyard waiting for the guard to unlock his manacles he can’t decide that he wouldn’t rather go to the gibbet after all.

The courtyard is very quiet around him. The nobility are all within, taking shelter from the bite of the wind and with no interest in themselves to see a convicted traitor sent on his way; they are done with him, as they will be done with him until and unless he should return and provide what entertainment a hanging can serve. But the servants are gone too, cleared away by what McGillis can only assume to be intention, until the only person in the whole of the space but himself is the stone-faced guard now collecting his shackles. McGillis lets his hands fall to his sides as the weight comes free, not even bothering to rub against the chafed ache at his skin; and then he turns towards the gates of the castle, ready to begin the long trudge to the borders of the country and towards whatever life he can find for himself.

“Wait.” It’s the guard again, speaking clearly and without any trace of emotion in his tone, but the sound of his voice alone is enough to bring McGillis’s attention back around to him. The man is still looking at the shackles as he gathers up the chains into his hold; his tone seems to say he’s speaking by rote more than out of any real interest in McGillis’s response or lack thereof either one. McGillis stays still, waiting as ordered in spite of the guard’s unresponsiveness; as the man collects the last of the chains into his hold he finally looks up to fix McGillis with a nearly blank expression enough to match his tone.

“You’re to be given a horse,” he says by way of explanation. “To carry you out of the kingdom more quickly.” He turns to move away without waiting for McGillis to answer. “Wait here.”

McGillis waits. The thought flickers through his mind that he might be the subject of a trick, that perhaps the guard simply intends him to loiter until he is taken back to the cells for disrespect of the king’s orders; but the promise of a horse is more than he expected, and even the possibility of it is worth waiting for. He waits for a minute, two, ten; and then there’s a breath from behind him, and McGillis is turning in answer to it before he can place the familiarity of the sound.
There is a horse, as the guard promised. It’s fully outfitted as well, with a saddle and bridle both simple but better made than most of the tack that McGillis ever had occasion to see when he was a child at Conel’s inn. There’s a bag strapped to the side of the saddle, heavy enough to suggest the weight of the contents within; but McGillis barely glances at the surprising gift of the mount or the promise of a warmer coat in the saddlebags. His attention slides away as soon as he sees the animal, his gaze slipping down to the man leading it instead: not the stableboy he expected, not the servant he was braced for, but the crown prince himself, still in the fine clothes he was wearing in the hall inside. Gaelio’s gaze meets McGillis’s for a moment, long enough for McGillis to see the brittle shadows in those blue eyes; and then McGillis ducks his head, capitulating to his own cowardice rather than watching the prince’s slow approach.

Gaelio crosses the whole of the courtyard, drawing nearly close enough for McGillis to touch before he stops. The horse goes still, obedient to the urging of Gaelio’s hands on the reins; McGillis stays where he is, his gaze fixed on the paving stones beneath their feet and the toes of Gaelio’s boots rather than the other’s face. There’s a moment of absolute silence, with nothing around them but the whip of the wind through the trees; then Gaelio huffs a breath, and tosses the weight of the reins towards McGillis before him.

“There.” The reins slap hard against McGillis’s arm; it takes him a moment to lift a hand to take them up from where they’re dangling loose. He has to think through the motion with conscious effort, as if his body is someone else’s and obeying the demands of some third party; he keeps his gaze fixed down instead of up to meet Gaelio’s eyes. “That’s enough to get you past the city borders.” Gaelio shifts: in his periphery McGillis can see his arms come up to fold tight over his chest, but he doesn’t dare look up to see the expression that goes with them. “Once you’re out of the country you’re on your own.”

McGillis ducks his head forward into a nod, into the start of a bow that goes awkward and clumsy even as he gives it. He has to swallow to find moisture for his lips and even then his voice is strange, as distant and echoey as if it’s being carried on the wind around them instead of on his own breath. “It’s more than I deserve.”

“It is.” Gaelio’s response comes with brutal speed, with no hesitation over the judgment at his lips, and McGillis doesn’t try to fight it. He just dips his head forward, offering the surrender of a nod instead of the words he can’t give voice to; and then he turns away, giving Gaelio the span of his shoulders instead of a last glimpse of his face. McGillis feels cold, chilled so far down to his bones that there’s no space for pain anymore at all; he wonders if this is what it would feel like to freeze to death, to feel his consciousness hovering at some point well distant of his head as he faces the curve of the gate leading out of the courtyard and works his legs through the clumsy motions of walking. The horse follows at his side, docile to the urging of his numb fingers closed on the reins; it’s graceful enough to make McGillis feel his own movement with stark clarity. McGillis’s gaze is fixed on the gate before him, his thoughts dragging a step behind his movement; and then: “McGillis,” a cry like a sob tearing through the air, and McGillis hears the sound of footsteps too late to pull away. A hand closes at his arm, fingers press hard against his bicep, and he’s stumbling backwards and against the side of the horse as he’s wrenched around.

Gaelio is right in front of him, breathlessly close, nearer than he has been since their last violent encounter in the stable. His grip is painfully tight on McGillis’s arm, his thumb is digging in hard against the other’s shirt; his face is so near that McGillis can see the tremor at his lower lip, can see the liquid threat of tears collecting against the bottom curve of his lashes. McGillis could lift a hand to touch his face, to stroke against the long curl of violet hair falling against the other’s bruised cheek; for a moment the closeness is too much to resist, too much to offer anything but the wide-eyed shock of a stare as Gaelio hisses an inhale past pain-gritted teeth.
“Tell me,” Gaelio says. He’s not looking at McGillis’s face; he’s staring at his shoulder instead, his jaw clenched tight and his eyes dark with something too fraught for McGillis to read. His fingers dig in against the other’s sleeve; McGillis can feel the burn of the friction dragging over his skin. “Was it all a lie?” His mouth twists, his lashes dip; for a moment McGillis thinks he’s about to start crying, that the next heat to press to his skin will be the splash of Gaelio’s tears falling against his shoulder. “Everything you told me, everything you said. It was all just for power.” He drags a breath past the line of his teeth; McGillis can hear the effort on the sound as if it’s a mortal wound stealing Gaelio’s speech instead of the choking force of emotion. “Did you ever see anything more than my rank?”

McGillis’s throat is tight. It’s hard to breathe, hard to think; he’s sure the only reason he’s still upright is that hold on his arm pinning him back against the support of the steady-footed horse behind him. He presses his lips together and breathes in hard through his nose, fighting for space enough in his lungs for his voice; and then he parts his lips, and he speaks.

“It wasn’t your rank.” Gaelio’s gaze comes up, the blue of his eyes cast heavy under the angle of his lashes and the set of his jaw as his eyes meet McGillis’s, as the set frown of emotion at his lips twists into something almost like pleading, something desperate with want. McGillis swallows again, struggling himself into words that sound raw even to his own ears, stripped down to the grate and drag of the street he grew up on, the brutal honesty of the world that Gaelio has barely so much as glimpsed, even now, even with the marks of McGillis’s too-rough touch bleeding color over the high curve of his cheekbone.

“You weren’t the prince to me.” McGillis lets his hold on the reins go, lets his hand come up; his fingers reach for the color of hurt at Gaelio’s cheek, for the shade of the sky in Gaelio’s eyes, for the firelight glow of heat in Gaelio’s veins. “To me, you have always been--”

His fingers don’t touch Gaelio’s cheek. The blow comes fast, a sudden jerk of Gaelio’s hand up and out to knock McGillis’s outstretched fingers away from him. The impact is startling, sudden and shocking enough to cut off McGillis’s speech at his lips, and Gaelio follows it immediately with a shove at the other’s arm to shove him back against the horse as he stumbles backwards to interpose distance between them again.

“Don’t touch me,” he hisses. “Keep your filthy hands off me. How dare you think to touch the heir to the throne. You should have known your place from the beginning.” Gaelio takes another step backwards; his shoulders are hunching in, his arms are coming up to cradle his chest as protectively as if McGillis might reach out and try to steal the treasure inside. “Get out of my kingdom, street rat.” And he turns to move away, his steps coming so fast he’s half-running, half-falling in his haste to retreat.

McGillis is left standing in the courtyard, his hands empty and his skin colder from the sight of the tears on Gaelio’s cheeks than the familiar rough of the insults at his lips. He looks after Gaelio until the other has vanished from sight, until there’s nothing left of the prince but the aching aftereffect of his hold on McGillis’s arm; and then finally he turns, and reaches for his reins with icy fingers, and he mounts the horse to begin his long journey out of the city.

The cut-off shape of Gaelio’s name stays unvoiced alongside the lead weight of his own unshed tears.
Extraordinary

Exile isn’t as awful as it might be.

The world is a big place, after all. McGillis has never left the borders of the country of his birth, has never had the means or the inclination to break past the invisible boundaries that matter so much to kings and queens and so little to those in the life he has led. One street is the same as another, the passersby in a neighboring country no more generous than those around him; and the borders are far-off, impossible to cross over for an imagination bound in the narrow alleys and rain-wet streets that McGillis has made his home. But he has a horse, now, and the speed that grants him is enough to eat up the miles that seemed so insurmountable when he was a child. He’s well past the limits of the city he once lived in by the time night falls to urge him to an uncomfortable bed in a clearing far distant from any habitation, and by the afternoon of the third day McGillis is riding through territory he knows nothing of except what he has gleaned from those books he made such use of back in the long-distance mansions of minor lords.

He’s in no real danger. His saddlebags are packed with a bedroll and several days’ worth of rations, along with a change of clothes that fit him too perfectly to be anything but bespoke to his precise size. McGillis lingers over those, running his fingers along the nearly-invisible seams that speak to the care of a royal seamstress placing stitches under the orders of a prince; and then he stuffs them back into the bottom of the bag and sleeps wrapped in the blanket he was sent off with. By the next morning he’s gained enough dust to dim the white of his shirt to a more appropriate beige, and he doesn’t bother changing before he rides over the border to the nearest town in the neighboring country. His somewhat tattered appearance will keep him clear of any bandits looking to prey on the likely mark of the nobleman McGillis isn’t; and besides, he thinks, he’s more comfortable dressed like this anyway.

The greatest advantage is the horse. McGillis was sent off with food enough for a week by noble standards, sufficient for him to live on for a month if he’s careful, and his clothes are well-made and heavy enough to save him from the dangers of freezing even if he sleeps outside every night. But it’s the animal that lets him clear the borders before his supplies give out entirely, and once within the next city it serves as a source of income beyond what McGillis suspects anyone expected it to be. It’s a fine animal, suitable for a self-assured young lady or the second or third son of a minor lord, but more importantly it’s strong enough to suit the farmer that hands over a pocketful of gold for it, and if he’s not interested in the tack McGillis can find a buyer for that as well. He suspects he gets far less for the bridle and saddle than they’re worth, even with the dust of his travel still heavy against the leather; but he has a strange paranoia to keeping them, and he’s happier to see them safely out of his reach. He has no use for the means of travel, not when the borders of the country behind him are closed as surely as if an iron door had swung shut in his wake; and with the too-persuasive shadows of dreams to lull him to rest in the bed of a cheap inn, he’d rather keep the temptation of an ill-advised return well clear of his means.

The gold is vital. With it McGillis’s situation goes from tolerable to sustained: he has the funds to keep himself under a roof and with a more-than-full stomach for more than long enough to find an alternate source of income. It’s stability like he’s rarely had before, when his existence was always outlined by the tolerance of whatever high-born patron he had managed to find or to dupe; it feels strange, to know where he will be staying the next night, to be absolutely certain of his position in the world. It’s nothing like the elegant ballrooms he once moved through, it lacks the well-stocked libraries he made such use of in his position as tutor; but it’s a vast step up from the streets on which he began as a shivering, half-starved child. McGillis can acknowledge his improvement, can appreciate how far his machinations have gone to raise him in the world; and if he sometimes
wonders if the cost was worth it, he knows too well how quickly life at the lower ranks of the world will beat such curiosity free from its moorings. It’s only a matter of time before his aching heart scars over, before the pain in his chest goes the way of his fast-fading black eye; and then he’ll be well and truly free of the life he used to live and every tie that may have conspired to keep him there.

He keeps to himself. His name means nothing here: rumors from the neighboring kingdom never make it over the border, and the only trace of his history he carries with him is in an accent that grows softer every day, as his tongue adjusts to the slippery vowels and half-voiced consonants his present company carry on their tongues. He would lose it faster if he spoke more, if he lingered longer by the fireplace in the evenings after finishing the generous portions of simple stew or roast meat the innkeeper provides his patrons; but McGillis has lost his taste for crowds somewhere in those overheated ballrooms, and when he tries to linger in them now he just finds himself craving the cool air of a distant garden and the flushed heat of alcohol-warmed skin. Better to take refuge in the quiet of the narrow room he has rented for the next handful of weeks and let the flickering light of a candle carry him towards sleep and dreams vague enough to be comforting without offering the threat that comes with clear-edged fantasies.

There is no plan in place for his life. He could take to the streets, could walk himself to the borders of town and look for a shop willing to take him on as one of their workers, or even an understaffed farmhouse, if needed: his clothes are clean and well-made enough to do excellent work in improving his apparent reliability, and as the bruises on his face fade they take the open possibility of trouble with them too. McGillis still has his good looks, and his quick wits; he’s sure he could make a life for himself anywhere, even if only for a few months, even if only for a week before he uproots himself to move on once again. He could do anything, could go anywhere; and yet he stays where he is, lingering in his quarters and only occasionally selling his knowledge to those patrons who are looking for a map to some neighboring village or just willing to buy him a drink or dinner in exchange for a story made foreign and interesting by the distance McGillis has carried it in his own mind. It’s a simple life, far more mundane than anything McGillis would have found himself satisfied with before; but the ambition that always drove him on before this is absent, it has left nothing but an empty space against his chest when he reaches for the burn of desperate want that used to be there, and without it this cramped inn is as good as the next, this life as close to contentment as he is likely to find elsewhere. There is conversation when he wants it, and wine when he doesn’t, and he sleeps under the warmth of thick blankets and with the comfort of a full stomach, and he tries to believe it’s enough as his younger self always thought it would be.

McGillis has no visitors. His acquaintances are patrons to the inn, travellers or short-term stays that move on with the hour or the week; he avoids eye contact with the maids and conversation with the innkeeper for the sake of sustaining his privacy in the quiet of his quarters. It’s better that way, he thinks, easier to keep his distance than to cope with the uncomfortable intimacy that would come with interactions or slow-forming interest; and it gives him silence, that when he retreats to his rooms he knows no one will come after him. He can shut the door without bothering with the lock, can linger in the peace safe in the knowledge he won’t be interrupted, and when his thoughts wander far afield there is no one there to call him out on his dalliance with memory.

Tonight is one of the quieter nights. There is no festival in town, no trade caravan winding its way down the main highway; there are only a few farmers in the common room, and they will be stumbling their way home after another round or two of ale to ease their passing. McGillis returned to his room as soon as dinner was over, leaving his dishes for the maids and moving upstairs without answering the mumbled good wishes he received from the innkeeper idly wiping a towel across the damp at the bar. He’ll have quiet for hours, will have peace he can linger in for what comfort it grants him; and he’s just starting to ease into the shape of the silence when there’s a sharp rap against the door.
McGillis looks back. The noise is unmistakable, too loud and clear to possibly be intended for any of the adjourning rooms, however thin the walls may be, but even then it catches him so entirely off-guard that he can’t think to react for a moment. There must be a mistake somehow, there is no one who could possibly want to speak to him at this hour, here; and then the knock comes again, sharper and longer, and McGillis pushes up to get to his feet while he’s still blinking through the wave of shock.

He’s fumbling with his clothes as he steps forward, pulling hard at his shirt to tuck into into his breeches while he flickers over options for his apparent visitor. It could be a new guest, lost and knocking at the wrong room, or perhaps one of the maids who didn’t see him coming up for the night; but both options are so vanishingly impossible that he discards them as soon as he considers them. The most likely option is the innkeeper himself, coming to demand payment for the room; but McGillis is up-to-date on that, he knows, and he’s been here for so long there’s no reason for anything more than a comment over breakfast should there even be a problem. The only remaining possibility is some kind of guard, here to drag McGillis out on suspicion of a crime he didn’t commit; it’s with consideration of that, with the words of a denial already started on his lips, that McGillis finally lays hand to the door to pull it open. He looks out, braced for the familiar roundness of the innkeeper’s face, or the stoic suspicion of a town guardsman, or perhaps a complete stranger; and his gaze comes up, his wondering eyes meet a blue stare darker than any he’s ever seen, and all his possibilities spill themselves along with everything else in his mind in a single huff of shocked air as he recognizes the familiar lines of the face before him.

“McGillis,” Gaelio says. His expression is set, his forehead creased and his mouth drawn onto a frown; he looks painfully tense, as if he’s carrying more strain in his body than any human ever should. He looks almost angry, with something very near to fury in the lines of his face; but his eyes are too soft for anger, his mouth is too shaky with some unidentified emotion.

McGillis stares at him. “Gaelio,” he says, his voice ragged with shock. It’s only after he’s spoken that he realizes he should have used the other’s title, and by then his next words are already rushing up his throat to lay claim to the air. “What--”

“I’ve been looking for you,” Gaelio says. His voice is as tense as his expression; he’s speaking fast, the words catching to topple over McGillis’s as if to stifle the sound of the other’s voice. His forehead creases, his mouth works on something very nearly pain. “I’ve named you my consort.”

McGillis’s breath fades out, his struggling thoughts silence themselves. The only thing he can manage to note is how much quiet there is in the first realization of true impossibility.
It is an extremely quiet journey back to the borders of the kingdom.

McGillis doesn’t know what to say. Gaelio hardly speaks after ushering him through packing his few possessions and out of the inn; McGillis’s first wave of shock is barely dissipating by the time Gaelio is pulling open the door to the stable and calling for a footman to bring around his horse. There’s some brief conversation, too soft for McGillis to make sense of even if he had the attention to spare to pick apart the details of it, and in less time than he thought possible a somewhat dusty youth is emerging from the shadows of the stable with a pair of horses following in his wake. McGillis recognizes the larger of the animals, the headstrong mount Kimaris he last saw from the side of an alley, but there’s another too, lighter in color and less proud in stance but just as well-outfitted as the first. Gaelio hands over a coin to the boy, and another larger one to the man standing by the door with his eyes wide on this proximity to royalty, even foreign; and then he’s catching at Kimaris’s saddle, and swinging himself up and onto his mount. McGillis is left standing by the door, feeling lost in the sudden, unexpected turning his life has taken, as if this might yet be a dream, some illusion of forgiveness impossible to grasp and harder still to believe, until Gaelio says “Mount up” with barely a glance towards McGillis at the door.

McGillis wants to ask many things: why Gaelio is here, first and foremost, and where they are going, and what he really is intending since his stated purpose is impossible to believe. But Gaelio is looking down at his reins, his expression set into such absolute attention McGillis feels sure his words will go unacknowledged, and the stableboy is holding the second horse steady, and the footman is glaring at him as if his hesitance in obeying this command is a personal insult. McGillis ducks his head, and swallows back his protest, and comes forward to claim the horse evidently to be his.

Gaelio doesn’t speak at all. He knees Kimaris into movement, somewhat more sedate than what the animal offered the last time McGillis saw him but still fast enough that McGillis has to struggle to catch up, and that sets the tone for their progress through the streets and past the gates of the city. Gaelio doesn’t look back to make sure McGillis is following; McGillis supposes he could turn his horse aside and ride off to lose himself in the warren of the city streets as a means to abuse this latest example of the prince’s foolish generosity. But Gaelio’s hair is curling dark against the back of his collar, and his face is still set into that blank mask of distance, and McGillis doesn’t have it in him to turn his back on the man before him anymore. His thoughts are still reeling over Gaelio’s incomprehensible statement, his reality still shaken out of all stability by the force of the other’s verbal blow, and the whole way through the city and down onto the main road it’s all he can do to keep his seat while his mind struggles to lay grasp to enough rationality to make sense of his present.

The sun is setting as they leave the city, sinking towards the horizon in a blaze of red across the gathering clouds. McGillis wonders at Gaelio’s movement in riding out of the city instead of finding an inn better suited to his tastes: but he doesn’t have the voice to ask, and Gaelio certainly doesn’t offer an explanation. He just leads the way, falling into a faster pace as they emerge onto the straight smooth of the road instead of the tangle of city streets, and McGillis sets himself to holding pace with Gaelio’s graceful advance. He gained some experience in riding during his time at the palace, courtesy of Carta’s bravado and Gaelio’s trust; but the memories there are too painful, they lead him through the shadows of a forest and to the splash of waves on a distant beach, and in the end McGillis presses his lips together and does his best to focus on the settling dark of the night around them now rather than trying to call up the clear skies of a day lost to the past.

They keep riding into the night for nearly an hour, until McGillis is beginning to wonder if Gaelio
intends to take them straight over the intervening miles to his home all in one unbroken ride, is beginning to wonder how long the tension aching in the air will keep him awake against the rising force of exhaustion. But then Gaelio draws aside, slowing their pace as he comes up to the side of the road, and when he turns off the path entirely McGillis follows close behind him. Their horses pick their way through the underbrush and the weight of shadows so heavy even the glow of the quarter moon overhead can’t banish them; and then they break out into a clearing, the space small enough to be invisible from the road but more than large enough for a pair of riders and their mounts. Gaelio dismounts without speaking, sliding free of his saddle with unthinking grace, and McGillis is left to draw up to an uncertain halt as Gaelio turns to come back towards him. Gaelio draws in close and lifts a hand towards McGillis; McGillis hesitates, uncertain whether the open palm is a demand or an offer and too lost in his head to make sense of it, and Gaelio breathes out hard through his nose and reaches to close his hand around the reins and tug them free of McGillis’s grip.

“I’ll handle the horses,” he says. “Get a fire started.” It’s not a request but a demand: if Gaelio were someone else McGillis thinks he would balk just on principle. But Gaelio’s the one who led him out here, who offered those words that have left McGillis’s thoughts reeling in such disarray since his appearance at the inn, and his present circumstances leave him few options to do anything but obey. McGillis braces a hand at the front of his saddle to steady himself as he gets down with less elegance but as much efficacy as Gaelio showed, and Gaelio moves away at once to lead both horses towards the edge of the clearing without looking back to McGillis standing in the pool of moonlight behind him.

McGillis is grateful to the direction. There’s a simplicity to having such a clear task, to being able to collect the wood for the fire and setting himself to the process of flaring it to life from the flint and tinder that Gaelio brings over to drop beside him before returning to what he’s doing with the animals. The focus of immediate need is straightforward, obvious and easy to move towards, the same way that obtaining food when he was starving on the streets was a simple task; McGillis doesn’t have to think about the stiff strain in Gaelio’s movements, and doesn’t have to make sense of the illogic of the other’s words, and doesn’t have to reflect on what kind of a reception will be waiting for him at the borders to Gaelio’s home country. It’s enough to frown at the sparks that catch and fade, and to peel apart curls of bark thinner than the ones he started with, until finally sparks turn into flickering flame that catches the larger twigs McGillis sets atop them. By the time he’s placing heavier sticks against the careful structure he’s made he has a warm glow of satisfaction in him completely unrelated to the crackle of the fire and he’s almost managed to forget about his company still lingering at the outside edge of the firelight.

It’s startling to have the sound of footsteps pull McGillis’s attention back to Gaelio as the other returns. The prince’s expression is still set, his shoulders are heavy; he’s carrying a saddlebag in each hand as he draws closer towards the fire McGillis has laid in the center of the clearing. He glances at the flames, looking towards this proof of McGillis’s obedience with no discernable reaction under the shadows flickering over his face, and when he steps in to drop one of the bags alongside McGillis’s hip it’s just as mechanical, like he’s going through the set motions rather than really thinking of the other at all.

“There’s a bedroll in there,” Gaelio says. He’s already turning away to step around the glow of the fire; the flicker of heat in the air distorts his outline and gilds over the violet shade of his hair falling in front of his face. “There should be some dried meat and cheese too, if you’re hungry.”

McGillis shakes his head as he reaches out to touch against the top flap of the bag. “I ate at the inn.”

“Fine.” Gaelio sounds as disinterested in this as everything else. He’s not looking at McGillis as he kneels against the pine needles and dirt underfoot to unfasten the straps of his own bag and pull his bedroll free. “We can make the palace by midafternoon tomorrow if we leave with daybreak.”
McGillis stares at Gaelio. This isn’t an explanation, isn’t even close to an answer to the questions he wants to ask, the questions so obvious it seems foolish to even give them voice. But Gaelio has closed his mouth again, and is keeping his head ducked down as he shakes out his bedroll and spreads it over the ground, and he doesn’t seem to have the least intention of speaking now that he’s conveyed all the immediately relevant information. McGillis is left to stare, apparently unnoticed, as Gaelio smooths his bedding with careful focus before sitting at the foot of it to work his boots loose. He has more than enough to occupy himself, all manner of details to hold his attention instead of McGillis across the fire from him, but there is no string of coincidences that would keep his gaze so absolutely away from any part of the man watching him, no possible chance that explains the deliberate downward cast of his eyes. He’s moving with apparent ease, as if camping without dinner in the middle of a forest is a perfectly normal way for him to spend his evening, and he is making absolutely sure to not so much as catch McGillis’s eye as he does so. McGillis watches Gaelio take off his boots and unfasten the buttons on his coat to slip it free of his shoulders and lay it out over his shoes next to him; it’s only as the other is pulling the weight of his blankets up over himself in clear preparation for sleep that tension wins out over self-consciousness and McGillis can find the air to take a breath and break the weight of the quiet around them.

“Gaelio.” The word is too loud, the name too clear; McGillis flinches as he hears his voice echo back from the trees around them, as Gaelio’s gaze jumps up to finally meet his own with all the dark force of judgment behind it. McGillis stares at the other for a moment, unsure even now how to frame words to the ache of uncertainty in his chest, and then he shakes his head to break himself free of his stasis and lets confusion spill unfiltered past his lips. “What are you doing?”

Gaelio’s eyebrows raise. If his expression were any softer it would look like a held-back laugh; as it is he just looks skeptical, like he thinks McGillis might be mocking him. “Sleeping,” he says. “Do you have some objection you’d like to voice?”

McGillis grimaces. “I don’t mean right now,” he says. “I mean…” He lifts his hand to gesture to Gaelio, to swing back towards himself, as if the wave of his fingers will somehow grant form to the impossible space between them of rank, of responsibility, of birth. “Why did you come find me?”

Gaelio’s lashes dip. “I told you,” he says in a tone as flat as if he’s reading from a report. “I’m declaring you my consort.”

McGillis hisses a breath past his teeth. “I’m exiled.”

Gaelio shrugs, his gaze drops to the fire. “You were exiled,” he says. “Now you’re not.”

“IT was a royal command.”

“I’m royal.” Gaelio turns his head down against his blankets and huffs a sigh. “I’m overruling it.”

McGillis stares at Gaelio. He can’t find the words for this, can’t give voice to the impossibility of this: that what Gaelio is saying is madness, is sweeping aside the gap between them like it’s nothing, as if that same distance hasn’t dominated every aspect of McGillis’s life from his struggle on the
streets to the precarious heights he scaled in court. The space between them left Gaelio unconscious on the floor of a cheap inn, brought McGillis shivering and bloodstained to the corner of a palace cell; to have Gaelio here, with him again, wrapped in blankets no better than those McGillis has and claiming there to be no barrier between them is like watching him declare the sun won’t rise in the morning and expecting eternal night to fall obediently.

McGillis shakes his head. “You can’t,” he says. “Your father will never allow it.” He gusts the closest thing to a laugh he’s mustered in weeks. “You might as well kill me yourself as take me back over the border.”

Gaelio hisses a breath against his sheets and pushes to sit up all at once. His blankets fall back around his waist, his hair catches to rumple out-of-keeping, but he’s looking at McGillis again, his eyes dark but clear over the heat-haze of the fire. “I won’t let anyone touch you.”

McGillis scoffs. “Because I’m your consort?” The word twists into mockery on his tongue but he doesn’t attempt to call it back. “The prince of the country can’t tie himself to some orphan from the gutter.”

Gaelio’s jaw sets tight. He looks like nothing so much as a child denied a favorite sweet, McGillis thinks. “I’m the heir. I can do whatever I want.”

“You are,” McGillis snaps, frustrated by this willful ignorance of reality itself. “That’s why. Why would you throw yourself away on some street rat--”

“I love you.”

The words come sharp and hard, as brutal as if Gaelio has reached out across the fire and slammed his elbow into McGillis’s face. McGillis’s voice dies, his attention jumps to meet Gaelio’s gaze; for a moment he’s left staring straight into the other’s eyes. The distant mask is gone, it’s cracked under the force of emotion: what McGillis had mistaken for childish desire is torn open, now, bleeding itself to liquid against the weight of Gaelio’s lashes as the other gazes at McGillis with anguish trembling at his mouth. They only look at each other for a moment; then Gaelio ducks his head, and McGillis gasps air as if he’s been allowed to surface from drowning in the endless blue of Gaelio’s gaze.

“I don’t care,” Gaelio says, the words tearing at his throat like they’re being ripped bodily from him. “I don’t care where you come from. I don’t care what you did.” His voice is shaking in a way that undermines his claim of neutrality but McGillis can’t speak to point it out in any case. “I just--” Gaelio grimaces and shakes his head before he lifts a hand to rub rough over his eyes. McGillis can’t seem to make himself look away.

“I’m naming you my consort,” Gaelio grates out. “I don’t care about anything else.” He turns his head away, ducking forward so his hair falls in front of his face to hide his expression. “I’m going to sleep.”

McGillis doesn’t say anything. McGillis doesn’t so much as move. He just sits still, staring at Gaelio as the other moves to lie back down and turn over before he pulls the blanket back up around his shoulders. There’s nothing to see but the color of his hair and the dark of the blanket wrapped around him, but still it’s long minutes before McGillis can collect himself enough to move to unroll his own bedding on the far side of the flames. The fire crackles between them, burning itself out to slow embers as it lets the darkness filter into the clearing around them; McGillis pulls off his boots but keeps his jacket on for an extra layer of warmth in his bedroll. He’s just settling himself under the blankets when Gaelio takes a breath and freezes McGillis in place where he sits.
“I’m sorry.” Gaelio’s voice is very soft and very small against the echoing expanse of the night around them. “For calling you a street rat.”

McGillis gazes at Gaelio’s shoulders for a moment. There’s nothing to see, no indication of the expression on the other’s face: just the strain enough to prove Gaelio is still awake, still listening to McGillis behind him. McGillis ducks his head over his lap and watches his fingers curl against the edge of the blanket spread over his legs.

“That’s all I’ve ever been,” he says; and then he lies down over the bedroll beneath him, and he pulls the blanket up over himself, and he leaves the fire to burn itself out by the light of the moon.

McGillis doesn’t think either of them sleep at all, but Gaelio doesn’t break the silence again, and McGillis lets them keep the illusion of rest.
They don’t speak the next morning. Dawn breaks grey and cool and they are packing while the sun still dallies below the edge of the horizon; Gaelio doesn’t take the time to stir the fire back to life, and McGillis doesn’t delay over a breakfast any more sizeable than a few mouthfuls of bread and the sweet of an apple he finds in his packs. Gaelio doesn’t eat anything at all, that McGillis sees; he just packs as silently as he unpacked the night before, and resaddles his own and McGillis’s mounts, and then sits staring out at the road with distance in his eyes while McGillis pulls on his boots and settles himself on his own horse. McGillis wonders what it is Gaelio is seeing on that distant horizon, wonders what kind of welcome the other imagines them riding towards with the first hours of the day; but he doesn’t ask, and when Gaelio heels his horse into movement McGillis follows him without protest or comment.

The silence lingers the whole morning, as they ride through the shadows of the forest and break out into the smooth green of rolling hills. McGillis barely recognizes the landscape, even knowing he must have ridden down this same road on his travel out of the kingdom; it’s strange to see it for the first time only in return, to realize how scattered his thoughts were on his first passing to make even his current state more amenable to taking note of them. Before his attention lingered in his wake, hovering in the curve of that courtyard where Gaelio had slapped his touch away, where Gaelio’s tears had splashed wet onto the paving stones; now it’s exactly that courtyard that McGillis wants to stay back from, that his imagination veers away from considering. He lacks Gaelio’s highbred certainty that all will turn out for the best, he has no real sense of how far the power of Gaelio’s position extends: for all he knows Gaelio could be leading them back to that noose McGillis was spared once, could be forfeiting McGillis’s life by his haughty certainty that he can simply force the world to obey him. But McGillis has spent weeks searching for a life outside the palace walls and finding only existence, frail and shaky and dissatisfying, and there is no part of him now that can turn his back on the demand of those blue eyes. He looked aside, before, turned away and shut his eyes and pretended not to see: but he has seen, now, has heard the weight of those words Gaelio threw at him like blows across their campfire last night, and McGillis can feel his doom in that as surely as the rhythm of their horses’s hooves against the road beneath them. So he fixes his gaze on Gaelio’s shoulders before him, and he lets his mount fall into pace with the prince’s, and he does what he has never done before in all his life, and he trusts.

There is no welcoming party waiting at the city gates. McGillis had half-expected one, either a ceremonial crowd in his more foolish imaginings or a hoard of waiting guardsmen from his darker ones; but there is nothing more than the usual pair of men looking bored with their dull post. They startle at seeing their prince, straightening from their slouched positions to muster a clumsy approximation of a salute and a bow at once, but Gaelio doesn’t even glance at them as he rides through the gates. His expression is set, his gaze fixed straight ahead, and the weight of that lack of response is apparently enough to overcome whatever protest the guards might offer even as their gazes linger on McGillis riding in clear view behind him. The guards fall into a whisper as the pair of them ride past, their words wrought with too much startled adrenaline to stay silent as they should, but Gaelio doesn’t turn around, and McGillis keeps following the line of those shoulders underneath a plain travelling coat.

The whispers follow them through the city streets. Not everyone looks at them, not everyone recognizes Gaelio and fewer know McGillis; but there are enough to stir a wind with their passing, as gossip catches up with rumor to murmur through the city like a storm. They stop for none of it, not the whispers and not the stares and certainly not the shocked silence; Gaelio continues on with a stoicism that reminds McGillis painfully of that last royal hearing, when the other was set up on a pedestal to be sneered at and judged by the eyes of all his peers. Whatever pain that caused him has
hardened, now, has formed itself to armor across his shoulders, and he doesn’t so much as flinch even when the whispers grow loud enough to catch fragments of words, street rat and mad prince hovering like moths filling the air with whisper-soft wingbeats.

They push on through the fog of rumor and out into the far side of the city as they turn up towards the castle. There’s a field here, a span of road left clear of shops and houses to allow for a long, winding pathway up to the castle proper; Gaelio pushes on, still without looking back or breaking his pace at all. McGillis can feel his shoulders prickling, can feel himself tensing in expectation of a shout from behind them, or an arrow from before: but there is just silence, and stillness, all the way up to the weight of the castle gates. The gates stand open, as friendly and welcoming as Gallus’s put-upon smile, with the illusion of cheer and the promise of a cell: but Gaelio rides through them, and that means McGillis must follow him, even with all his skin tingling with something between anticipation and terror. He was a rumor in the city, a name to pin to a vaguely-remembered face: here he is an intruder, a prisoner, a convict throwing away the life he was so generously granted. There is tension riding his shoulders, bearing down on him like he can feel the burden of his own recklessness in physical form: but there is no shout, no blow, none of the violence McGillis is braced for as they make their way forward to one of those courtyards that so framed their last interaction.

McGillis follows Gaelio in dismounting without waiting for the other to turn back towards him. It feels better to be on his feet, to have what barrier the horse at his side grants him rather than feeling himself exposed for even the most casual of glances; he lingers at the horse’s side, his hand at the saddle and his head ducked while he takes a breath to urge back some of his rising tide of panic. In front of him Gaelio is patting at his horse’s nose, smoothing his hand back against Kimaris’s mane with tension enough that McGillis can see it in the line of his wrist; then he lets his hand fall, and takes a breath, and turns to face McGillis fully.

“Come with me,” Gaelio says, and extends his hand towards McGillis lingering in his shadow. “I’ll call a servant to take care of the horses.”

It’s not the horses McGillis is thinking of. He’s already breached nearly every boundary set on him by the king’s pronouncement: to actually step into the halls of the castle itself seems as surely suicide as leaping forward off a cliff into open air. But Gaelio’s hand is outstretched, his gaze is fixed full on McGillis’s face, and McGillis has already made his decision, made it as soon as he opened the door to his rooms in that inn already hazing over in his memory. Doom is hanging over him, death reaching out to clutch at his shoulder; his only chance at a stay of execution is now resting in that open palm extended towards him. McGillis looks at Gaelio’s hand, at the invitation and demand that both fit themselves between the tremor of those fingers, and he ducks his head, and reaches out to close his hand on the prince’s.

Gaelio leads him within at once. There is no explanation, no warning for where they are bound; he just leads, and McGillis follows, guided by the strain of Gaelio’s fingers clutching as hard on his own as if the prince thinks he’s likely to balk if he’s let free. The idea is absurd, McGillis thinks, but the pressure is more of a comfort than he wants to admit, the last thing keeping him from falling into that open air he flung himself towards, so he keeps his head down, and he keeps his hand in Gaelio’s as the other pauses to murmur a command to a servant, as he pulls open a doorway, as he draws McGillis into the heart of the castle.

McGillis doesn’t know where they are going. He assumes some enclosed space under Gaelio’s control: a bathroom, maybe, where he can wash the dust of travelling off his skin, or even the comfort of the other’s bedroom, with the walls to serve as protection from what royal judgment they surely must face eventually. But they’re not taking the right path for the other’s quarters, and the hallways seem endless as they wind through them, and then Gaelio draws to a halt, and when McGillis lifts his head to look up they’re standing in front of a pair of heavy doors that he recognizes
“Don’t say anything until you’re spoken to,” Gaelio says, and McGillis’s horrified attention swings around in spite of himself to the man at his side. Gaelio is looking at the doors and not at him, his jaw set and his eyes dark with determination; it would be almost a comfort to see how certain he looks, were it not for the tremor at his lips and the utter pallor of his face. His fingers seize tight on McGillis’s hand; it would be painful, if McGillis were in a state to notice anything of the sort. “I’ll handle this.”

McGillis’s heart skips, his breath catches. “Gaelio,” he says, and he takes a step forward to reach for the other’s shoulder. “Wait, Gaelio—” but Gaelio is stepping forward and away from the reach of McGillis’s hand, and then he’s pulling at the handle before them, and the door is swinging open before McGillis can find a means to stop him.

There are fewer people in the hall than there were the last time. This is far from the formal gathering into which McGillis was shown on his last attendance here: there are hardly a quarter of the nobility that previously filled the space, and far more of them are occupied in conversation and laughter when Gaelio first strides into the room. But there are enough to see them, heads enough to turn and eyes to open wide in the first sudden wave of shock, and McGillis can see recognition spill across the room, cresting at the entrance and sweeping speed across the crowd until every eye is fixed on them by the time he and Gaelio as approaching the dais. There is less structured judgment, this time, more disbelief and rising shock; but Gaelio doesn’t pause for the stares, doesn’t pause for the whispers. He’s not looking around them, not paying any attention to the nobles gaping at his travel-dusty clothes and the too-familiar face of the man with him: he’s striding forward across the room, moving so fast he’s nearly running, before he brings himself and McGillis to a sudden halt at the foot of the dais.

They have an audience. They are surrounded by startled nobles, the same gazes that so shunned McGillis and so judged Gaelio knocked out of all their lofty self-assurance by pure surprise: but it’s the chairs before them that draw McGillis’s gaze, that pull his attention up through the fall of his hair to confront his true opponent. The king is seated in his throne, leaning in against one arm at an angle that speaks to his former comfort in this moment; but there is no comfort in him now, not with the thundercloud scowl he’s turning on his son before him. There is no trace of his wife, and with Gaelio’s own position left empty the dais seems overlarge for just the king and Almiria’s shocked-wide stare, but Gallus’s presence fills the room all the same, weighting the air as if he intends to crush his son to silence just by the force of the glare he’s turning on him. McGillis can feel the pressure radiating around him, kingly fury expanding to push back the startled nobles and leave only Gaelio and McGillis himself in range of the king’s ire, but if Gaelio feels it he’s showing no signs of such, either in the dip of his shoulders or in the cast of his eyes. He’s rather meeting the king’s gaze, straightening his posture into the full force of the self-assurance of his rank, and when he tosses his hair back from his face it’s with so much grace that for a moment even the simplicity of his present attire isn’t enough to strip away the princely air that clings to him.

“Gaelio,” Gallus intones, his voice dragging over a threat no less clear for going unvoiced for the moment. “Pray tell what it is you believe yourself to be doing.”

“Father,” Gaelio answers without so much as a flicker in the certainty of his stare up at the king. “I have returned from my travels.”

“We see that well enough,” Gallus says without any softening of his tone. “You bear unwelcome baggage with you into our court.”

“Only from necessity,” Gaelio responds. “Expedience seemed the best course of action when a
question of personal safety hung in the balance.”

Gallus’s chin comes up, his eyes go darker still. “You cannot truly be so deranged to persist in this unmitigated folly,” he says. “Retreat to your chambers. We shall discuss this with you once you are presentable in polite company once more.”

“No,” Gaelio says, with force enough to more than match his father’s. Gallus’s eyebrows go up, his shoulders go back, but when Gaelio lowers his chin it’s only to darken his stare to greater intensity. “I am presentable enough for my purposes and in the only company I care to choose for myself.”

Gallus’s jaw sets, his hand curls to fist at the arm of his throne. “Gaelio,” he says, a growling warning of judgment; but Gaelio is taking a breath, and clutching at McGillis’s hand, and speaking fast and loud.

“I wish to claim my authority as crown prince of the realm,” he says; and it’s in the volume of his voice that McGillis hears the tremor, the telltale sign of fear that gives away the illusion of assurance that Gaelio has been maintaining as the reckless insanity it is. McGillis’s attention drops from Gallus, even the threat of the king’s displeasure insufficient to overcome this sudden alarm, and it’s then that he sees the bloodless white of Gaelio’s face, the bowstring-tension at his shoulders, the tremor of fear at his lips. McGillis had taken his calm for arrogance, for the self-assurance of a child too long spoilt to know when a plea is too much to ask for: but there is painful knowledge in Gaelio’s eyes, there is the full force of understanding in that hand holding to McGillis’s. Gaelio knows what he’s doing, knows the risk he’s taking, the damage he is doing to himself in even attempting this claim: and yet he’s speaking all the same, he’s choosing the press of McGillis’s hand in his over everything he could be throwing away. It’s stupid, it’s mad, it’s a reckless desperation McGillis has never seen before: and even so, even realizing that hand holding his is falling into open air the same as he, even with the wave of fear that hits him, it’s aching affection that starts tears at McGillis’s eyes, that flexes his fingers to hold the tighter to Gaelio’s hand in his.

“I retain the right to choose my own partner,” Gaelio says. His voice is clear and sharp; McGillis wonders if anyone else in the room can hear the brittle edge on it, if anyone else can taste the salt of unshed tears hazing in the air around Gaelio. “I wish to declare my decision here and now.”

“Do not,” Gallus hisses. “Gaelio, we command--”

“I name McGillis Fareed my consort,” Gaelio shouts, loud so his voice will carry over his father’s unfinished demand. Gallus growls, “No!” as he lunges to his feet from his throne, but Gaelio is continuing on without stopping, even as his voice breaks over the strain in his throat. “I formally tie myself to him, with all the benefits and powers that rank bestows upon him, to be respected and upheld by all loyal citizens of the realm.” His hand clutches tight at McGillis’s, the pressure aching into the other’s wrist; and then his hold goes slack all at once, his shoulders sag, and he sighs a shudder of relief in the form of a sigh. “I declare this as Gaelio Bauduin, crown prince of the realm.”

There is absolute silence in the room for a long moment. McGillis can feel the eyes on them, the cluster of nobility gaping at the pair he and Gaelio make at the front of the hall: but they are as insignificant now as ever, with all Gaelio’s strength spent in this one great defiance and Gallus looming over them. Gaelio is still looking up at his father, his jaw still set as if he intends to push bodily through whatever resistance he meets; it’s the only strength left in him, judging from the tremors of adrenaline coursing through his shoulders and shaking in his fingers. McGillis stares at him for a moment, caught in a blur of impossible vertigo; and then he looks up to Gallus on the dais.

The king isn’t looking at him. His head is turned towards his son, the full force of his glare fixed firmly on the blue stare of his son’s resistance. McGillis might as well not exist at all, might be no more than the rat the nobility have named him; Gaelio’s reckless titling of him has changed no part of
that. McGillis is sure if he were to turn out at the rest of the crowd he would see the same: gazes fixed on the king, or on the prince, attention turned towards those with the power to change the world, to change other’s lives with the voicing of a word or the raise of a hand. McGillis is no more than he ever was, yields no more power now than he did on the streets; and then there’s the shift of skirts, a rustle of movement as the figure behind Gallus moves, and McGillis’s attention draws to Almiria, as forgotten in her father’s wake as he has been. She’s not looking at the king; she’s staring at her brother, her eyes wide and startled but lacking the weight of judgment in Gallus’s set scowl. She just looks surprised, caught by the shock of the moment but without any of the cold fury that McGillis can feel stirring the air behind him and radiating from the king before. It’s something of a comfort, to have even a single neutral observer to the conflict; and then Gaelio speaks, dragging the words past his teeth like he’s forcing them.

“Ask him.” His fingers clutch at McGillis’s hand, pulling against the support of the other’s grip like he’s bracing himself. “It’s already begun, you have to finish it.”

Gallus doesn’t look to McGillis. His mouth drags on a sneer, his chin comes up to cast judgment down upon the pair standing before him. “We will not,” he says. “We see no one capable of assenting to such an absurd request.”

Gaelio hisses past his teeth. “You cannot stop this now.”

“We can,” Gallus says, and he lifts his chin to raise his gaze to the rest of the crowd. When he holds his arms wide it’s a mockery of openness, an invitation to speak as certain as a rope closing off any hope of breath. “Is there anyone here who sees a fit partner for the prince of the realm?” He lets the silence stretch long around them, lets the weight of it speak for itself; then he drops his arms and looks back to twist a smirk at Gaelio. “You are too old for this, my son. Your days of rebellion are as behind you as our too-much tolerance. We shall have words of this later, after the mess of your childish resistance has been dealt with by--”

“McGillis Fareed.”

The voice is soft, childish, the tenor of a little girl in clothes too fine for her small frame to bear; but the volume is carrying, the enunciation the well-trained clarity of a daughter raised from birth to her rank. Every head in the room turns to track the sound of those words, there’s a collective gasp from the crowd behind them; and before McGillis and Gaelio, on the height of the dais, Almiria steps forward from behind her father to come to the front of the platform.

“His Highness has made a request to grant you the official title of prince consort.” Almiria’s voice is thin, it strains over the tension visible in her shoulders and in the clasp of her hands, but her gaze is steady as she looks down at McGillis standing before her. “As a repre--representative of the royal family, I ask for your answer.”

“Almiria,” Gallus spits, and reaches to grab at Almiria’s shoulder. “You don’t understand what it is you do!”

Almiria’s jaw quivers, her mouth sets. “Mr. Fareed,” she repeats without looking away from McGillis. “Do you accept the offered title?”

McGillis can feel the weight of the room press down upon him, can feel all those dozens of eyes shift to turn and fix him where he stands. Almiria’s words grant him presence and form, as surely as if she has allowed his existence to continue in this too-grand space; behind her even Gallus is turning to look at him, to fix the force of his glare upon McGillis instead of his son. The entirety of the room is watching McGillis, their attention pinning him with more weight even than he felt on his last visit to this space; the only one not looking at him is Gaelio, when McGillis turns his head to see. Gaelio’s
hand is still in his, their fingers still curled to hold to each other; but the prince has finally let his head
duck down, has let his gaze fall to the ground instead of the sky. His mouth is trembling, his cheeks
are flushed; he blinks hard even as McGillis watches, struggling with tears that McGillis can feel
flexing in that hand clasped in his own. The question hangs in the air, the decision finally lying clear
in McGillis’s hold; and Gaelio’s hand in his goes slack, surrendering even his desperate grip for
resignation.

“Do not do this,” Gallus grates. “For what love you hold for your country, you must refuse.”

McGillis takes a breath and lifts his head to look up at the king’s furious glare. “My country has
never loved me,” he says, feeling the words fall like weights into the taut silence of the air around
him. “I owe it nothing.” He looks back to Almiria to meet her waiting gaze, and he ducks his head
and his shoulders into the best bow he can manage with Gaelio’s hand still in his. “Thank you,” he
tells her. “I do so accept.”

The room gives way to a roar of sound, the response too shocked into volume to let even Gallus’s
shout of rage be heard clearly, and McGillis can’t hear anything at all from Gaelio next to him; but
he’s still holding to the other’s hand, and he can feel the pressure of Gaelio’s grip squeezing tight
against his in the midst of the chaos.
They are banished from the throne room.

Gallus composes himself more readily than McGillis had dared to hope. His eyes are still dark with fury, his mouth still set on a line that speaks loud to his royal discontent; but he lets Almiria’s shoulder go without the shove or bruise that McGillis is half-expecting, and by the time he has resumed his position standing over them he has cast himself into the seeming of composure once more. There are words, after that: formal declarations of displeasure and judgment of Gaelio’s poor choice and decisions, but Gaelio barely raises his head to acknowledge them, and the verbal blows run off McGillis like the cool of rain. There is no promise of violence, no words of exile or of execution, even if Gallus struggles audibly over what are clearly set phrases acknowledging the prince’s consort; when he finally concludes it’s so abrupt that McGillis is left reeling, frozen by his own confusion until a pair of guards step forward to flank himself and Gaelio. The king glares at them both, and voices a hope that Gaelio may yet learn discretion after the fact of this ill-advised rebellion; and then he waves a hand, and the guards are urging them away almost before McGillis can offer even a token bow of acknowledgment.

The crowd gives way reluctantly, held close by whispers of shock and the wide-eyed stares that are clinging to Gaelio’s bowed head and McGillis’s own forced calm; McGillis is grateful to the guards, even, for what benefit they give in clearing a path for the two of them. They all four step through the doors, the weight of them swing shut behind them; and then one of the guards lays hand to McGillis’s shoulder, and the other catches at Gaelio’s elbow, and they are escorted away down the hall.

Gaelio doesn’t speak. He keeps his head down, trailing forward at the demand of the guards’ movement and the urging of McGillis’s hold; the only sign that he remembers McGillis is there at all is in the pressure of his grip, which hasn’t eased since the other gave voice to his assent in the echoing space of the throne room. McGillis isn’t thinking of speech himself, in any case: he’s still lost in the impossibility of whatever world he’s stumbled into that has seen fit to lift him from the starving streets to here, walking down the halls of a palace with the title of prince consort settling itself around him. It’s absurd, a dream, a delusion too great for even his high-flown ambition to strain for: and yet the hold at his shoulder doesn’t waver, and Gaelio’s grip on his hand doesn’t pull away, and every crisp step forward they take seems only to underline the truth of this. It’s too much, it’s an endless leap of fantasy to have this falling into his hands: but when the guards come to a halt it’s in front of familiar polished doors instead of the dark entrance to the dungeons, and when they let McGillis go it’s only to turn and bow to the two before them.

“You must be tired, Your Highness,” the guard at Gaelio’s side says. “Please take some time to rest and recover from your exertion. Do you have need of anything?”

Gaelio shakes his head. “No,” he says, in a voice weighted with exhaustion enough to flatten all the tells of emotion smoothly out of it. “Please ask one of the maids to draw a bath in the adjoining room. Is my attendance expected at the evening meal?”

The guard clears his throat and straightens his shoulders to look out past Gaelio’s shoulders. “His Majesty has graciously allowed you the option to take your meals in your quarters, should you wish to recuperate from your recent travels. We shall remain here to take any request Your Highness may have of us.”

Gaelio huffs a humorless laugh. “Very well,” he says. “Thank you.” The other guard reaches to pull the door open and hold it as he ducks into a bow, and Gaelio steps forward and into his quarters with
McGillis still following in his wake. The door swings shut, there’s the sound of the latch clicking into place; and Gaelio drops back against the support behind him and heaves a sigh like he’s letting go of all his tension at once.

“That went better than expected,” he says.

McGillis looks at the other alongside him. Gaelio’s eyes are shut, his expression is relaxed; when he lifts his hand from his side it’s to push through his hair with shaky fingers. McGillis’s mouth quirks onto a smile in spite of himself, relief winning out over both lingering concern and his overwhelming shock. “I’m surprised to still be breathing. He might have disowned you.”

Gaelio shakes his head. “He can’t,” he says. “He’s been holding me up as the heir for my whole life, disowning me would be an even bigger disaster than acknowledging you. He’s spent all Almiria’s life raising her to be a prize, not to lead; he can’t disavow my claim to the throne without throwing the country into a civil war.”

McGillis hesitates for a moment. “Did you know she would do that?”

Gaelio shudders a breath. “No,” he says, and lets his hand fall from his face. “I owe her my thanks. When I’m permitted to leave, anyway. Those guards aren’t just there to answer my every whim, I’m afraid. We’ll be here for a while, until Father calms down somewhat.” He straightens from the door and draws his hand free of McGillis’s hold with grace enough that McGillis doesn’t feel the loss until Gaelio is sweeping a hand out to the rest of the room to gesture welcome with a wry twist of his mouth. “At least you’ll find the quarters reasonably comfortable, I hope.”

McGillis looks out at the room and takes a step forward in obedience to Gaelio’s outstretched hand. The other spoke with something bitter on his tongue, as if there’s a mockery under the words: but the space around them truly is opulent, expansive and luxurious in a way even McGillis’s guest quarters never came close to matching. The main room is twice as large to begin with as the whole of McGillis’s previous chambers, outfitted with a bed drenched in the weight of heavy blankets and a profusion of pillows: there’s a wide window overlooking the palace orchard, with a windowseat wide and long enough to serve as a bed itself. Doors shut or left barely ajar promise more space still, to a wardrobe and the bath Gaelio had asked for before they came in; it might be a prison for the time being, but the space is comfortable enough that McGillis thinks he could spend a year here before he felt the limitations chafe at him. There’s even a bookshelf against one wall, stacked haphazardly with the personal collection Gaelio has merited for himself. McGillis draws towards that, reaching out to touch his fingers against what looks like a collection of travel records left lying on its side against the surface. There is an illustration on the front, drawn or painted by careful fingers; McGillis touches his fingers to it, feeling dizzy and awed, and behind him Gaelio clears his throat.

“I’m sorry your freedom will be limited for the time being,” he says in a clear, deliberate tone. “I’m afraid I’ve truly upset Father, it may be a few months before he’s moved on to my latest transgression.” Gaelio’s not looking at McGillis when the other turns around to see him; he’s still standing by the door, his arms crossed tight over his chest and his frown fixed as thoroughly to his lips as his gaze is on the toe of his boot scuffing against the rug beneath him. “I’ll see to it you have everything you desire as far as comforts go in the meantime. And once Father has cooled off I can have something set up for you elsewhere, if you like. By the seaside, maybe, if you want to be out of the castle, or I’ll arrange for lodgings in the town if you want to be in a more familiar space.” He clears his throat without lifting his gaze from his shoe; the toe digs in against the rug to catch at the edge of it and roll it up off the floor. “Or you can stay here. I don’t mind moving, if you’d prefer that. If I’m going to a smaller room anyway I’m sure Father can hardly object to letting my confinement go on in a different location.”
McGillis frowns at Gaelio’s bowed head. There’s tension on the other’s voice, rising stress audible against the words, but he can’t see the blue of those eyes and can’t identify the source of this inexplicable strain from someone brave enough to face down his father and his king at once for the sake of his heart. “What are you talking about?”

“Your lodgings,” Gaelio says down to his boot, and then he lifts his head enough to glance up through his hair at McGillis. His eyes are dark, his mouth is set; he looks like he’s bracing himself for some necessary but unpleasant task, as if there’s anything else left to see through now that his rebellion has succeeded. He meets McGillis’s gaze for a moment before he grimaces and struggles towards the sketch of a smile while his eyes ache with unvoiced hurt. “You have your freedom, now. Your exile is ended. As prince consort you are free to go wherever you want within this kingdom or any other.” He ducks his head again to kick at the rug. “You have the position you wanted now, right? Without being born to it this is the highest rank I can raise you to. It’s enough like this, isn’t it?” He cracks into another smile; this one is a little less forced but it has teeth on it, an edge that twists and bleeds until the sound of the huffed laugh that goes with it slides nearly to a sob. “I’m not such a brute that I’ll force you into a relationship you don’t want as payment. You have my word on it, your life is yours to do with as you will. I won’t force you to hang on me or...or see me at all, if you don’t want to, I know you--”

“Gaelio.”

McGillis hadn’t intended to speak. He hadn’t realized he was going to at all: the name tore itself free of his lips on its own power, struggling itself to freedom with all the strength of a childhood on the streets. It comes out raw, harsh and too-loud in the enclosed space, but it carries weight enough to cut off the increasing speed of Gaelio’s tumbling words. Gaelio’s breath catches, his head comes up to meet McGillis’s gaze, and McGillis pushes the book back to the shelf and leaves it to stride forward across the room to Gaelio. Gaelio doesn’t flinch back, doesn’t shrink against the door in spite of the haste of McGillis’s approach, but his expression sets, his mouth tightening like he’s bracing himself for a blow in time with the set of his fingers clapping at his opposite elbows. He looks tense, like he’s making a wall of himself, like he’s ready to take any assault McGillis might throw at him; it would even be convincing, were it not for the giveaway of his eyes. His eyes are wide, blue as the sky, blue as the ocean and liquid with hurt, with want, with everything that he was fighting to fit his words around. McGillis can feel the pull of that stare, can feel the magnetism of those eyes urging him nearer; and he doesn’t look away, he doesn’t flinch back. He draws in close, stepping up to meet Gaelio at the door until the difference in their height becomes clear between them, and then he takes a breath and he lets himself speak.

“I want to see you.” He lifts his hand and reaches out for Gaelio’s face, to touch his fingers to the curl of dark hair falling against the curve of the other’s cheek; there’s no blow this time, no smack of desperate rejection to knock his touch away before his fingers touch the heat of Gaelio’s skin. McGillis’s palm presses to Gaelio’s face, his fingers urge up and into the weight of the other’s hair; Gaelio’s lashes flutter over his tear-wet eyes, Gaelio’s lips part on a gasp of air that cracks towards a sob McGillis can taste in the air between them. McGillis takes a breath, feeling his heart pounding in his chest like it intends to run away with him outright, but his other hand is coming up too, his fingers reaching out of their own accord to hold and steady Gaelio’s face between his palms, and when his hands settle into place Gaelio’s lashes lift and his gaze comes up to meet McGillis’s.

“I do see you,” McGillis says, and he can feel his voice strain in his throat, can taste the effort hot against his tongue. “Gaelio.” Gaelio’s forehead creases, his breath catches on a sob, and McGillis leans in to press his mouth against the tremor of emotion caught at the other’s lips. It’s a careful motion, offering more than desperate, but Gaelio still sucks in an inhale like McGillis is stealing the air from around him, still hiccups over the breath like he can’t control the flood of tears in him. McGillis wonders if he should pull away, if he should retreat to grant Gaelio to space to collect
himself, but then Gaelio’s hands come up, his painful-tense grip on himself giving way for him to reach out for McGillis instead, and this time when he makes contact his fingers curl to fists at McGillis’s jacket, his strength turns to a pull instead of the shove it was when McGillis left. Gaelio pulls at McGillis’s coat, and McGillis stumbles forward to fall against Gaelio at the door, and neither of them breaks away from the contact between them.

McGillis is grateful to Gaelio’s willingness. He isn’t in the habit of letting go of what he needs.
Equality

McGillis has never before been so appreciative for a locked door.

He can remember avoiding them in the past, when his position within a household was a tightrope walk of polite distance and flirtatious encouragement. A closed bedroom was the most dangerous of places for him, the threat of an unlocked door the best defense he had against an escalation he might wish to politely refuse. Even when he was last within the castle walls, Gaelio carried an audience with him wherever he went: servants and guards and fawning nobles and an affectionate sister, until it was only in ill-advised escapes from the same that McGillis found himself the leeway to topple them both into an expression of mutual desire. But now: the walls are heavy around them, the weight of the shut doors barred as much by the power of Gaelio’s rank as by their own presence, until McGillis has absolute certainty that there will be no inconvenient knock, no stomach-dropping panic of possible discovery to hunt them. There is nothing of substance between them anymore thanks to Gaelio’s desperate, reckless declaration, and in the heady rush of that McGillis finds himself more anxious than he’s ever been before to remove what else still exists between his body and his prince’s.

Gaelio is compliant to McGillis’s urging. He stumbles forward from the door when McGillis collects himself enough to draw back and claim balance under his own feet; their movement may be less elegant in this moment than it was in the Issue ballroom when they had the spill of music to guide them together, but McGillis finds the rhythm of his own heart racing in his chest better music than what all the nobility might be able to muster for them, and without the strain of an audience there is no one to judge the stumble of Gaelio’s footsteps. McGillis pulls them back, retreating over the bedroom floor without looking behind him to track their progress, guiding Gaelio forward by a hand curling against the back of his neck and urging up into his hair, and Gaelio follows as readily, still clinging to McGillis’s shirt and with the shine of his gaze pinning itself to the part of McGillis’s lips like he’s stopped seeing anything else. The inevitable fall is gentle when it comes, cushioned by a plethora of blankets and eased by all the opulence of featherdown pillows; McGillis hardly feels the impact at all except for the shift in angle and support it grants him to urge Gaelio in and over the sheets so he can tip in and weight the other’s body to stillness underneath his own. Gaelio catches an inhale as McGillis fits on top of him, the sound so sharp and sudden McGillis has a moment of fear for hurt: but the grip at his coat forces him down, and Gaelio lets one of his hands go to grab at the back of McGillis’s head instead, and that’s encouragement enough to need nothing by way of speech to grant it clarity.

McGillis can’t figure out how to pull away. He wants to draw back, wants to rock onto his knees and frame Gaelio’s face in his hands and gaze down at those eyes whose loss he felt so keenly in his exile, to breathe until he can align this present moment with the shadowed desperation that has always been his reality, but there is a hunger in him, something deep down in his belly and quivering in his fingers, a craving for more that has its source elsewhere than his stomach but is no less anxious than starvation, no less essential than air. Gaelio’s lips are parting for him, McGillis has the taste of Gaelio on his tongue and Gaelio’s voice spilling against his lips and Gaelio’s skin radiating heat under his hands, and it would take far greater strength than he possesses to pull himself back from this. He kisses into Gaelio’s mouth, tastes against the give of Gaelio’s lips and touches against the soft of his hair, the pale of his skin, the rhythm of his pulse; when his fingers slide down it’s with instinctive intent, questing for buttons and laces to drag them free of their fastenings and undo the barrier of clothing between his greedy want and Gaelio’s open generosity. It doesn’t make sense that he should feel such need, that in the midst of royal censure and a barred door McGillis should feel so suddenly, helplessly free, but after those weeks of loneliness and a night of aching want there is no part of him that can possibly muster restraint now.
McGillis is grateful to the simplicity of Gaelio’s travelling clothes. There is none of the difficulty that comes with layers of embroidery, none of those endless rows of buttons that so often append themselves to truly fine garments, as if to serve as armor for the delicate skin wrapped within them: there is just the weight of his coat, and the loose of a white shirt beneath it, both giving way to McGillis’s hands without requiring the attention of sight to free them. Gaelio shrugs the coat off as soon as McGillis gets the front unfastened, and his shirt drags up and off for the cost of a few seconds of time spent in breathing instead of kissing. Gaelio is reaching for similar freedom, his hand pushing against the shoulder of McGillis’s coat while his fingers pull the give of the other’s shirt free of his waistband and hitch the plain linen high up against the curve of McGillis’s spine, but his movements lack form and focus, as if his intent itself is being stripped from him with every moment of contact he claims from McGillis’s skin. Gaelio’s hand slides up McGillis’s back, his fingers questing out a map against the pattern of the other’s spine pressing close to his skin, and he lingers there, caught in attention to his own touch while McGillis rocks himself into a better angle against the bed so he can push up from the pinning weight he’s been giving to Gaelio beneath him. Even kissing gives way for the moment, as McGillis ducks his head to watch the work of his fingers at the front of Gaelio’s pants; his hands are as quick with the fastenings as they ever were with a coin, the laces open for him as if they were never tied at all. McGillis catches his fingers against the fabric and urges in and down, and it’s as his touch finds out the heat of Gaelio’s cock inside the covering that he ducks back in to catch the note of want that spills up Gaelio’s throat against the urging of his tongue at the other’s lips.

McGillis can feel the shudder of tension that runs through Gaelio as if it’s gauged to his own fingertips, as if he’s singlehandedly catching the other’s blood to flame against the friction of his touch. Gaelio’s heel braces at the edge of the bed, his hips rock up to chase the weight of McGillis’s palm; when McGillis pushes to bear him back down to the bed Gaelio’s fingers against his back tighten like he’s struggling to find stability under his grip. McGillis is panting for air, his breathing coming fast enough that he feels lightheaded, as if the heat in him is sunlight burning down against uncovered skin instead of something spilling up with hungry greed from the core of his existence, but all the dizzy vertigo blurring his vision and stealing his breath isn’t stopping the urging of his fingers. His palm weights against Gaelio’s length, his fingers drag and pull flaring sensation over the solid heat of the other’s desire, and Gaelio groans against McGillis’s mouth, his fingernails digging in hard against the pattern of the other’s spine under his skin. It might hurt, in other circumstances, but right now the friction just feels like Gaelio is dragging heat closer to the surface, as if the pull of his nails is urging the fire stoking itself to flame in McGillis’s chest to break free of his skin and spill out into the open air around them.

It’s their clothing that finally brings McGillis back into himself. He’s pressing against the heat of Gaelio’s body, urging low, desperate want free of the other’s lips to catch and taste at his own: but there’s fabric caught against his wrist, and Gaelio’s fingers are urging his coat higher, and the hotter McGillis’s breathing comes the more stifled he feels by the burden of shirt and coat layered over the motion of his arms. He pulls back at once, forcing himself into decisive motion before he can overthink the action, and Gaelio lets his hold on McGillis’s neck go as quickly, reading the intent of the other’s movement without needing to be told. Gaelio pushes himself back over the bed, sliding away from the edge where they fell and towards the soft depths of the blankets heaped at the middle, and McGillis takes the opportunity to catch his fingers against the waistband of Gaelio’s pants and tug them down and off the angle of the other’s hips. They draw free as obediently as Gaelio does, pulling down to bare the pale inside of Gaelio’s thighs and the flushed heat of his cock, but McGillis lays claim to a measure of patience granted by the weight of the walls around them and leaves Gaelio’s skin untouched while he pulls back to get to his feet at the edge of the bed instead. It puts more distance between them but also gives him the freedom to work at Gaelio’s clothes with both hands, and the process of dragging the other’s boots free is far easier to undertake as they are. The tangle of pants goes the way of the boots, stripped free of Gaelio’s feet and dropped to the floor atop
the rest of the other’s clothes, and McGillis kicks off his own boots as rapidly, leaving them at the
floor along with his shrugged-off coat before he comes back in to kneel at the edge of the bed and
draw in towards Gaelio sprawled over the sheets. Gaelio’s cheeks are flushed, his mouth is red, his
hands are reaching, and McGillis comes in at once to answer the open plea of those outstretched
fingers. Gaelio’s touch winds into his hair, his fingers slide back up and under McGillis’s shirt, and
when he pulls to draw the other back down over him McGillis leans in obediently to fit himself
against the shape of Gaelio’s body beneath him.

There’s a return to kissing, for some span of time. McGillis has a knot of near-painful pressure deep
in his stomach, twisting as if with a hunger panic-anxious to be sated: but they are in Gaelio’s
quarters, in what are now McGillis’s quarters, and the impossible intoxication of that ownership is a
lure to pull his actions slow and savouring, as if he is the starving orphan he was sat down at a
banquet overflowing with possibilities. Gaelio is panting under him, clinging to his hair and his neck
and his waist as if to urge McGillis down against him, as if to beg with his fingers what he can’t find
breath to give words to, and McGillis can’t settle himself on where to begin. He wants to press his
lips to the dip of Gaelio’s shoulderblades, wants to catch his fingers to the curve of Gaelio’s spine; he
wants to pin Gaelio’s hips still between his knees, wants to frame the other’s legs in the catch of his
feet hooked around Gaelio’s ankles and lay the other’s arms out taut over his head. Lips, fingers,
friction and pressure and push and pull, McGillis wants all of it all at once, with a want as mad in
itself as Gaelio’s own irrational sacrifice, and when he moves it’s with as much desperation, moving
more on heated impulse than on conscious thought. He gives up Gaelio’s lips for the other’s throat,
pressing his mouth beneath Gaelio’s ear, against the motion of unvoiced speech in his throat and
down to bisect the very center of his chest, tasting travel dust and salt-sweat and heat like a burn
against his tongue as he goes, marking out his future intention like he’s laying claim to the territory of
Gaelio’s body with every press of his lips. There’s the drag of breathing against the cage of his ribs,
farther down pale skin trembling across the soft give of his belly around the indentation of his navel;
and McGillis catches salt on his tongue, strange and bitter against his lips, and when he ducks his
head it’s to consider the dark-flushed strain of Gaelio’s cock at his hips.

Gaelio pulls at McGillis’s shirt when the other moves. His hand is still trailing up the other’s spine,
urging the fabric higher with every downward inch McGillis gains for himself; as McGillis shifts
down to fit into the space between Gaelio’s knees Gaelio’s fingers catch at the hem and pull outright,
as if he’s intending to drag McGillis back up to his mouth by the tangle of the shirt around him. The
neckline is loose, it slides through McGillis’s hair as quickly as Gaelio pulls, and all McGillis really
has to do is duck his head and lift his arms to strip himself free of the fabric. Gaelio is left with a
handful of cloth, and McGillis is left free to move, and he presses his advantage at once, reaching out
and bracing a hand against Gaelio’s thigh and one at the indentation of his hip while Gaelio is still
tossing the shirt to fall over the edge of the bed to the floor. Gaelio’s fingers touch McGillis’s hair,
Gaelio’s breath catches high and wanting in his throat, and McGillis ducks his head, and shuts his
eyes, and parts his lips as he presses down to take the hot weight of Gaelio’s cock back into the wet
of his mouth.

Gaelio moans at the contact. It’s a raw sound, unstructured and unintentional: McGillis can feel the
spasm of heat that comes with it in the muscle under his palm, can taste the salt of want that spills to
impossible slickness across the drag of his tongue. The fingers in his hair press closer, weighting the
strands to McGillis’s scalp before they tense and curl to attempt a fist against the locks, but McGillis
don’t lift his head, is barely paying attention to the drag of Gaelio’s fingernails sliding through the
strands of his hair. His focus is turned downward, inward, winding itself around the solid resistance
of Gaelio against his lips, filling his mouth, sliding back over his tongue, and when he pushes in
closer it’s to take more of Gaelio past his lips, to swallow back as much of the other as he can fit into
the wanting heat of his mouth.

McGillis lacks grace in this. He’s moving on impulse instead of experience, guided by instinct more
than elegance, and his instincts have ever been those of greed, of hunger, of a want too bone-deep to
sate itself in polite company and with graceful restraint. But his hands are bracing Gaelio to stillness,
one bearing down hard against his hip and the other sliding in and around to drag intimacy at the
inside of his thigh, to come in to cradle the weight of his body closer, and with his fingers clutching
Gaelio in place McGillis can move over him with the desperate speed he craves, can press his mouth
and tongue and lips as close to Gaelio’s skin as he can fit them and suck against the heat like he’s
trying to draw the flame in Gaelio’s veins up and into his own blood. There is no need for haste, no
logic to the tension of want aching with such fever-heat in him, but Gaelio’s fingers are fisting in his
hair, and Gaelio’s breathing is breaking open on the syllables of his name, and McGillis feels as
desperate as if he’s drowning, as if it’s only with the contact of Gaelio’s body against his own that he
can buy himself another moment of survival. He draws up over Gaelio in his mouth, pulling away
only to press back down to fill the space over his tongue and at the back of his throat with as much of
the other as his wanting need can bear, and over the sheets beneath them Gaelio tremors with rogue
energy, with strain too formless to take a focal point.

There’s too much haste in them to bear much duration. McGillis thinks he would stay like this for an
hour, if he could, so long as he could keep drawing that shuddering tension out through Gaelio’s
open thighs and clutching fingers: but he’s moving too fast, or being too rough, and whatever
restraint Gaelio may have in him comes apart to the clutch of McGillis’s fingers and the pressure of
his mouth. Gaelio is gasping for air almost as soon as McGillis touches him, it seems, fracturing his
inhales over desperation and whimpering McGillis’s name on the exhales, until by the time McGillis
starts to feel the strain of his position in the back of his jaw he’s surprised and distantly impressed by
the other’s self-control in holding back his pleasure even this long. It’s been building without pause,
McGillis has heard and felt and tasted it at once, until Gaelio’s whole existence now seems to be
drawn to impossible tension, the arch of his back and the pull of his arms and the catch of his
breathing all urging him towards unbearable heights. McGillis can taste salt on his tongue, the bitter
heat of expectation is filling his mouth and burning at his lips, and Gaelio’s breathing comes faster
with every movement he takes, speeding and settling at once as the rhythm of it drops into Gaelio’s
chest like a point to ground him out where he lies. He’s almost groaning over every inhale, now,
sounding like McGillis is drawing him empty of breath as the heat between them rises to impossible
heights, until finally his fingers seize tight at McGillis’s hair, winding into fists on the strands,
and McGillis can feel the jolt of anticipation run through the other even before Gaelio gasps at the
sound of his name.

“McGillis,” Gaelio says, sounding so shattered-open McGillis hardly knows even that familiar voice.
The polish is gone, the royal hauteur stripped away to nothing; he sounds as frantic as a child on the
street, desperate with need enough to bring him down to a level that McGillis understands. It doesn’t
matter that they’re in the elegance of a princely bedroom, doesn’t matter that the sheets under them
are silk instead of wool: Gaelio’s body is flexing on the same heat, his breathing stalling on the same
want, as if they’re back in the stifling bedroom of that inn with McGillis shoving him down against
the blankets beneath them to muffle his voice against thin pillows. The thought tenses in McGillis’s
shoulders and shivers a chill of past nightmares through his memory: but there is no need for
nightmares, there is nothing to push away. Gaelio is sprawled loose-limbed with heat before him, his
lips parted to the air to give voice to McGillis’s name to whoever may hear it, and McGillis feels
satisfaction hit him like a wave, pleasure dark with possessiveness coursing through all the shadows
of his body. He clenches down against Gaelio’s hip, digs his fingers in hard against Gaelio’s thigh,
and when he moves it’s with greater speed, with force enough to insist upon the sound of Gaelio’s
voice cracking open in the other’s throat. Gaelio spasms under him, his body straining over the
sensation McGillis is swamping him in, but his voice breaks hot instead of pained, his throat opening
up on pleas for more instead of mercy.

“McGillis,” Gaelio is gasping, over and over again, forming the other’s name to a chant. “Please,
McGillis, ah, more, McGillis you--” and his breathing catches, his voice breaks high and straining. For a moment there’s nothing but silence at his lips, nothing but strain curving through the whole of his body; and then: “McGillis” Gaelio groans, and all the tension in him gives way to a spill of heat over McGillis’s tongue. McGillis makes a sound in the back of his throat, low and as pleased as the pressure curling itself to warmth deep down in his stomach, and he eases his hold on the other’s hip and leg to soften his bracing hold as he shifts to suck Gaelio through the quivering aftershocks of his orgasm. The shudders run through the whole of the other’s body, from the part of his lips and down his spine to offer up the last of his pleasure to McGillis’s tongue, until finally Gaelio falls still and panting with satisfaction to the sheets, and McGillis draws up and over his knees to reclaim some measure of his own composure. His tongue is burning with salt, his mouth is full of heat; even when he swallows his tongue clear the sticky lingers at the corner of his mouth, clenching to his lips as he lifts a hand to wipe the flushed damp of them as clean as he can get them. He feels dizzy, breathless, like he’s stumbled into a dream, like he’s the one who just rode out the tremors of orgasm under Gaelio’s lips and hands and tongue, until it’s strange to shift and feel the weight of his cock straining at the front of his pants with unsatisfied desire.

“Oh,” Gaelio gasps from where he’s lying sprawled over the bed. His legs are angled open, one arm is loose over the bed; he has the other up over his head, where his fingers are wandering through the fall of his hair. He looks dazed, heat-hazed and undone by pleasure, as if he’s chocolate melted out to a puddle across the sheets, and McGillis’s chest aches as if a fist has clenched around it to wrench affection free from him by force to offer up to those pleasure-softened blue eyes. “God.”

There’s a knot in McGillis’s throat, a pressure rising against his chest in time with the dip of Gaelio’s lashes casting shadow over his eyes. He wants to look away, wants to duck his head and break free of whatever force it is that is so stealing his breath and aching as if a wound in his chest, and he can no more turn his head than he can fly. He struggles over an inhale, feeling the rasp of it going rough and desperate in his throat, and when he speaks the sound comes out raw and husky. “Gaelio.”

Gaelio’s lashes dip, his head lifts from the sheets beneath him. When he looks at McGillis his whole face softens: something McGillis would have said impossible a moment before. What was languid relaxation melts into affection, the dizzy distraction in his eyes gives way to open tenderness, and McGillis’s throat closes on what he’s terribly afraid are tears even as Gaelio braces an elbow under himself and pushes himself up from his slack sprawl over the sheets.

“McGillis,” Gaelio says, breathing over McGillis’s name as if it’s made of gold and diamonds, and McGillis does have to shut his eyes, then, just to hold back the tension that knots in his throat. Gaelio’s fingers catch at his hair to smooth through the strands as the other’s touch slides down to the back of McGillis’s neck; when Gaelio tugs the force is gentle, hardly an urging at all so much as a suggestion, and McGillis gives way anyway. He reaches out to brace a hand at the bed, lifts his other hand to settle his fingertips just at the line of Gaelio’s waist, and when Gaelio presses his parted lips to McGillis’s McGillis gives way at once to let Gaelio taste the heat of his own pleasure off McGillis’s tongue. Gaelio makes a soft sound in the back of his throat, something that sounds like a purr and tastes like a moan, and when his arms flex McGillis topples forward and down to land hard atop Gaelio beneath him. There’s no chance for him to flinch an apology, no time even to appreciate the flushed heat of Gaelio’s bare skin pressing against his own before Gaelio pushes hard against the sheets under him and claims McGillis’s imbalance to twist them both to fall back over the give of the bed behind the other.

It speaks to how wide the frame under them is, to let them invert while still having feet of distance between McGillis and the edge of the mattress, but at the present moment McGillis’s attention is elsewhere than the expanse of the bed beneath him or even the silken soft of the sheets dragging against his bare skin. Gaelio is pressing against him, pinning McGillis in place under his weight as he kisses farther into McGillis’s mouth, and his fingers are tracing against the dip of McGillis’s hip to
find the laces at the front of his pants. Gaelio grabs at the lacing, curling his fingers in to weight against the tension, and McGillis’s hips come up as much to urge closer to Gaelio’s fingers as to provide the leeway to pull his clothing down and off. Gaelio’s dragging all the same, without bothering to wait for an invitation, and whatever friction the waistband can get on McGillis’s hips isn’t enough to overcome the demand of Gaelio’s fingers. The cloth drags down, McGillis gasps a breath as his cock pulls free, and Gaelio is reaching for him at once, abandoning his hold on the other’s pants to wrap his fingers close against the heat of McGillis’s cock instead. McGillis groans into Gaelio’s mouth, stifling the sound by accident instead of intent, and Gaelio answers with the pressure of a kiss crushing against McGillis’s lips before he pulls away by an inch to look down at the other. His gaze slides down, wandering across McGillis’s face and over the close-up outline of his ribs hovering under the surface of his skin, down over the tension-taut pull of the other’s abdomen until he reaches their hips, where his knee is pressing to McGillis’s half-loose pants and the heat of his spent cock is slow-softening alongside the radiant ache of want in McGillis’s own.

“McGillis,” Gaelio breathes, sounding like he can’t decide whether to sob or moan; his fingers clutch tight, his wrist flexes in a pull. McGillis’s hips jump without his intention, bucking up as if to answer Gaelio’s motion, and Gaelo’s gaze comes back to McGillis’s face. His eyes are wide, his mouth half-open; he looks disbelieving, as shocked as if he’s on the verge of crying, as if the fact of McGillis’s desire for him is something impossible to believe. It makes McGillis’s chest ache again, thuds pressure in his heartbeat with as much force as the want throbbing in his cock, and when he lifts his hand it’s with need-clumsy speed to catch at Gaelio’s hair and push the long curl of it back from the other’s face. Gaelio presses his lips together tight, his forehead creasing with the effort it is costing him to hold himself together, and McGillis huffs a breath as his fingers trace out the curve of Gaelio’s ear.

“Gaelio,” McGillis says; and there should be more than that, should be a request or a plea or even just thanks, some measure of gratitude for all the impossibilities that Gaelio has offered to him like they’re nothing, from the opulence of their surroundings to the soft of his smile and the warmth of his eyes. It’s too much, McGillis feels, this is too much for his street-hungry imagination to fathom; but it’s not a fantasy, there’s no need for his imagination here. Gaelio is smiling at him, the expression genuine even as his eyes overflow with tears, and when he ducks his head it’s only to draw down McGillis’s body and rock back onto his knees atop the sheets. The loss of his hold is a painful one, McGillis can feel impatience staging a revolt within him, but Gaelio is pulling at his pants, and with his skin as hot as it is McGillis wants nothing so much as to be free of whatever clothing he made the mistake of leaving on. He kicks his feet free, leaving Gaelio to drop his pants over the edge of the bed, and this time he’s the one who pushes onto an elbow and reaches up and out to draw Gaelio back down. Gaelio does so at once, with a smile starting at his lips even as his eyes swim with tears, and McGillis wraps his fingers into the other’s hair and pulls to urge Gaelio down and against his mouth to kiss him back into distraction. Gaelio’s hand ghosts at McGillis’s hip, his fingers steadying to brace himself as his hold returns to its original position, and when he strokes up again it’s with a slow, unhurried pace, as deliberately lingering as if he intends to keep McGillis here under him for the rest of the night.

McGillis has no arguments to this. The sheets are soft, the mattress is deep: even without the physical comfort of the moment, he thinks the weight of Gaelio’s body pressing close atop his would be enough to persuade him to linger, whether they were in the room of a cheap inn or pinned together on the thin of a bedroll in the shadows of a forest. Gaelio’s skin is hot against his, burning with the fever of his own satisfaction and his present focus; McGillis can feel the rhythm of Gaelio’s heart pounding off-center to his own, even if he didn’t have the taste of Gaelio’s breathing to guide his own gasping inhales against the other’s lips. Gaelio’s skin is soft as silk, as luxurious as the sheets beneath them, but it doesn’t catch at McGillis’s own, doesn’t drag rough against the calluses and scars that McGillis has spent to purchase his survival to bring him to this point. They move together
smoothly, as easily as if Gaelio is molten, to fit himself to every sharp edge and vicious angle of McGillis’s body, until McGillis can hardly tell it’s Gaelio’s fingers drawing over him instead of the wet of his mouth or the heat of his body. It’s enough to satiate him, to offer up a banquet enough to gorge that ravenous want hollowing out the depths of his existence; until McGillis is panting at Gaelio’s mouth, until the heat is burning over his cheeks and creasing at his forehead. He feels dizzy, distracted, like he can’t tell where he is, like he might be anywhere at all; but Gaelio is still against him, their skin sticking sweat-hot together as that pressure works up and over McGillis’s length with feverish speed. There’s a tide rising, a wave forming itself to a weight in McGillis’s body; he can feel it coming, can feel inevitable pleasure cresting on his mental horizon, until finally the strain breaks from him in a groan of air.

“Gaelio,” he chokes out, the vowels of the other’s name opening like flowers against his lips to spill wine-dark between them. His foot catches at the bed, his leg flexes to arch him up against Gaelio’s body as his eyelashes flutter shut, as his throat works on unspoken need. “Gaelio, it’s too much, I’m going--”

Gaelio seizes a breath, catching the inhale before his hand touches McGillis’s cheek with force enough to hold the other’s attention if not enough to make a blow. “Watch me,” he says, his voice breaking on intensity. “McGillis, open your eyes and look at me.” Those fingers slide up and into McGillis’s hair to catch and pull attention to themselves. “McGillis!”

It would be easy to ignore. McGillis can feel the heat in him coiling to a knot, can feel pleasure rising in preparation to crash over him; and Gaelio is still moving, there’s been no delay or hesitation in the stroking force of his grip. But Gaelio’s voice is breaking, pleading for this one thing with as much desperation as McGillis has ever wanted anything, and McGillis cannot refuse that request. His eyes open, his focus comes up to meet Gaelio’s, and for a moment they’re staring full into each other’s eyes. McGillis can watch the tension give way from Gaelio’s expression, can see the strain of panic melt into a glow of pleasure: Gaelio’s lips flicker with a smile, brief and brilliant in its happiness. The hand in his hair eases, softening to a stroke instead of a plea; Gaelio’s forehead uncreases, Gaelio’s eyes go wide with overwrought attention. McGillis feels himself stripped bare, laid open, unravelled and spread out for the affectionate appreciation of Gaelio’s eyes on him; and under Gaelio’s grip his cock jerks, his body tenses at the precipice of orgasm. McGillis reaches up to grab at Gaelio’s shoulder, clutching to the other’s collarbone as he drags a breath to fill his lungs; and Gaelio’s fingers pull, and McGillis feels pleasure wash out and over him even as he stares up into the blue of Gaelio’s eyes. His expression goes slack, his body convulses on helpless heat, and as his vision whites out he hears Gaelio catch a sharp breath of air as if in a sob as he watches McGillis coming under his touch.

It takes some time for McGillis’s vision to clear. He feels heavy, as if every part of his body has been inundated with heat to leave space for nothing but languid surrender; it’s long seconds of staring up into blue before he makes sense of Gaelio still leaning over him and gazing down at his expression as if McGillis is something of far, far greater value than he has ever thought himself to have before. Gaelio’s grip on him has eased, his fingers have fallen to spread out over McGillis’s hip, and he’s still watching McGillis’s face with so much intention there is no space for self-consciousness anywhere in his expression. He looks awestruck, stripped of all his blasé regality along with his clothing and left just the young man he is, skin pink with lingering heat and fingers sticky with his lover’s pleasure and his expression radiant with open affection in every detail. It makes McGillis’s throat tighten, makes his forehead crease, until he thinks for a brief, terrifying moment the shellshocked force of pleasure might carry him over into tears before he can stop himself. He fights with his throat, blinking hard to keep back the tears from overflowing his lashes, and over him Gaelio takes a breath and saves him the effort of speech.

“I didn’t know you were so thin,” he says, aiming for something like a light tone that quavers itself out-of-stability in spite of his attempts. His hand comes up, his fingers touch just against the bottom
edge of McGillis’s ribcage to fit against the outline of bone under the skin; the contact is trembly
gentle, even before Gaelio swallows and speaks in a much softer tone. “You’ve had a hard time of it,
haven’t you?”

McGillis looks up at Gaelio: the curl of his hair, the crease at his forehead, the angle of sympathetic
pain twisting at his mouth. Then he sighs a breath, and lifts his hand to catch against Gaelio’s head
and draw the other down against him before Gaelio can catch himself from toppling forward into
surrender.

“It’s okay,” McGillis says against Gaelio’s hair. “We’re okay, Gaelio.”

Gaelio’s hand slides away from McGillis’s hip and up to cling at the other’s back, his knee comes up
to press hard at the inside of McGillis’s thigh; after a moment McGillis wraps his other arm around
Gaelio’s shoulders to brace the other steady as Gaelio catches his hold close around McGillis and
presses his face against the other’s shoulder. McGillis can feel the strain in Gaelio’s chest as clearly
as he can hear the catch of the other’s breathing over his skin, but he doesn’t urge Gaelio to lift his
head, even when the hot wet of tears trickles over his shoulder to soak into the sheets beneath them.

His own eyes are too damp to let him see clearly anyway.
Obesiance

“It’s easy to do once you know how,” McGillis says, speaking without looking up from the fruit he’s bracing in one hand as he tears carefully against the give of the peel. “You could do it with practice, I’m sure.”

“I have practiced,” Almiria says, sounding only a little frustrated and mostly distracted. McGillis glances up from what he’s doing but she’s watching him work, frowning attention as she leans all the way over the table between them with no consideration at all for the elegant lines of the satin dress she’s wearing. “Whenever I try the sections get struck in the peel.”

“You’re not working down far enough,” McGillis tells her. “If you go too far they’ll all fall loose, but if the peel’s too high up you’ll just tear them to pieces when you try to pull them free.” He reaches the midpoint of the fruit and draws up to finish off the long, coiling strip of orange that he’s been creating. He lays the peel aside at the edge of the table and leans back in his chair as he reaches out to offer the fruit to Almiria. “Try it now.”

Almiria sighs. “Of course it’s perfect when you do it,” she says, but she’s reaching out to take one of the slices obediently. It pulls free at the first touch of her fingers; McGillis grins unseen at the beaming smile of delight that breaks across her face. “That’s wonderful. I don’t see how you’re so good at that.”

McGillis holds his free hand up to disavow this compliment. “Practice, no more,” he says, and sets the fruit down in the middle of the table so he can pull a slice free for himself. “Same as you and your piano, or your brother and his horseback riding.”

Almiria grins wide enough that her mouth pulls tight onto a dimple in the soft of her cheeks. “Carta’s better at him in that anyway.”

“That’s because she’s dedicated to it,” McGillis agrees. “Gaelio has other pursuits he spends his time on.”

“What’s this?” The voice comes from the doorway on the far side of the room; both McGillis and Almiria look back just as Gaelio steps forward to let the door swing shut behind him. “I leave for an hour and what do I find but my sister stealing away the affections of my consort.”

Almiria sticks out her tongue at her brother. “I was looking for you,” she tells him. “But you’re so busy I don’t have anyone to play with.”

Gaelio makes a face. “I’m afraid that may be exactly Father’s goal,” he says. He comes forward from the doorway, unbuttoning the weight of the coat around his shoulders as he goes. “If he keeps me in meetings all day he can be sure I’m not out wandering the country.”

“I don’t blame him,” McGillis says as mildly as he can. Gaelio looks up sharply from his attention to his buttons, frowning confusion at the other’s unexpected agreement with the king, and McGillis lets his mouth quirk up onto a smile. “Seeing what you picked up the last time you were left to visit the city on your own.”

Gaelio snorts. “Don’t talk about yourself that way,” he says as he shrugs his coat off to toss it over the back of a chair. “As heir to the throne I won’t allow it.”

“As prince consort I don’t require your allowance.” McGillis tips sideways in his chair so he can kick his legs out in a show of luxurious comfort. “Unless you intend to strip me of my title?”
Gaelio heaves a sigh. “This is rebellion,” he says. “And of the worst sort. Is your gratitude so short-lived, McGillis?”

“Don’t tease,” Almiria says, with as much assurance as if she has any kind of ability to back up this demand, and she reaches for the orange in the middle of the table to pull another slice free. “Have some fruit.”

“The royal family is above bribery,” Gaelio says from all the lofty heights his role as older brother can grant him. “You ought to pay more attention to your own lessons, Almiria.” But he’s coming forward to accept the fruit just the same, and punctuating his teasing with a grin that undoes its power even before he eats the fruit in one go.

“I have to go to more of those soon anyway,” Almiria sighs. She reaches for the orange to take another slice. “I should go and change before I need to be down at the stables for riding practice.”

“No need to look so glum,” Gaelio tells her as he reaches to ruffle the smooth-combed curl of her hair. “You’ll have fun if you remember to smile once in a while.” He takes the half-peeled orange that McGillis made a cup of and offers it to Almiria entirely. “Take this with you.”

Almiria hesitates. “Mackie’s the one who wanted it in the first place.”

“I’ll get him another,” Gaelio says easily. “Take it and get out of here before you’re late.” Almiria beams up at him, the glow of happiness warm all over her face, and then she ducks forward to step around Gaelio and reach out to hug McGillis one-armed where he’s sitting.

“I’ll be back to visit later,” she promises. “Bye, Mackie.”

“No hug for me?” Gaelio protests, and Almiria turns to stick out her tongue at him. He matches her with a put-upon scowl, and a growl of royal frustration, and when he launches himself at her she runs for the door with a yelp of assumed terror that sounds more like a laugh than anything else. Gaelio catches her before the entrance and presses her into a hug that looks as much like an excuse to muss her hair as anything else, but Almiria is smiling when she finally breaks free to slip out the door and into the hallway. She waves to McGillis at the table once more, and grins at Gaelio, and then she’s gone, and Gaelio is easing the door shut behind her. He lingers there for a moment, leaning against the support with his forehead pressing against the weight; behind him McGillis is left to rein in the unconcerned smile he gave to Almiria and to straighten to sit up in his chair.

“Gaelio,” he says, gently now rather than teasing, as he pushes to his feet to come forward across the room. Gaelio’s shoulders sag heavy under their own weight at the sound of McGillis’s voice; when McGillis steps close enough to reach out and touch Gaelio’s sleeve he can hear the huff of the other’s exhale like a sigh of surrender even before Gaelio turns half-away from the door to give way to his urging.

“I think he’s trying to kill me,” Gaelio says as McGillis steps in to fit against his spine and loop an arm around the other’s waist to support some part of his weight. Gaelio is heavy in McGillis’s hold, weighed down by the exhaustion of the conversation he has just come from; McGillis wonders if he might not be sitting on the floor instead of standing were it not for the support of the other just behind him. “I swear, if I have another day of these meetings...”

McGillis ducks his head to press his forehead against the fall of Gaelio’s hair. “You’ll be fine,” he soothes. “You’re getting better every day.”

Gaelio’s laugh is weak and shakier than McGillis could wish, but it’s a laugh all the same, and that counts for something at least. “I’m glad to hear it,” he says. “Sometimes I think he really is just
looking for an excuse to disown me now that the first wave of gossip has passed.” His hand presses atop McGillis’s around him; when he ducks his head forward his hair falls off the back of his neck to bare the pale skin between hairline and shirt collar. “It would be easier if you were there.”

“No,” McGillis says levelly. “I don’t think having a constant reminder of your defiance sitting next to you is the way to work your way back into His Majesty’s good graces.”

Gaelio snorts. “I suppose you’re right,” he allows. “It would still be easier for me, at least.” His fingers atop McGillis’s shift to curl to a gentle hold around the other’s wrist, as if he’s idly forming the adornment of jewelry from the warmth of his own body. “You don’t have to hide away in here all day, anyway. Father’s in these gatherings with me, you wouldn’t need to worry about running into him.”

McGillis hums in the back of his throat. “That’s true,” he says, but with skepticism enough on the tone to make his lack of capitulation clear before he voices it. “I think it best to not push my luck at the moment.” He ducks his head forward to press his nose to Gaelio’s hair and let his lips skim against the knob at the top of the other’s spine just before him. “I’ll have plenty of time to take advantage of my position later. I’m in no hurry.”

“I suppose not,” Gaelio says. “Now that you’re secure in having landed the affections of a prince. The only thing more you could aim for is the devotion of a king.”

“Indeed,” McGillis says against the back of Gaelio’s neck. When he presses in closer to weight his lips to the other Gaelio’s fingers tighten against his hand and Gaelio’s breath rushes from him in a huff, but the other doesn’t pull away and McGillis doesn’t draw back. “I seem to have spent my chances on that with your father, in any case.”

Gaelio laughs again, a little breathlessly. “All you have to do now is wait,” he says. “And hope that I succeed in keeping my fortunes afloat.”

“My future is tied to yours,” McGillis says. “Your name has been my only protection since I followed you back here.”

“At my demand,” Gaelio says. “I didn’t offer you many options in the matter.”

“I am not in the habit of refusing opportunity,” McGillis tells him. “I would still be on the streets where I began if I were.” He shrugs a shoulder without drawing away. “The benefits outweigh the risks.”

“Like those of having a prince captive to your every whim?” Gaelio asks. He’s leaning hard against the support of the door, now; his shoulders are pressing back to relax against the brace of McGillis standing so close behind him. “Was the outcome worth the risk of your life?”

McGillis pauses in his careful work at the back of Gaelio’s neck, where he’s fitting the print of his mouth into the gaps between Gaelio’s vertebrae and bringing a flush of color under the pale of the other’s skin. Gaelio’s head is still ducked forward, his shoulders slack in the illusion of disinterest in the question, but his fingers are tight against McGillis’s wrist, a giveaway for his tension even if he’s learned better how to hide his expression and smooth his shoulders. McGillis looks at the fall of Gaelio’s hair, at the open surrender in the forward tilt of his head, and for a moment it’s hard even to speak for the pressure that rises in his throat, the force that comes forward to tighten his breathing out of his grasp even as he struggles for it.

“Yes,” McGillis says, finally. The word is soft at his lips, almost a whisper as he gives it voice; his tone must sound strange, enough that Gaelio lifts his head and starts to turn, but McGillis ducks in to
kiss against the other’s neck again and Gaelio submits to the desperate weight of McGillis’s mouth at
his skin with a groan. McGillis kisses him hard, pressing close as if to underscore his sincerity by
force; when he pulls away Gaelio’s skin is darkening to a bruised-in print to glow the mark of
McGillis’s lips even after they have drawn away. McGillis ducks his head forward and shuts his eyes
as he leans against Gaelio’s head. “It was worth it.”

Gaelio shudders against McGillis, his fingers tightening and then easing against the other’s wrist, and
McGillis moves in closer, urged to action by even that small shift of the man leaning back against
him. He moves down, now, drawing over Gaelio’s neck and across to touch at his shoulder, to seek
out soft skin underneath the cover of his loose-laced shirt, and Gaelio tips into it at once, angling his
head to the side in encouragement for the push of McGillis’s mouth and the catch of his fingers
tugging and urging clothing aside. Gaelio tastes faintly of salt against McGillis’s lips, bearing dried
sweat as a suggestion of the discomfort he’s been sitting through for the long hours of the morning,
but there’s something sweeter underneath, the spicy tang of the lavender oil that the maids spill into
the steam of their baths and a hint of the orange that Gaelio took from Almiria before her departure,
and McGillis presses his nose close against the indentation of Gaelio’s shoulderblade and breathes in
against the heat of the other’s skin as the rest of his concerns in the moment give way to the
simplicity of appreciation.

Gaelio doesn’t offer any protest. He’s going slack, tipping back hard as if he’s melting to the heat of
McGillis’s breath, as if every touch of McGillis’s body against his own is stripping his strength to
leave him limp with satisfied heat. The only motion he makes is as McGillis is threatening the farthest
reach of Gaelio’s loosened shirt in urging it down his shoulder, and then it’s just to reach up with his
free hand and tug the laces of his shirt wider to give them inches more slack to work with. It’s
enough for McGillis to tug the neckline all the way down Gaelio’s shoulder, to leave the shirt
hanging open over the shift of breathing in the other’s chest, and Gaelio answers him by dragging the
hem of his shirt up and free of his pants. McGillis reaches for that too, pushing up and under the
loose of the cloth to find the heat of Gaelio’s skin under his fingertips, and he urges up higher as
quickly as he makes contact, fitting his touch to the curve of Gaelio’s lowest ribs as he takes a breath
and speaks into the other’s shoulder. “Shall we retire to the bed?”

Gaelio hums a sound in the back of his throat, a little strained around the forward tilt of his head. “I
have to make an appearance at dinner this evening.”

“That won’t be for an hour or more,” McGillis tells him. “You have the time, if you want it.” He
draws his hand around to Gaelio’s back to press his palm against the shift of muscle in the other’s
back, where knots of tension twist themselves into place alongside the dip of Gaelio’s spine. “Or I
could call for some wine and you could nap instead.”

“Mm,” Gaelio hums. “That does sound pleasant.” He shifts under McGillis’s touch, the tension at his
back promising his movement even before he turns to face the other; McGillis looks up by an inch
into the heavy-lidded weight of Gaelio’s eyes and the slow curve of the smile at his lips. “Maybe
after.”

McGillis smiles. “Very good, Your Highness,” he says, purring the words into the start of teasing,
and he slides his hand free of Gaelio’s hold to reach up for the other’s hair instead so he can rock
forward onto his toes and draw Gaelio down into a kiss. Gaelio submits at once, surrender coming
easy in answer to the urging of McGillis’s hands, and McGillis holds him there, keeping them fitting
near together while he slides his free hand around to Gaelio’s waist and presses to urge him into
movement. Gaelio moves at once, as smoothly as he ever does across the floor of a ballroom, and
McGillis steers him across the room with grace enough to do any couple proud. He doesn’t have to
watch where they’re going, doesn’t have to draw away to keep them from collision: the last months
have given him knowledge of their quarters nearly as intimate as his knowledge of his prince, until
he can travel the distance from the door to the rumpled sheets of the bed without having to lift his
gaze over Gaelio’s shoulder or pause in his efforts to urge the other’s shirt up and free of his chest.
Gaelio lifts his arms as McGillis tugs at his shirt, giving up the contact of touch for the freedom from
his clothes, and when McGillis drops the clothing to catch at Gaelio’s hips instead Gaelio takes his
cue as readily to drop back without even looking before he sits at the edge of the mattress.

“So,” McGillis says, leaving Gaelio to wait for him for a moment while he steps back and reaches to
pull his own shirt up and over his head. It’s not quite as easy a motion as Gaelio’s, with his own
laces still tied into a proper bow, but all it takes is an extra tug before he’s free to drop the clothing
and step back in towards the bed where Gaelio is waiting for him. “What is His Highness’s wish?”
He braces a knee at the outside of the other’s hip and leans in to cast Gaelio in his shadow as he
reaches to push the other’s hair back with both hands; Gaelio rocks back in surrender to the contact,
his lashes dipping as his mouth softens with the pleasure of McGillis’s fingers stroking smooth
through his hair. “I could see to your pleasure myself, if you’d prefer to lie back and make a languid
afternoon of it.” McGillis drops his hand from Gaelio’s hair to reach out and curl his hold around
the other’s wrist instead, to urge Gaelio’s touch up and press the other’s palm to encouragement against
the dip of his back. “Or perhaps you’d like to exert your royal prerogative over your loyal subject
instead?”

Gaelio huffs a breath and ducks his head forward, drawing free of McGillis’s touch to press his
forehead to the other’s chest instead. His hand he keeps where it is against McGillis’s spine, but
when he pulls it’s only to press his palm flush against the other’s skin, more like he’s seeking out the
contact between them than trying to pull the other down to the sheets of the bed.

“I’m tired of playing prince,” he says, soft against McGillis’s heartbeat. “I just want to be Gaelio
right now.” His hand slides up to press his fingertips to McGillis’s shoulderblade as he catches the
other in the curve of his arm and presses himself closer against the span of the other’s chest.
“However you want me.”

McGillis ducks his chin to look down at the top of Gaelio’s head. Gaelio is pressed in against him,
his head ducked forward and his features hidden by the curtain of his hair falling in front of his face,
but there’s tension enough in his arm and in the press of his fingers to speak more loudly even than
the clear color of his eyes. McGillis smiles without trying to hold back the soft at his lips and brings
his hand up to touch at the back of Gaelio’s head.

“As you wish,” he says. “Gaelio.” Gaelio breathes a laugh against McGillis’s skin, huffing over the
exhale with strain enough for it to sound a little like a gasp, and McGillis shifts his weight to urge
Gaelio sideways over the bed. Gaelio gives way obediently, falling slack to the urging of McGillis’s
touch even as his fingers trail against the other’s skin as long as can maintain the contact; he doesn’t
even protest when McGillis draws back to stand at the edge of the bed so he can catch at Gaelio’s
hips and turn him over onto his stomach over the sheets. Gaelio brings both arms up over his head,
one catching at his hair and the other angling out over the pillows, and he turns his head to let his hair
fall unattended over his face as McGillis drops to a knee alongside the bed so he can catch and pull at
Gaelio’s well-polished boots.

Neither of them speak for a few minutes. McGillis is occupied in what he’s doing in urging first
Gaelio’s boots and then his pants off his body; for his part Gaelio seems content to lie still across the
blankets and linger in what must be the familiar simplicity of being waited upon. McGillis isn’t about
to complain; there’s a pleasure to this, he thinks, of stripping Gaelio free of the royal attire that marks
him out as the prince he is and laying him down to the human simplicity of tangled hair and flushed
skin. It’s as if he’s pulling the other’s title free under the urging of his hands, dropping Gaelio’s rank
to the floor to be as forgotten as the weight of his pants, until all he is left with is Gaelio the man,
tense with the anticipation he still hasn’t fully given up, as if the prospect of what is to come is more
than he can quite let himself believe even now. It draws McGillis to stillness at the edge of the bed, leaves him standing just to gaze down at Gaelio laid out before him atop the rich sheets that have become as familiar to McGillis as the coarse blankets he once wrapped himself in, until it’s only Gaelio shifting to look over his shoulder and ask “McGillis?” that reminds him to move at all.

“Stay there,” McGillis tells him, punctuating with a touch at the outside of Gaelio’s thigh as a means to underscore his words, and he steps away to the dresser alongside the bed. It’s an ornate thing, carved over with elaborate designs and weighty enough to speak to the value of the wood that forms its shape, but McGillis doesn’t linger over appreciation of it. He’s grown accustomed to the details of this room, at least, as familiar with his surroundings as if he has lived here as long as Gaelio, until he hardly has to think at all to know where to find the jar of oil set carefully upright in the topmost drawer. It has a rich scent to it when he pulls the stopper free, dark and heavy as the dresser itself; the perfume of it alone is enough to draw up the imprint of past memories to McGillis’s body if not his mind, to ghost friction across his skin as if to remember the press of Gaelio’s thighs atop his own, the grip of his fingers against a sweat-slick hip, the pant of Gaelio’s breathing coming hard with desire against the side of his neck as their bodies move together. McGillis’s cock tightens, flexing with want at the front of his pants, and when he moves it’s with his hands tense with anticipation, with the strain of want enough to surge towards impatience at the back of his head even as he spills the slick of the oil over his fingers and palm.

Gaelio is breathing harder by the time McGillis turns back towards him. His fingers are curled into his hair to fist at the weight of it as he pulls it back from his face, his lashes are weighted over his shut eyes; his lips are parted against the pillows beneath him as he shifts against the sheets, his hips rocking forward in instinctive pursuit of some kind of easing of the tension building in him. McGillis comes back at once, leaving the bottle open atop the dresser while he comes forward to fit his knee alongside Gaelio’s and straddle one of the other’s thighs; Gaelio shudders at the movement and tips his head back to look up at McGillis as the other settles his weight in over him.

“McGillis,” Gaelio says, and lets his hair go to reach out instead, to touch his fingers against the curve of McGillis’s hip like he’s trying to find a handhold. “Like this?”

McGillis catches at Gaelio’s reaching hand, stopping its motion with his hold before he squeezes pressure over the other’s fingers and slides his touch up to slot together with Gaelio’s. “For now,” he says, and reaches out to rub slick oil over the tension of Gaelio’s entrance. Gaelio’s lashes dip, his breathing gusts, and his hand in McGillis’s flexes tight on anticipation in the moment before he eases with conscious attention. McGillis works in against him, promising friction without quite providing it while he watches the strain in Gaelio’s forehead and reads the flicker of pressure at the part of his lips. “Just until you’re ready.”

Gaelio shudders a breath and ducks his head into a nod. It’s enough to serve as the permission McGillis is waiting for: coupled with the easing of the strain Gaelio’s been holding in his legs it’s as much as an invitation. McGillis leans forward over the bed, pinning Gaelio’s hand down to the sheets under them as he steadies himself, and when he pushes up and in it’s with the same careful intent, guiding his motions by the easing of Gaelio’s tension rather than the slow-building ache of desire in his own body.

Neither of them speak. Gaelio’s eyes are shut, his lashes casting arcs of shadow across the curve of his cheekbones; his mouth is relaxed against the shift of his breathing, his expression soft on the heat McGillis is working up and into him. McGillis keeps watching his face all the same, even though there’s no trace of the tension that would bring a halt to his steady motion: there’s something satisfying just in the ease across Gaelio’s shoulders, in watching the accumulated stress that he always brings in the door from his meetings with his father drain out of his body to slump him heavy and warm against the sheets under them. McGillis shifts his weight to come in closer, to hitch himself
a little higher against the support of Gaelio’s thigh pinned beneath his own, and when he moves in again it’s with more force behind the forward push of his fingers into the give of Gaelio’s body, with more intent to the stroke he takes. Gaelio’s lips part, even if his breath spills from him silently, and McGillis can feel answering tension flex Gaelio tighter around the paired fingers he has working up into the other, but there’s no protest, and McGillis doesn’t retreat. Better to lean in, to brace himself more firmly against the bed and hold the tighter to Gaelio’s hand in his before he begins to work again, bringing the whole strength of his arm to bear on the steady-smooth strokes he’s taking. Gaelio’s cheeks flush to heat, his mouth comes open on the pant of his breathing; McGillis can see the fingers at his hair reaching with instinctive strain, seeking out some kind of a handhold even against the loose fall of his own hair. It’s intoxicating to see, the power of the moment as dizzyingly intense as that first time, when McGillis could barely let himself even glance at Gaelio’s face for the foolish, insane heat of desire coursing through him, but he’s looking now, he’s already caught in that freefall of their shared recklessness, and this heat is something that always proves the better when it’s shared.

“Gaelio,” McGillis says, his voice giving a warning of his intent before he draws his fingers free of the other’s body. Gaelio’s lashes shift, his eyes come open; when he twists his head it’s to look back over his shoulder at McGillis kneeling over him, to meet McGillis’s attention with heat-drunk haze over the blue of his eyes. He turns at once, pushing up onto his elbow as he pulls at McGillis’s hand in his; McGillis rocks back over his knees and lifts their intertwined hands to press a kiss against Gaelio’s wrist like a promise before he lets the other go and slides back over the bed. Gaelio turns at once, shifting on the sheets even as he pushes himself up to sit with unthinking grace over the luxury of the blankets beneath him, and McGillis ducks his head to work open the laces of his pants enough that he can urge the weight of them off his hips and free of his legs. He kicks his feet free and steps out of the puddle he has made of his clothing, and then there’s a touch at his shoulder, fingers sliding over his skin as Gaelio leans far forward from his perch at the edge of the bed.

“McGillis,” he says, his voice soft enough to make the words a suggestion and not a demand. “Come here.”

“I’m on my way” and McGillis is moving as quickly as he speaks, suiting action to words as he steps in to follow the draw of Gaelio’s touch and give the other space to slide his palm down and against McGillis’s shoulderblade instead. Gaelio pulls at once, looping both arms around McGillis’s neck and leaning back to pull the other down atop him, and McGillis comes in, throwing out a hand to catch himself at the sheets while Gaelio is still struggling to align his legs with McGillis’s. There’s a moment of difficulty, Gaelio’s knee dragging over McGillis’s chest and McGillis’s balance wobbling precariously; and then Gaelio’s legs are open around McGillis’s hips, and Gaelio’s fingers are pushing into McGillis’s hair, and McGillis is toppling forward into the invitation of Gaelio’s position without waiting to be urged. He catches at Gaelio’s hip to brace them together so they can slide back and closer towards the center of the bed; Gaelio braces a leg around McGillis’s hip and arches himself closer as if to pull the other down atop him even as they move. It steals McGillis’s breath even as they move backwards to lose themselves in the middle of the blankets and pillows surrounding them, and when he slides his hand back it’s to brace under Gaelio’s hips and lift him up off the bed to meet the tension of McGillis’s body pressing over him. Gaelio arches immediately, curving up to answer McGillis’s pull as his fingers clutch at the other’s hair, and when McGillis shifts his weight he finds Gaelio ready for him, the oil-slick heat of his body as welcoming as the angle of his legs and the reach of his arms. McGillis sets his knee at the sheets, and leans in hard against the support, and when he thrusts forward it’s to slot them together in one long pull of aching heat.

This is a rhythm McGillis has learned well. In the months since his return he’s had occasion to memorize the layout of his new shared quarters into the comfort of familiarity, and to work his way through two shelves’ worth of the books that fill Gaelio’s personal collection, and to redevelop his
taste for the regular meals he shares with Gaelio over the table at the corner of the room. He has always been a fast learner, and he finds his situation an easy one to accustom himself to: but even so, nothing has proven as instinctive as this. McGillis remembers his desperate history with every grimace of distaste Gaelio makes at some too-rich soup, still wakes disoriented and adrift in the soft of blankets and the echoing expanse of the distant walls around him, but this -- the fit of Gaelio’s legs bracing around him, the weight of Gaelio’s arms draped across his shoulders, the gasp of his breathing falling into time with Gaelio’s own -- this McGillis has learned as if it’s a past-life memory waiting to be recalled more than studied. He knows how to move, how to set his knee at the sheets and brace his fingers into the soft of the mattress, knows how to press himself forward to curve Gaelio’s spine into an arc of heat and how to fall into pace with the reflexive strain of the other’s body working around him: and he knows to lift his head, and open his eyes, and fix his gaze on Gaelio’s face to watch the tide of heat rising against the give of the other’s expression. He knows how to read the tells on Gaelio’s face, the signs as clear to him as if text drawn across the pages of a book: that crease at his forehead, this tremor at his mouth, the flush that spreads from his shoulders and up the curve of his throat to darken his lips and stain his cheeks.

“McGillis,” Gaelio gasps, his throat working on strain as McGillis moves over him, as his heel digs in close against McGillis’s back, as his body tightens instinctive pressure against the pull of the other’s cock working into him. His lashes flutter, his lips part on unspoken want; McGillis shifts his weight to the side to come in harder, to thrust deeper into the give of Gaelio beneath him. Between their bodies Gaelio’s cock jumps, straining on the heat McGillis is stroking into him; McGillis huffs a breath and pulls Gaelio in closer to him to claim a better angle for the rhythm of his movement. “Ah. God, I. I love you.”

“I know,” McGillis tells him. His voice is strange, husky and rough in the back of his throat; he can do nothing to ease it, not when the whole of his body is radiating heat as tension forms itself to the curve of his spine and spreads up and out to lay claim to his body. “I know you do.”

“McGillis.” Gaelio’s hand draws free of McGillis’s hair, freeing the weight of the locks to come down to press to the side of the other’s face instead; when McGillis looks up in answer Gaelio’s gaze is fixed on his face, his mouth soft on affection. There’s no dignity in his expression, none of the dominance he has been bred to from his youth: he’s just himself, breathless and flushed and aching with want, and McGillis can feel the weight of that hit him like a blow enough to rattle the whole foundation of his existence. He hisses a breath, feeling it ache like pain in his chest, and when he moves it’s with force like he’s trying to chase it away. Gaelio’s palm presses closer to his cheek, answering tension with strain of his own, but his gaze doesn’t shift, his attention doesn’t fall aside. “Tell me.”

McGillis flashes the teasing edge of a grin gone breathless on heat. “Is that a command?”

Gaelio grimaces and shakes his head as sharply as McGillis knew he would. “A request.” he amends, and catches his fingers up and in McGillis’s hair to urge the other down over him. “Please, McGillis.”

He sounds desperate, as wanting as McGillis has ever heard him, with that breathless shock on his tone that always comes with true desire, as if McGillis is showing him some fraction of that endless need that the other took in with every raindrop against his skin, with every night gone hungry on city streets. Gaelio has never known any part of that, any more than McGillis will ever return to it: and yet there is need in his voice now, a tone that slides towards begging even as his words break over the startling force of his own desire. McGillis grits his teeth against the heat that fills him at the sound, and tips himself forward to press close atop Gaelio beneath him, and when he moves it’s to weight his forehead to Gaelio’s shoulder and gasp for air against the heat of the other’s skin.
“I love you,” he tells the flush of Gaelio’s skin, the thud of Gaelio’s heartbeat. Gaelio’s fingers tighten in McGillis’s hair, his fingernails catch to brace at the line of the other’s spine, and McGillis shuts his eyes and speaks on. “I need you.” He gives up his hold on Gaelio’s hip, trusting to the support of the bed instead so he can reach between them to lay hold to the pleasure-hot strain of Gaelio’s cock pressing a line of heat flush between their bodies. Gaelio shudders with the contact, his legs flex tight around McGillis leaning over him, and McGillis tightens his grip into the certain strength of experience, of memory, and he begins to stroke in time with the motion of his hips to urge the heat in Gaelio’s body to a fever pitch in advance of his own surging want. “No matter what title you have.”

Gaelio huffs the outline of a laugh that breaks to a groan in the back of his throat as McGillis’s grip slides up over him. “I bet you say that to all your princes.”

McGillis takes a breath against Gaelio’s shoulder. “You’re not the prince to me,” he says, and he lifts his head so he can open his eyes and look down at Gaelio beneath him. Gaelio’s watching him, the way he always does, like this, his head tipped and eyes heavy and half-lidded with pleasure but still fixed on McGillis, still tracking the other’s every motion like he’s the whole of the world. It makes McGillis’s throat tighten in spite of himself, as familiarity gives way to the incomprehensible surge of affection that he still can’t get used to, even after all this time, and when he gasps a breath he doesn’t know if it’s more heat or emotion choking over the sound. “You’re just Gaelio.”

Gaelio’s forehead creases, Gaelio’s mouth goes soft. “McGillis,” he says, breathing the other’s name into a sigh; and then McGillis twists his wrist to stroke up over the curve of Gaelio’s cock, and Gaelio’s thighs flex, Gaelio’s eyes go wide on response as his body clenches hard around McGillis inside him. “Oh, god, McGillis.”

“Watch me,” McGillis tells him, dominance falling with the easy certainty of obedience to come, and he rocks in closer, shifting his rhythm to speed as he moves over and into Gaelio beneath him. Gaelio’s mouth is open on his breathing, his cheeks are flushing to scarlet as heat builds in him, as his hold on McGillis tightens to pull the other closer, but he obeys all the same, opening his eyes wide to gaze up at McGillis over him with all the reverent attention of a supplicant on their knees before a lord, a king, a god. McGillis’s breathing is rasping, his arm is straining, he can feel his heartbeat like a drum against the inside of his chest, but he can’t look away, can’t duck his head even to surrender to the rush of pleasure building in him with every slick-smooth movement of his cock stroking into the tension of Gaelio’s impending release. He’s too focused, too enraptured by watching Gaelio’s eyes glaze with heat, with watching the effort of the other’s focus shudder in his shoulders and drag at his lips, until finally he pulls up, and thrusts in, and Gaelio’s expression falls to heat, his attention capitulating to the involuntary spasm of pleasure that hits him. His cock twitches, his thighs tense, and McGillis is gasping, is groaning, “Gaelio” turning to tribute on his tongue as Gaelio’s orgasm urges his own free from his desperate hold. His fingers clench on flushed skin and rumpled sheets alike, his hips stutter forward to press close against Gaelio’s body, and for the first seconds of Gaelio’s trembling pleasure McGillis is caught in the white-blind rush of his own release.

The heat haze gives way to languid satisfaction after the first wave of pleasure has eased. McGillis’s vision comes back, his attention easing back into place behind his eyes as he blinks to reorient himself in the trembling relief of his body; beneath him Gaelio is sprawling slack over the sheets, one knee canted wide while the other leg is still hooked around and over McGillis’s hip. He hasn’t eased his hold on the other’s shoulders, doesn’t even when McGillis lets his grip on Gaelio’s spent cock go so he can slide back and free of the other’s body; when McGillis turns sideways to fall into the give of the blankets Gaelio turns to follow him, the weight of his body drawn into the same motion by his lingering hold. They end up lying across the middle of the bed, turned in to face each other and still so close McGillis can feel the radiant heat of Gaelio’s skin against his without having to think of it at all.
Gaelio takes a breath and heaves it out in a long sigh, shutting his eyes as he smiles drowsy satisfaction. “Now then,” he says, falling back into the regal tone he takes for more public appearances. “What was that about wine and a nap?”

McGillis huffs a laugh. “Wine we can manage,” he says. “You’ll want to take a bath before you go down to dinner, though.”

“Mm,” Gaelio hums. “Maybe I won’t go down to dinner at all.”

McGillis lifts a hand to touch against the tangle of Gaelio’s hair. “You said you had to.”

Gaelio wrinkles his nose and lifts a hand to wave away this protest. “I’m prince of the realm,” he says haughtily. “I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to.”

“Prince is not king,” McGillis tells him. “I think you’ve already used up all your spoiled tantrums for the year already.”

Gaelio opens an eye and raises an eyebrow as he squints up at McGillis. “My tantrums?”

“Yes,” McGillis says without any hesitation. “What else would you call naming an urchin off the streets your official consort?”

Gaelio rolls onto his back so he can look up at McGillis with both eyes open. “I have some ideas,” he deadpans. “I prefer to think of it as love.”


Gaelio lifts his hand to touch at McGillis’s hair and feather his fingers against the weight of it. “I don’t care,” he says. “I’m just glad to be with you.”

“Spoken like a true madman,” McGillis tells him, and Gaelio cracks into a laugh.

“It’s your fault, anyway,” he says. “If I did lose my heart it’s you who did the stealing.”

McGillis shrugs. “I’ve always been good at taking what I needed to survive,” he says, and watches Gaelio’s laugh melt into a smile, watches Gaelio’s eyes go soft on affection.

“McGillis,” Gaelio says, his voice tender enough to make a prayer of the other’s name; and then he slides his hand at the back of the other’s neck, and McGillis is ducking in to kiss the soft of his lips before Gaelio has yet urged him to it. They stay there for a moment, McGillis savoring the heat of Gaelio’s mouth beneath his and Gaelio’s fingers trailing down across McGillis’s shoulderblade; then Gaelio pushes up, and McGillis goes back to topple onto the sheets as Gaelio presses him down against them. A hand slides down his waist, fingers brace in against his hip, and then Gaelio pulls away to gasp a breath against McGillis’s lips and speaks. “Come to dinner with me.”

McGillis blinks up at Gaelio over him and grimaces before shaking his head. “I don’t think I’d be overly welcome.”

Gaelio tosses his head. “I don’t care.”

McGillis sighs. “Gaelio--”

“You have to come out sometime,” Gaelio tells him, speaking over the protest McGillis is too heat-dazed to properly form. “The nobility will just have to get used to you eventually and they might as well start now. Almiria would love the company, she never has anyone to talk to at these things.” His
hand slides down to trail over McGillis’s skin like he’s memorizing the heat of it as his lips shift and twist on a frown, as he ducks his head to look at the other’s shoulder instead of his eyes. “And I want you there.”

McGillis thinks about protesting, about urging more time, more patience, more of the submission they have been offering all these months as payment for Gaelio’s recklessness and his own defiance. Then he looks at Gaelio’s frown, and the shadow of his lashes, and the set of his shoulders; and he sighs, and lifts his hand, and presses against Gaelio’s cheek to urge the other’s gaze up to meet his own.

“Okay,” McGillis says, and has the satisfaction of watching a smile break bright and brilliant across the whole of Gaelio’s face. “I can hardly refuse an invitation from my prince.”

Gaelio grins at him. “I never thought I’d hear obedience from you, McGillis.”

“Yes, well,” McGillis says, and slides his hand up into Gaelio’s hair. “Love makes fools of us all.” Gaelio laughs, bright enough to dimple in his cheeks and sparkle in the blue of his eyes, and McGillis smiles and pulls him down into satisfaction.

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