The Descriptivist's Approach

by CrunchyWrites

Summary

Professor Caleb Widogast has a problem, and that problem is the following: for the last several months a lavender-skinned tiefling has been loitering in the yard beneath his office window, spinning fire and doing stretches and generally being very, very distracting.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

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Professor Caleb Widogast (Bachelors in classical civilisations and languages, Masters in descriptive linguistics, PhD in the etymology of pre-divergence Sylvan, current PhD researcher into Sylvan declamation and semantic change) has a very set routine to his life. Every morning between 4am and 6am he is woken up by his flatmate Nott returning from or leaving for a shift at one of her many, ever-changing jobs, mumbles a greeting or goodbye to her that she can’t hear through his bedroom door, rolls over, and goes back to sleep. At 6:30am exactly Caleb’s alarm goes off, prompting him to roll back over in bed with a groan and hit it until it stops making noise. At 6:35am Caleb’s second alarm goes off, giving the same result. At 6:45am Caleb’s third alarm, positioned on his over-crowded, ever-cluttered desk on the far side of his small bedroom goes off, making him groan even louder than the two previous alarms did combined, sit up in bed, slide his feet into the slippers resting neatly by his bed-side table, stand up, cross the room, and hit that alarm until it too falls silent.

Then he does everything else.

He shuffles into the bathroom that he shares with Nott, takes a quick shower, brushes his teeth, shaves if he can be bothered to, makes himself a mug of tea, checks if the milk is off after the tea has been poured, drinks it anyway, and slowly wakes up over the next half an hour.

At 7:25am the alarm in his room goes off again, and Caleb makes himself breakfast (if he remembers to), gets dressed, grabs his very nice satchel (a gift from Nott that he didn’t question), and leaves, arriving at his equally cluttered, equally messy office at the university at 8:30am.

Then the day can begin.

The rest of the day, no matter what happens, always categorises itself in Caleb’s mind as ‘research’. He may stay in his office only for long enough to check his emails before heading to the library (standard research); he might teach a lecture and meet with students (human research); he may write up some more of his thesis and meet with his supervisor (academic research); or he may do none of that and instead sit at his desk, glancing out of the window periodically and hoping that the infuriating purple fire-spinning tiefling doesn’t show up again to ruin his day (not actually research, but Caleb’s trying to learn the tiefling’s timetable, which means he’s technically researching something.)

The tiefling had first shown up beneath Caleb’s window almost two months ago now, and has become a fairly regular fixture in his life since then. Reasonably, he understands why the tiefling practises where he does – Caleb’s second-floor office looks out onto a small, overgrown yard between his building and the next one over, which he thinks houses the offices of the archaeology professors. The yard itself is more or less abandoned, cut off as it is on three sides by old, rust-red brick walls crawling with vines and ivy, and it’s small and grimy enough to be uninviting to students looking for a quiet place to study or eat their lunch outside while still being big enough for someone to, for example, swing around two flaming balls on the end of a length of chain before doing some really, really impressive yoga positions.

Caleb knows. Caleb’s watched.

He’s trying not to watch right now, and is failing miserably. He’s been distracted all day, operating mostly on autopilot, and after staring at his blinking cursor and rummaging pointlessly through some
of the books stacked high on his desk he’d eventually given up and half-accepted defeat, permitting himself momentary breaks to look out of the window before forcing himself back to work. He’s still determined to get some work done if nothing else, rolling back to his computer periodically to check his emails and scan his notes and try desperately to actually focus, but time and time again he finds himself scooting back to the other side of his desk, resting an elbow in his windowsill, and watching the tiefling go about his practise.

It’s a dull, overcast kind of day, but the tiefling looks stunning all the same – he’s doing what Caleb can only assume are warm-up stretches of some kind, reaching his arms over his head and arching his back in a smooth curve before folding forwards exactly in half, his hands coming to lie flat on the ground on either side of his feet. He holds the pose for a while, his tail swaying gently behind him, and then breaks out of it, lowering himself into a plank before lying flat and lifting up his upper body. It’s a pattern that Caleb vaguely recognises from the one time that Jester had convinced him to join her at yoga – he’d been able to do approximately none of the positions, and his body had complained the whole time with a loud chorus of pops and clicks and crunches, but it meant that now Caleb can lean on his windowsill and watch the tiefling and appreciate that even if he is throwing off Caleb’s daily pattern at least he always starts it with a sun salutation.

He’s been throwing off Caleb’s pattern for the last couple of months now, interrupting his train of thought with muttered, lightly-accented curses and the odd conversation with someone who seems to be even quieter than he is – certainly, Caleb’s only seen the tall, pale-skinned woman who the tiefling seems to be friends with a few times, and even with the window open he’s never really heard her speak. The tiefling, it seems, is the vocal one of the two – it’s not unusual these days for Caleb to hear his ringing laughter carry in through his open window on the breeze, or to hear him softly singing or talking about tarot cards or some other such nonsense. And it isn’t awful, either; the tiefling has a pleasant enough voice, soft and warm and lightly accented in such a way that Caleb can only ever think to call it charming, and on more than one occasion now, when Caleb had found himself laden down by work and research and weeks worth of compounded stress, he’d heard a quiet, unrecognised song come drifting in through the window and found himself calming slightly at the sound of it. The tiefling is familiar by now, almost reassuring, and now, two months after his arrival in the little yard, Caleb has almost managed to get rid of his initial and instantaneous dislike of him.

Almost.

The fact still remains though that he is loud and bright and annoyingly distracting and Caleb has work to do and can’t do with having a jewellery-bedecked tiefling loitering around underneath his office window doing unspeakably attractive things with his body. It’s a distraction, and Caleb has a doctorate to work on and lectures to plan and students to see. He doesn’t have time for any distractions.

Unfortunately, though, it seems like the tiefling didn’t get this message, because recently it’s started getting even worse.

Recently, the tiefling has started flirting with him.

Or at least, Caleb thinks it’s flirting. He’s not really sure how else he could interpret it. He is not a stupid man, is not an inexperienced man – he’s thirty-three years old after all – and he knows flirting, has experienced flirting, has admittedly never really flirted much himself but he knows, albeit vaguely, what flirting looks like.

He thinks it looks like this; he thinks it looks like the tiefling giving him a nod and a wave and an almost painfully obvious once-over when Caleb arrives at the building the same time the tiefling is
crossing the path before the door, colourful and vibrant in galaxy-print yoga pants and a loose tie-dye
croptop with a bag slung over one shoulder. He thinks it looks like the same tiefling’s gaze lingering
on his face, tracing the line of his jaw and noticing the spot of stubble that Caleb missed when
shaving in a hurry that morning, and then glancing back up to make eye contact before calling out a
cheerful “Good morning, sir,” in perhaps the most overtly flirtatious tone Caleb has ever heard in his
life, making Caleb flush bright red as he ducks his head and hurries inside and tries not to smile and
look after the tiefling when he laughs and saunters away. He thinks it looks like the tiefling catching
his eye and winking when Caleb, having forgotten to bring his own lunch, walks past the little
entrance into the yard on his way to the coffee and sandwich place two roads away. He thinks it
looks like all of that.

He’s not entirely sure.

It happened this morning, whatever it was. It’s not often that they see each other in the mornings, the
tiefling seeming to have a somewhat erratic schedule, but today Caleb had been running a little late,
the bus he normally caught missing his stop entirely, and as he’d been jogging down the path to his
building he’d spotted the tiefling coming from the other direction. As he normally did the tiefling had
given Caleb his typical nod-wave-greeting combination, seeming to appreciate Caleb’s more-
dishvelled-than-usual look and Caleb, too focused on not being late for a supervisor meeting
had forgotten that he told himself two months ago that he found the tiefling annoying and wouldn’t
respond to him and instead looked up, given a half wave, opened his mouth and—well.

Caleb had wheezed at him. It probably wasn’t the best thing he could have done, but he’s far from
in-shape and his lungs really weren’t up to much more than that. He’d been aiming to actually say
‘hello’, responding to the tiefling for the first time ever, but what had come out of his mouth instead
was something that sounded less like human speech and more akin to the sound one might expect a
mummified corpse to make when disturbed several millennia later. Still, the tiefling hadn’t minded—it’d
just laughed a little, no meanness to the sound at all, and tilted his head towards the old wooden
door to Caleb’s building.

“You’re running late,” he’d said, and Caleb had just wheezed again. The tiefling, seemingly
unsympathetic to his plight, laughed quietly and reached out to gently push Caleb in the direction of
the door, and even through the layers of clothing that Caleb was wearing he swore he could feel the
warmth of the tiefling’s hand. “Go on, wheezy professor,” the tiefling added, pushing him again,
“Go do your professor stuff, and sit down before you collapse.”

Caleb hadn’t had anything to say in response to that and so he’d followed the tiefling’s instructions,
staggering into the building and arriving at his supervisor’s office only ten minutes late. It wasn’t
awful, but it was still twenty minutes later than he normally turned up for important meetings (or
anything really, he hated to be late) and thoughts of the tiefling had lingered in his head the whole
time, distracting him and making him trip over his words even more than usual.

It was at times like that that Caleb wished he knew the tiefling’s name, just so that he had something
to call him by when he complained about the aforementioned tiefling to himself.

As it is, for now he still only knows him as ‘the tiefling.’ Maybe he could come up with a nickname
for him, he muses to himself as he stares blankly at the blinking writing cursor on his computer
screen, trying to stop his eyes from darting over to the window. It’s been a few hours now since his
meeting with his supervisor, and in that time he’s managed to meet a student, annotate and highlight
some relevant articles and journals, and send several emails, all of it done almost completely on
autopilot; even now he can still remember the warmth of the tiefling’s hand pressing against his
shoulder, a phantom touch that still lingers at the back of his mind. It’s simultaneously pleasant and
very annoying, and Caleb’s not sure how to feel about it.
He’s not sure how to feel about the tiefling.

Because he’s— he’s annoying. He is. Caleb can’t count the number of times that he must have complained to Nott about him, muttering under his breath about his fire and his jingling jewellery and
his raucous laughter and his really, really beautiful peacock tattoo that curls down his neck to meet
up with the other tattoos that cross his back and shoulders and arms that Caleb occasionally gets tiny, enticing glimpses of. He hasn’t yet figured out what they are.

Maybe he should. Maybe, if he figures out what the tiefling’s tattoos are he’ll be able to come up
with a nickname for him, which will let Caleb better compartmentalise and subsequently ignore him
and push every thought of him out of his head and go back to his nice, structured life of research and
meetings and research and writing and research.

It’s a solid plan, but the moment he settles on it he feels his eyes start to drift away from his computer
monitor, trailing back towards the half-open window to where he knows the tiefling and his very,
very tall friend are likely still practising. This is good. This is fine. He can just watch for a little bit,
think of a good nickname for the tiefling, and then he’ll never have to think about him again and
everything will be fine.

Caleb crosses his arms, looks out of the window, and watches. He can think of a nickname for the
tiefling in a bit, when said tiefling isn’t contorting his body into some poses that Caleb didn’t even
think were possible, making the tattoos on his arms and neck glow like jewels in the weak sunlight.
Yeah, the nickname can wait. For now, Caleb just watches.

“Widogast,” comes a sudden voice from the door, and Caleb snaps out of his daze as his heart jumps
in his chest. He spins in his chair, eyes wide and confused – he could swear that he didn’t have any
other meetings scheduled for the day – but the moment he’s turned enough to see the person standing
in the doorway he relaxes.

“Oh,” he says, “Hello, Bryce.”
Bryce nods up towards the cat clock on Caleb’s wall that perpetually runs ten minutes fast; a birthday present from Nott. “It’s one o’clock,” they say, “Have you had lunch yet?”

“…Not yet.”

Bryce doesn’t sigh, but their face changes into the expression that Caleb knows is more or less their silent equivalent. “Widogast.”

Caleb narrows his eyes. “‘Lunchtime’ still runs for at least another half an hour, Bryce.”

“I know. But I also know that if you haven’t eaten by now then you won’t at all.”

“I-“

“Don’t argue with me, Caleb. Even linguists need to eat.”

Caleb huffs, and falls silent. It’s become a common event in his life, this situation of Bryce dropping by his office to check that he’s eaten; it has been ever since Bryce, doing their standard security rounds after hours one day, found Caleb still hunched up in his office typing furiously away at his computer at some time approaching midnight and discovered, upon talking to him, that he hadn’t eaten in nearly 48 hours. They’d sighed quietly, told him to sit tight, and vanished off into the dark hallways of the building only to return five minutes later with a sandwich in hand, more or less ordering Caleb to eat it before they’d gently but firmly kicked him out of his office and told him to go home, eat, and rest.

Now, it had become an almost daily event for Bryce to come by Caleb’s office to check that he’d eaten something, and force him to do so if he hadn’t.

Which, today, may just have been the case.

“I’ll eat, Bryce,” Caleb mumbles quietly, crossing his arms across his chest. It makes him feel a bit like a petulant toddler being checked up on by their mother, but he can’t disagree that it worked, which only makes the situation more annoying.

“Did you bring lunch with you?” Bryce asks, and Caleb frowns to himself and reaches down to grab his satchel out from under the desk, flipping it open and starting to rifle through it.

“I don’t think I did- no. No, I didn’t. I must have forgotten…”

“Did you bring your wallet?”

“I always bring my wallet.”

“Good. Go get lunch.”

“In a moment,” Caleb replies, tucking his satchel away again before letting his eyes dart back over to the window. Last he’d seen the tiefling had been in the middle of some pose that had involved him lying on his chest with his legs hanging over his head, his whole body turned into a beautiful inverted ‘C’ that pulled his muscles taut and made the peacock feathers trailing down his chest ripple in the sunlight and Caleb is really, really curious to know if he’s still in the pose, scrolling lazily through his phone as he had been when Caleb had last looked at him all of two minutes ago.

He’s not, and Caleb feels disappointment flare sharply in his chest for all of a few seconds before crushing it. He has absolutely no right, absolutely no cause to be disappointed, and he knows it. The tiefling is not there just for Caleb to stare at – he’s there to do his circus skills practise fire-spinning
yoga stuff, and Caleb absolutely should not be disappointed that he’s no longer in his yoga pose and is, instead, leaning over his bag to dig out what Caleb thinks he recognises as his fire-spinning equipment.

Still, Caleb muses absently, leaning forwards just a little in his chair, at least the view is nice.

“What are you watching?” Bryce asks curiously from their position in the doorway, and Caleb jumps at the unexpected sound and tries not to flush as he guiltily pulls his gaze away from the tiefling.

“Nothing,” he says quickly, and sighs quietly when Bryce raises an eyebrow. “There’s- it’s- there is a tiefling outside…”

“In the dumping yard?”

“Ja.”

“You mind if I-“ Bryce asks, gesturing at the room, and Caleb shakes his head. Bryce steps inside and crosses to the window, standing next to where Caleb sits at his desk as they look out of it. Caleb can see the second when Bryce spots the tiefling – their eyes narrow as their brow wrinkles into a frown, and for a brief moment Caleb can see the slowly twirling balls of flame reflected back in Bryce’s pupils.

“Huh,” they say quietly. “That’s a fire hazard.”

“…I- I suppose it is, yes,” Caleb agrees.

“Mm. Is this the reason you seemed so distracted when I came in?”

Caleb flushes. “…No.”

“Uh-huh,” Bryce replies, still not looking away from the tiefling. “It’s alright if you are, Caleb,” they add, and Caleb feels his cheeks growing warmer until he hears their next few words. “I know how you are with fire.”

…Oh.

“Bryce…”

“I’m not sure if we have any explicit rules about fire-spinning on university grounds,” they continue, still watching the tiefling, “But I can check if you’d like me to ask him to leave.”

“No,” Caleb says quickly, before he can stop to think on the words, “No, it is- it is quite alright, Bryce.”

He’s not sure why he’s letting the tiefling stay – he’s been distracting Caleb from his studies for a while now, and Caleb knows that had Bryce asked him the same question only a few weeks ago he would have asked to have the tiefling escorted out of the yard immediately, but it seems that his mouth hadn’t got the memo that it would undoubtedly improve his productivity no end if the tiefling were to leave. And it’s not like Caleb has any ties to the tiefling, either; they’ve never spoken beyond the tiefling greeting him on occasion and what barely passed for an exchange that morning; they have no friends in common that Caleb knows of; Caleb doesn’t even know the tiefling’s goddamn name. Bryce is offering Caleb the perfect solution to the problem that’s been plaguing him for the last few months, and Caleb is, for reasons unknown to himself, rejecting it.

It's baffling.
He’s going to sit down and have a proper conversation with himself about productivity and priorities and how low on that priority list watching a very attractive tiefling is the moment Bryce leaves his office.

But, for now, he has to talk to Bryce.

“No,” he says again, quieter, “You can- he can stay. I don’t mind.”

“Alright,” Bryce says simply, and they watch the fire for a bit longer before turning away from the window, their curiosity seemingly sated for the time being. “If you want him gone though, let me know.”

“I will.”

“Good.” Bryce nods and turns to leave, pausing once they get to the doorway. “And Caleb?” they ask turning slightly to look at him.

“Hm?”

“Eat.”

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Caleb eats, eventually.

After Bryce leaves his office he spends another half an hour or so absolutely, definitely, undeniably getting some proper work done on his thesis, and definitely does not spend the time gazing wistfully out of the window at the tiefling like a shoddy fairy-tale reimagining in which the princess in the tower is instead a perpetually tired professor in a fraying cardigan. He doesn’t do that, and he definitely doesn’t only look away when the tall, dark-haired woman who his tiefling prince charming hangs out with spots him staring and frowns at him.

That doesn’t happen.

After working exclusively on his thesis for another half an hour Caleb eventually stirs himself to action, and another half an hour after that he’s back in his office, sandwich in hand and thermos refilled with the admittedly atrocious tea that lives in the little professor’s lounge. Really, he has no idea how the tea is so bad – tea is tea no matter what, and in theory combining tea bags with boiling water and adding a little milk should produce the same tea anywhere, but it appears that some sort of monster dwells in the professor’s lounge that makes all the tea produced there taste like hot water with a hint of dirt.

Caleb drinks it anyway. He drinks it, and he doesn’t let himself look out of his window, not even to check if the tiefling is still there being obnoxious and annoying. Not annoyingly attractive, he tells himself. Just annoying.

He caves eventually, because of course he does. It seems, he thinks to himself as he once again catches his gaze trailing over towards the window, that it’s just that kind of day. It’s the kind of day that has only become more frequent recently, despite Caleb’s best attempts to combat it and focus – he’s found that working at the library instead of his office helps somewhat, but he has a lot of books that he frequently needs to reference, and he’s not nearly strong enough to carry them out to the library on the far side of campus. Perhaps if he asked Jester she’d be willing to help, but- no. Caleb knows that if he does that then Jester would want to know exactly why Caleb has to work at the library and not in his office, which would only lead to all sorts of horribly awkward questions and teasing and Gods, but Caleb can already imagine it. Not to mention that he knows Jester to be
busy with her carnival work these days – something about a new routine with the new guy that the
carnival had picked up.

So, no Jester to help carry his books to the library, which means that Caleb is still here, in his office,
finding himself settling by the open window with his thermos loosely held in one hand. He places it
down on the inside windowsill and crosses his arms, leaning forwards to rest his head on them as he
gazes out of the window, feeling the fading warmth of the spring sun and the soft breeze dancing
across his skin. It’s nice. It’s quiet and calm and it’s nice and for a moment Caleb shuts his eyes,
leaning forwards a little to better feel the fresh air on his skin.

Maybe this was what Bryce meant all those times when they told Caleb that he doesn’t get outside
enough. Maybe this is what he’s been missing.

He enjoys it for a few moments more and then opens his eyes again, looking for the now-familiar
sight of two balls of flame spinning and twisting through the air. He’s familiar with fire as it is, but
not with fire of this form – it seems almost lazy, almost tame for all that Caleb can almost hear the
crackle and quiet roar of it, and he traces the burning paths they cut through the air before dropping
his gaze half a foot to the tiefling.

Ah, there he is.

That motherfucker.

Caleb’s gaze settles on him, and he raises his thermos to take a sip. The tea is still boiling hot and he
almost hisses when it hits his tongue, the taste of hot water with a hint of earth doing nothing to
appease the sense of mild annoyance that Caleb still feels just from looking at the tiefling. Gods. He
doesn’t want to be attracted to the tiefling and he’s not, not really; the tiefling is just… he’s… he’s
interesting. Caleb’s never seen anyone quite like him before, and he feels that’s reason enough to be
curious. He’s seen tieflings before, has a few who are students in his course, but he’s never seen one
with lavender skin and more than that, he’s never seen one who adorns themselves so thoroughly
with beautiful, beautiful tattoos. Caleb doesn’t know anything about this tiefling apart from the ink he
can see on his skin and the fire-spinning and yoga and stretching and tightrope-walking practise
Caleb has seen him doing, and it’s interesting and unique and Caleb is curious by nature. He’s
allowed to be curious about this.

He’s allowed, he reasons to himself, to watch the firelight turning the tiefling’s skin to every sunset
shade. He’s allowed to see how the tiefling’s horn and ear jewellery glitters and glints in the weak
sunlight, turning copper and brass in the light of the fire. He’s allowed to trace the lines of the
peacock feathers on the tiefling’s neck and the snake coiling down his arm.

He’s allowed to do all of that. He’s just being curious. It’s fine.

It’s then that the tiefling looks up, catches Caleb’s eye, and winks.

Caleb jerks back almost on instinct, feeling his elbow connect with something as he pulls away from
the window. For a split second he’s not sure what he hit – his arm doesn’t hurt enough for him to
have smashed it into the window frame, as he knows from experience – but a moment later he hears
something clatter against the weed-woven bricks of the yard below.

Oh.

Oh fuck.

He knocked his thermos out of the window.
“Fuck,” Caleb mutters to himself, still holding his elbow. It doesn’t hurt but it’s more of an instinctual thing, like stubbing your toe and then apologising to the table. “Fuck. Fuck. Scheisse.”

That was his good thermos. It was the thermos that Nott had given him for his birthday when she’d found out that Caleb had been using the awful little plastic cups in the professor’s lounge that barely held more than two mouthfuls of terrible tea. It was a nice thermos. It was patterned with non-functioning magical sigils, and Nott had scratched her initial into the base of it, and it held just the right amount of tea and now Caleb would never see it again, because there was absolutely no way that he was going down into the yard to try and get it back. That wasn’t happening.

Gods. What an awful day this was turning out to be.

Caleb doesn’t look out of the window as he carefully shuts it, and sits back down in front of his computer. The screen has faded to darkness in the time it took for Caleb to watch the tiefling and lose his thermos out of his window, but he wiggles the mouse to wake it back up and is greeted, once again, but his open thesis document.

Right.

Thesis.

He should work on that.

Caleb stares at the screen, and tries to ignore his thoughts about the tiefling and his thermos and the tiefling and instead focus on his work. He knows what he’s doing. He’s already got one doctorate – he knows how to write a thesis. He knows how to plan a chapter. He knows exactly what he’s doing.

Caleb spends maybe ten minutes looking blankly at his document before he hears it – a soft tap, tap, tap-ing sound coming from his office window. He glances up from his screen, more than a little bit confused, and looks over to see a single purple hand tapping against his shut window.

Tap, tap, tap.

… What the fuck.

He’s on the second floor. He knows he is on the second floor, he’s been on the second floor for the last few years, and he has no idea how on earth the tiefling managed to, Caleb can only assume, climb his goddamn building to tap on his window like it’s a perfectly normal thing to do.

He doesn’t even know what the correct response to this is. Caleb knows he’s not great at social situations in general but most of the time he at least has some sort of general idea of what to do – there are always social rules he can memorise and follow, and when things stray from those he can still normally adapt or, if the worst comes to the worst, escape.

There is no guidebook to having a tiefling tapping on your second-floor office window.

Caleb stands, pushing his chair back from his desk, and instantly freezes. Fuck. What does he do? Does he open the window? Does he invite the tiefling in? Is that what’s supposed to happen in this sort of scenario? Does he open the window and then tell the tiefling to use the door instead like a sensible person?

He hovers by his desk for a few moments more, the tiefling still tapping away intermittently and then, forcing himself into motion, crosses to the window, pulls in a breath, and opens it inwards.

Clinging onto the side of Caleb’s building, his head and shoulders visible above the windowsill with Caleb’s dropped thermos held in one lavender hand, is the tiefling.
“I’m Molly,” the tiefling says without any preamble, pressing Caleb’s thermos back into his hand with a grin, and Caleb feels his heart trip over itself. Molly’s fingers are warm where they brush against Caleb’s, heated perhaps by the fire he had been playing with or perhaps by his demonic ancestry or perhaps by both factors combined, and whatever it is Caleb can feel his skin growing warm in the wake of their touch, and feels his face growing warm too. “I think you dropped this.”

“Oh!” Caleb says, “Danke.” There’s a pause, and Caleb abruptly realises that Molly is likely looking at him expectantly because he’s waiting for Caleb to respond. After all, Molly’s already introduced himself – the polite thing to do would be to return the favour. Caleb glances at the thermos, looks back at Molly, and clears his throat. “I’m- um- Caleb.”

“Do you have a last name, Um Caleb?” Molly asks, a teasing smile on his lips.

“Widogast.”

“Widogast,” Molly repeats, and Caleb feels his face grow hotter still at the way that Molly seems to savour the sound of the Caleb’s name on his tongue. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Um Caleb Widogast.”

“My name is- there is no um in my name. That was a mistake.” Molly laughs. The sound is soft, quieter than Caleb would have expected given what he’d heard from Molly so far, but it’s still nice. It’s lovely. “I know,” Molly says, “I know, darling. It was a joke.”

“Oh.”

“Your name is Caleb Widogast, no ums involved, and my name is Mollymauk Tealeaf, also no ums involved.”

“Ja,” Caleb replies, “No fillers.”

Molly tilts his head to one side, making the countless tiny trinkets that adorn his horns jingle quietly. “Fillers?”

“Ja,” Caleb says again, “Fillers. I don’t- I do not suppose you are a linguistics student, Mollymauk?”

“No,” Molly says with a laugh, “No I’m- I’m certainly not a linguistics student, Caleb.”

Caleb nods, and tries to ignore the way his heart skipped a beat when Molly said his name. He is a stranger. He does not know you. Do not get attached. “Well,” he says, and feels himself slipping back into his lecturing voice, “Fillers are sounds we make in conversation to indicate that we are thinking, without having a pause that may suggest that we have finished speaking. Sounds like um, er, ah, and so on.”

“Mhmm,” Molly hums, “So it’s Caleb Widogast, no fillers? Is that right?”

“That is correct,” Caleb replies, and swallows. “I am- yes.”

“Caleb Widogast, no fillers, who dropped his thermos out of a window?”

Oh. Caleb had almost forgotten about that.

“I-“ he says, and can feel the way the words are waiting to trip up on his tongue, “I- ja- nein- it was-sorry.“
“Nothing that needs apologising for,” Molly says breezily, “It’s always good to change up the old routine, and nothing changes it quite like a little bit of building-climbing.”

Caleb can’t say he has any experience in the matter, but he nods in agreement all the same. “Well- I- … Thank you.”

“Not a problem. Have you got it?” Molly asks cheerfully, and Caleb glances down to see that for all his hand is touching the thermos, he’s not actually holding it. Scheisse.

“Oh,” he says, and forces his fingers to move. The flask is cool to the touch; an unpleasant contrast to the warmth of Molly’s fingers. “Ich… ja, ich habe es.”

“… Was that a yes?”

Caleb blinks. He hadn’t even noticed he’d been speaking Zemnian. “…Yes.”

“Excellent,” Molly replies, and before Caleb can think to actually take the thermos Molly starts moving it for him, guiding both of their hands to place the flask securely on the inside windowsill with the soft clink of hard plastic on stone. “There we go – back where it belongs.”

“Thank you,” Caleb says quietly, “You did- you certainly did not have to climb the building just to return my flask.”

Molly shrugs, or at least shrugs as best he can while dangling from a window ledge. Caleb’s honestly not even sure what Molly’s balancing on, which only makes it all the more impressive. He doesn’t even know if there’s any more ledges below his one. He’s never thought to check. “I don’t know which room is yours from the inside,” Molly says simply, and Caleb replies before he can think better of it, his mind still full of thoughts of attractive tieflings standing on windowsills.

“207,” he says absently, and Molly smiles.

“Caleb Widogast, office 207,” Molly repeats back at him. “Well, if you ever lose your flask out of a window again I’d be delighted to come by your office and drop it off.”

Caleb flushes. “I will- I will endeavour not to do that,” he says and Molly’s smile just grows wider, showing the edges of his neat, curving fangs.

“What, and deprive me the opportunity to say hello? That’s harsh, Caleb.”

“I did not- I do not need a reason to say hello to me, Mollymauk,” Caleb stammers out, and Molly laughs again. There’s no meanness to his laughter, no cruelty, and Caleb finds himself smiling back at Molly when his solid red eyes next meet Caleb’s.

“Just teasing,” Molly says, “And it was nice changing up the norm with an unexpected coffee explosion. I wouldn’t complain if you chose to do it again.”

“It was tea in the thermos. Not coffee.”

“My bad,” Molly replies cheerfully, and goes to cross his arms over the window sill only to pause with a quiet groan.

Caleb frowns. He’s not sure what the sound meant, but it certainly didn’t sound good. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Molly says, “I’m just- believe it or not, I don’t often go around climbing buildings, not even
to return lost tea flasks to dashingly attractive professors. I might have to drop back down before I fall off the ledge.”

Dashingly attractive. “…Oh,” Caleb says, and hopes that he doesn’t look as red as he feels he does. He feels like the tips of his ears are on fire, which is not a good look when combined with auburn hair.

If he is red, though, it seems like Molly doesn’t notice. “I’m bendy, but I’m not strong,” Molly’s saying absently, and as Caleb watches he shifts in place a little, glancing down towards the ground. “I think I’ll just- yeah, yeah, I can get down from here, this is fine. Yasha will catch me if I fall anyway.”

“Yasha?” Caleb asks in an attempt to keep himself in the moment and not quietly imploding over the fact that Molly just called him dashingly attractive. Gods above. He’s just one socially reclusive man – he doesn’t know how to deal with compliments like this, even if they were meant in jest (which, he feels, this one probably was.)

“My friend,” Molly replies, “She’s the actual strong one out of the two of us. I do the bendy stuff, Yasha does the strong stuff. It balances out.”

“You certainly looked rather flexible,” Caleb mutters and feels his flush, which had been fading gradually as the conversation progressed, return in full force when Molly looks at him with a wide, delighted grin. Oh, Gods. He shouldn’t have said that.

“Caleb,” Molly says delightedly and Caleb darts his gaze away, looking pointedly into the distance over Molly’s left shoulder. The distance is much nicer to look at. The distance isn’t ridiculously attractive and smirking at him. “Have you been peeping?”

“…No.”

“Methinks the professor doth lie.”

Caleb says nothing, and continues his staring match with the horizon. He doesn’t have a cat but he’s had staring matches with them before. He can definitely out-stare the sky.

On the ledge below him, Molly chuckles. “I’m not going to be annoyed if you were, you know. It’s rather flattering.”

Caleb still doesn’t speak, but he can feel the flush that’s crawling up his face.

“If you want to do it again in future you’d be more than welcome to. It’s always good to have another pair of eyes to, ah, critique my form.”

As if Caleb knows anything at all about- well, about whatever it is that Molly does. He still doesn’t know – for all he knows the firespinning and the yoga and the stretching could just be a very distracting and very dedicated hobby – but Molly’s comment brings a slight smile to his lips all the same.

“I don’t think I’d be very good at that,” he says quietly, and Molly laughs again.

“No? I promise you, it’s not hard. It’s mostly a lot of looking and watching, which you seem to be pretty good at.”

Gods. Caleb can’t deal with this. He’s socially anxious and perpetually awkward and has no idea what to say and he really, really should get back to his research. He swallows, wets his lips, and
clears his throat. “I need- I have to- I need to get back to work,” he croaks out eventually, and when he glances back at Molly it’s to catch sight of an almost disappointed look on his face.

“Alright,” Molly says, and a moment later the look is gone, replaced by yet another easy grin. “I really should climb off this building too. I’ll see you around, Caleb Widogast. Try not to go flinging any more poor unsuspecting bottles out of windows, would you?”

“I knocked it, it fell – I did not throw it.”

“I know,” Molly says with a smile, “I know, darling. But keep it in mind all the same, alright?”

“…Alright.”

“Good boy,” Molly says, and the last Caleb sees of him before he drops back out of sight below the ledge is one of his eye shutting in a wink.

…Well. That just happened.

Caleb sits back down in his chair practically on autopilot, scooting it away from the window and back towards the half of his desk that holds his computer and most of his paperwork, his thermos still held loosely in one hand. He reaches out, moving to place it back down on his desk, and it’s only then that he catches sight of a fluttering piece of paper attached to the thermos. It’s a post-it note, innocuously stuck to the base of his flask. Caleb tilts his head, frowning at it a bit, and plucks it off, placing his flask absently on top of a stack of books to read the characters written across it.

Scrawled across the top of the note is a string of numbers, followed by Molly’s name and what looks to be a quickly drawn winking tiefling emoji. It’s scruffy but also strangely adorable, and Caleb can’t help but feel a little impressed at the accuracy of the doodle given the short length of time that Molly must have had to draw it. It’s almost kind of cute.

He spends a little longer looking at the doodle and smiling to himself, and then rereads the rest of the note. Numbers, name, doodle, and nothing else. Strange. Molly hadn’t said anything about numbers in their short conversation – Caleb tends to forget things like eating breakfast, or eating lunch, or eating dinner, or shaving, but he doesn’t forget things like numbers. If Molly had said any Caleb would have remembered them, and that combined with the fact that Molly returned the thermos to Caleb with the post-it already attached means that he wrote them down on the ground.

Caleb stares at the numbers, utterly baffled, for a few moments more, and then it all clicks into place.

Oh.

Oh.

Hastily written along the top of the post-it in neat black ink is a phone number.

Molly’s phone number.

“Oh boy,” Caleb mutters to himself, and he tucks the paper away in his satchel before folding over, leaning forwards, and pressing his forehead to the one clear part of his desk. “Oh boy.”

Chapter End Notes
The wonderful art in this chapter was done by the excellent nonsycamore on tumblr!
After the incident with the thermos the rest of the day passes relatively uneventfully, and when 7pm rolls around Caleb leaves his office with an empty thermos, a partially full stomach, a whole 200 additional words written of his thesis, and a pointed glare from Bryce burning into his back which tells him in no uncertain terms that had he dared to stay even a minute later than he had then he would have been forcibly evicted from his office with Bryce threatening to text Nott to tell her what he’d done.

He wouldn’t put it past them. They’ve done it before, and Nott had been less than delighted to find out from Bryce how they’d entered Caleb’s office at 9pm to find him napping under his own desk. Apparently that’s not what respectable academics do. Apparently respectable academics go home to sleep. Caleb disagrees, because he has definitely heard of other academics sleeping in their offices, but at the time Bryce had been scary and Nott had been loud and annoyed, her voice screeching over the phone line, and so Caleb had decided to cut his losses and accept defeat.

7pm, thankfully, has generally been accepted by both Nott and Bryce as an acceptable time for Caleb to leave his office. He does normally try to leave earlier, but today had been a weird one and he’d wanted to get at least some work on his thesis done, even after the whole event with Mollymauk. 200 words isn’t a lot but it’s something. It’s better than nothing and he hadn’t stayed too late working on it, and so when Caleb arrives back home at the little apartment that he shares with Nott at some time approaching 8pm, his mind nothing but a disorganised blur of Mollymauk and his thesis and his research and Bryce and Mollymauk, there’s no annoyed goblin glaring daggers at him from the couch.

“Hallo,” he calls out automatically, hearing the door click shut behind him as he crosses the open living space to the kitchen, reaching out to absentmindedly ruffle Nott’s hair when he passes her on the couch before dropping his satchel down on the kitchen counter. “I’m home.”

“I can see that,” he hears Nott reply. “How was your day?”

“Ja, it was good,” Caleb replies vaguely, opening the fridge and poking around. *Fuck.* They’re almost out of groceries again, but there’s just enough for dinner. He’d have to remember to buy more tomorrow, or ask Nott to, which was always a risky game; she’d either return with everything that they need minus several of the essentials, or Caleb would get home to find that she’d bought several packets of cookies, a punnet of blackberries, two tomatoes, and a collection of the mints and little packets and fruit and nut that were always right by the check-out.

Yeah, on second thoughts he’ll just buy the groceries himself.

Across the room, Nott is still talking.

“Did your research and writing go well?” she asks and Caleb straightens up, shutting the fridge door. He’d already eaten a whole meal earlier that day, so dinner could wait for a while.

“Ja,” he says again, “I, uh- ja.” He doesn’t mention how little he got done. That would only result in more questions.

Thankfully, his short answer is enough to satisfy Nott – she smiles at him from her position on the couch, curled up in a corner of it the way she likes to be, and when Caleb crosses the short distance from the kitchen area of the room to the living room area of the room she’s quick to lean against his side the moment he sits down. It’s nice. It’s familiar, and it’s comfortable – these days, Nott is the
“And did you eat today?” she asks, looking up at Caleb with wide yellow eyes, and Caleb can’t help but smile at her concern even as he gives an exasperated sigh.

“Yes,” he answers, “You know that Bryce would have texted you if I didn’t.”

“I know,” Nott replies, “But it’s nice to hear you say it anyway. You need to eat more. You’re all skinny and bony. Your elbows are weapons.”

Caleb smiles slightly, lifts his elbow, and makes a small jab towards Nott. She jerks away, her eyes narrowed in a playful glare, and after a moment of perfect stillness they both relax and grin at each other again. Nott shuffles back in to rest against Caleb’s side, and he drops his arm back around her shoulders.

“You’re more of a weapon than I am,” he mutters, reaching down with his free arm to start tugging off his shoes, and Nott laughs quietly.

“Not many people would agree with you, Caleb.”

“I know. I - Scheisse, bloody laces – I know. And that is why people underestimate you. It is why you get so many security shifts.”

Nott grins, and leans away as Caleb stands to put his shoes away on their barely-used shoe rack. “It does help,” she agrees, leaning back into Caleb’s side when he returns to the couch.

“I can imagine. I suppose most people won’t know what hit them, ja?” Caleb turns his head to smile at her. “Are you working tonight?”

Nott shakes her head. A few strands of hair fall free from the scruffy braid her hair normally ends up in, and Caleb doesn’t think twice about reaching out to tuck them back behind her ear. “Thank you,” Nott says quietly, and Caleb smiles at her. “And no, I’m not. I am tomorrow night, though. I have another shift for The Gentleman.”

“I hate that you call him that,” Caleb says with a grimace. “He sounds so…”

“Sleazy? Suspicious? Shady?”

“Ja.”

“Well he probably is,” Nott says breezily, “But he pays well, and you know that I can handle myself.”

“Ja,” Caleb says again with a sigh, “I know, I know. Jester calling you ‘small and fighty’ is a, uh, apt description. Even if ‘fighty’ is not a word.”

“It could be a word.”

“It’s not a word. I would know.”

“You would know,” Nott concedes immediately, “You know a lot of things, Caleb.”

“I know some things, in a very specific field.”

Caleb smiles. “O2q0[53]” he says, and Nott smiles and nods sagely.

“You see!” she says, “That was very impressive! What did you say?”

“I said thank you.”

“Impressive,” she repeats, and Caleb smiles.

“I could teach it to you, if you like.”

Nott shakes her head. “No, thank you,” she replies, “I’ll stick to Common and Goblin.”

“Fair enough.”

“By the way, what are you having for dinner?” Nott asks suddenly, and Caleb half turns to look back over in the direction of their little kitchen.

“Whatever I can scrounge out of the fridge,” he replies, “I have a few ideas.”

“Can I-“

“Of course you can have some, I was going to make enough for both of us anyway.”

Caleb turns back to Nott in time to catch her smile. “Thank you, Caleb,” she says, and Caleb leans forward to press a kiss to her forehead.

“Of course,” he says, and stands to go and make dinner. Nott doesn’t help, but that’s how Caleb likes it – it hadn’t taken Nott long into sharing a flat with him to discover that Caleb is very particular about where things go, which is not a habit that Nott has ever had. When Caleb cooks, it’s best that he cooks alone. Dinner is a quick affair, and a late one – by the time they’ve eaten and washed up (well, Caleb washed up while Nott dried and put the dishes back in their carefully labelled cupboards) Caleb can feel the tiredness starting to gather at the corners of his eyes.

“I think I’m going to head to bed,” he says as he’s drying his hands off, watching Nott put away the last of the cutlery. “It is late.”

Nott hums quietly. “It is late,” she agrees, though they both know that she’ll be awake for several hours more. As she’d explained to Caleb once, it was simply easier to keep her sleeping schedule like that when she frequently worked late. “Go to bed, Caleb. You need your rest. You always look so tired.”

“Blame the PhD,” Caleb mutters under his breath, but he still stops to press a quick kiss to Nott’s forehead as he turns to head towards the bathroom.

“Good night!” Nott calls, “Sleep well.”

Caleb waves a hand in her general direction over his shoulder. “Schlafes gut,” he replies, and makes quick work of taking care of everything in the bathroom before grabbing his satchel from the living room and retreating to his own room for the night. He leaves his bag on the floor by the door and crosses to the window, checking the latch for any signs of tampering. It doesn’t matter that he lives on the third floor of a reasonably nice building in a reasonably secure and safe area. Checking the window latch and the lock on his door has been habit for the last fifteen-odd years. It’s much too late to break it now.

And tonight, as with all nights for the past fourteen-odd years, there seems to be nothing to be
concerned about. The dust on the window latch is exactly how it was the previous evening, undisturbed save for where Caleb had lightly tapped it, and the narrow ledge on the other side of the glass looks exactly how it had that morning. Caleb doubts that even Mollymauk would be able to hang off it, and the thought of the tiefling brings a faint smile to his lips. Lovely though it would be to see Molly attempt to climb his building, Caleb is glad that he very likely couldn’t. He feels safer that way.

Satisfied, Caleb gives a little nod to himself, draws the curtains, and changes into his pyjamas. All is well. He’s safe, and Nott is safe, and not even Molly could balance on his window ledge. There is nothing to be concerned about.

Before he goes to sleep Caleb crosses to his dropped satchel, reaching into it and pulling out the slightly crumpled post-it note that Molly had left attached to the bottom of his thermos. He moves back to his bed, swinging his legs up to sit cross-legged on the duvet, and stares down at the note. The little doodled tiefling on it stares back at him, one eye still shut in a wink.

“What do I do?” Caleb asks the tiefling doodle. “Do I- what should I-…”

He gives a sigh, and trails off into silence. Even in the dim light of his bedside lamp the numbers along the top of the paper stand out clearly, inky-dark against the soft yellow of the paper. They seem heavier than they are, somehow; they seem like they should be pulling the paper down around them, their quiet weight and unspoken potential distorting gravity around their quick, sharp lines. They seem important.

They are important.

Caleb reaches out, picks his ancient brick of a phone up from his bedside table, and looks at it. He could add Molly’s number. He could text Molly. He could call Molly, right now, and hear that soft, faintly-accented voice again, in the safety and comfort of his room where he might be less prone to stammering and stuttering. He could do that.

Caleb looks at his phone, looks at the numbers, and puts his phone down again. Not tonight, he thinks, and turns his attention back to the tiefling doodle.

It smiles back at him.

“You are very sweet,” he tells the doodle. “And you are very attractive, and you are very charming and very nice, even if you do make me nervous. I have- I have not had someone be interested in me like this in a very long time. I do not know if it is genuine, and that worries me. I- Scheisse.”

Caleb reaches up, scrubbing a hand over his face. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. It’s late, and he’s tired, and he’s sitting on his bed talking to a drawing.

“You are very sweet,” he tells the doodle. “And you are very attractive, and you are very charming and very nice, even if you do make me nervous. I have- I have not had someone be interested in me like this in a very long time. I do not know if it is genuine, and that worries me. I- Scheisse.”

Caleb reaches up, scrubbing a hand over his face. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. It’s late, and he’s tired, and he’s sitting on his bed talking to a drawing.

“Scheisse,” he mutters again, and he looks back at the doodle. The doodle, being mere ink and paper, offers no advice. “He is nice,” Caleb says, and smiles a little. “He returned my thermos when he did not have to. He climbed a building to give it back.” A pause. “He called me dashing attractive,” Caleb says, and feels the blush settling in his cheeks. It’s alright. Here, alone in his room in the dark, there is no one save himself to see it. “I do not know if he meant it, but he said it all the same. That was very nice.”

He drops back into silence, worrying a corner of the post-it between his fingers. The paper is smooth beneath his fingers, unmarred save for the light creases now running through it, and Caleb catches himself trailing his fingers over them, running them back and forth over the slight ridges. He’d noticed at the window that there had been fine, narrow lines of silver scarring adorning Mollymauk’s
He wonders if they would feel anything like the creases.

“He will not want me,” Caleb says quietly, “He is— I am— he will not want me. This is nice, but it can’t be real. I must not get my hopes up. Not again.” A pause. “He will not want me,” he says again, softer this time. The shadows in the corners of the room seem to swallow his voice.

Caleb runs his fingers over the creases in the paper once more, committing them to memory alongside the numbers.

He won’t text Molly. Not today.

“I like you,” he tells the doodle quietly, and in that moment he does not know if he is talking to the drawing or to Mollymauk. He supposes it doesn’t matter. The only one who could hear him is not around to. “I like you, and I will— I will think about this.” That’s something he can do. That’s a promise he can keep. He reaches out, placing the post-it note on top of his phone, and then climbs into bed and shifts onto his side. From this angle he can see the curl of the post-it resting atop his phone, can just about make out one of the numbers and the edge of a sketched tiefling horn.

Caleb shuts off his light, rolls over, and doesn’t think of Molly at all.

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“…And then he was all ‘grr, no, I am big and scary and you must listen to me,’ but the barista was really cool and really brave and said ‘no I do not, you are disrupting the atmosphere for the other customers’—”

“Mhmm.”

“-and then angry guy got even angrier and he looked like his head was going to explode, just kaboom, so I drew that for the Traveller when I got home—”

“Mm.”

“-and then Fjord stepped in and he was all ‘excuse me, sir, but I think you were just asked to leave’ and he looked so handsome and he was about to go to the gym so he was in one of those, you know, really tight t-shirts—”

“Yeah.”

“-and angry guy looked at Fjord and saw how big and strong and handsome he was and he didn’t even say anything else, he just left, and Fjord saw me looking and he looked just like Oksar and he was all like ‘Jester, are you alright?’ in that really deep voice of his and I was swooning and I—”

“Mm?”

“-and I… I turned into a goldfish.”

Caleb hums absently, and crosses one bunch of Jester’s hair over another, slowly working his way through the braid.

“And then a dragon attacked Pumat’s coffee shop” Jester continues, and Caleb hums again. In the safety of his mind’s eye, where even Jester cannot follow his thoughts, he thinks about ink pressed into skin to create the image of a peacock. “And I had to fly away by flapping my little goldfish fins
really hard so that they became wings.”

“Okay.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Mm, ja.”

“Caleb,” Jester says suddenly, and Caleb blinks as the soft blue hair that he had been halfway through braiding suddenly slips out from his lax fingers, Jester turning around on the couch to face him, “Did you hear anything I just said?”

Caleb stares at her. He- he’d definitely heard Jester talking, he knows that much. Jester could talk for Wildemount if she wanted to, and Caleb knows that he’d been listening to her at the start, paying close attention to her stream-of-consciousness tale about her day as he decided on a nice hair style for her, but part way through the conversation his attention had just… drifted.

“Ja,” he says anyway, “Ja, I was listening.”

“What was I just talking about?”

Caleb frowns. “…Fjord?” he guesses. It’s a solid bet. Jester’s been talking about Fjord a lot recently, and it seems she must have been talking about him just now, because the moment Caleb says his name Jester beams and nods.

“I was!” she says, “I was talking about Fjord!” Her smile starts to fade, and Caleb feels his frown grow. Oh, shit. Had he missed something important? “But that was not all I was talking about, Caleb.”

“Oh?”

“No,” Jester says, and in a split second her look turns from faintly sad to knowing and almost unnervingly mischievous. “Caleb,” she says, grinning slightly, “Were you thinking about something?”

“No.” Not a lie.

“Were you thinking about someone?”

“…No.” Definitely a lie.

“Caleb,” Jester says, and Caleb averts his gaze. His hands, no longer occupied with braiding Jester’s hair, twist into each other on his lap in the absence of anything else to fidget with. “Who were you thinking about? Do I know them? Does this have anything to do with how Nott keeps telling me that something’s got you super distracted recently?”

“Nott told you that?” Caleb asks before he can stop himself, and Jester nods.

“Yeah, at the last slumber party! Apparently you’ve been complaining about someone distracting you when you’re trying to work.”

“I.”

“Apparently you’ve been saying that there’s this person hanging out in that little shitty grassy bit behind your office and that you really, really hate them.”
“Hate is a strong word, I just-“

“Apparently you talk about them every single day.”

Caleb doesn’t comment on that. He doesn’t think he’s been talking about Molly every day, but he knows that he has been complaining about him a lot. A lot of it has been muttered under his breath while he makes dinner or cleans the apartment, and at least some of the complaining is done in Zemmian, but he still thinks it’s a bit of a stretch to say that he’s been complaining about Molly every day.

He’d have to be obsessed to do that.

“So,” Jester says, leaning forwards and resting her chin on her hands, “Who are they? Tell me everything.”

Caleb clears his throat. “They are- he is a tiefling-“

“A tiefling?!?” Jester interrupts excitedly, her hands flying up to grasp her face. “Caleb! Who is it? Do I know him? Is he prettier than me?”

Caleb knows how to answer that question. “Nein,” he says, shaking his head a little as he grins, “No, Jester, you are still the prettiest tiefling I know.”

“Good,” Jester replies and she grins back at him, dropping her hands from her face to clasp them in her lap. “As long as I am still the prettiest tiefling.”

“You will always be the prettiest tiefling, Jester.”

“I know,” she says. “But it is always nice to hear it. Now tell me about this other tiefling! Do you like him? Have you spoken to him?” Jester gasps suddenly, and leans forwards into Caleb’s space, her chin balanced on her hands once again. Caleb instinctively leans back. “Caleb,” she whispers, “Do you have a crush?”

Oh, Caleb can answer that.

“No,” he says firmly. “No, I- I do not have a crush on him, Jester.”

“Mm, your blush says otherwise.”

“It is a natural response.”

“To what?”

“To… thinking about someone who is objectively attractive.”

Jester hums doubtfully, and Caleb glares at her. It is a natural response, and he knows it. He’s not lying about not having a crush on Molly – he doesn’t have a crush on Molly. He’s a rational, intelligent man with a degree and doctorate to his name and he is smart enough to recognise a crush when one appears, especially if it appears in himself. Mollymauk is simply objectively attractive and his tattoos are interesting and it is always enjoyable to watch someone who is clearly experienced in a certain skill practise said skill and sure, Caleb may have found his gaze drifting to Molly on more than one occasion, but that doesn’t mean anything. It just means that Molly was and is very distracting, but he’s only distracting because he is loud and colourful and humans, like elves and tieflings and dwarfs and pretty much any animal with colour vision and hearing are attracted to loud, bright, shiny things, and Molly is definitely very, very shiny.
Molly is shiny, and Molly is colourful, and Caleb knows that he absolutely, in no way, not even slightly, has a crush on him.

Not at all.

“Okay,” Jester says, but she’s smiling that knowing smile that Caleb knows only means bad things. “So you don’t have a crush on him.”

“No,” Caleb repeats, “He is just- he is very-“

“He’s very what?”

“He is very distracting.”

“Mm, okay. And how is he distracting when a fire alarm isn’t? Because you’ve worked through fire alarms before, Caleb. I’ve seen it happen.”

“The fire alarm is predictable,” Caleb replies, “I know when it is about to occur and how long it will last, and I have headphones that I can block it out with. I cannot block the tiefling out with headphones.”

“Because he’s louder than a fire alarm?”

“Because headphones only block out auditory stimulation – do not make that face at me, Jester, you know I don’t mean ‘stimulation’ in the way – and the tiefling is mostly visual.”

Jester grins, and waggles her eyebrows at him. “Caleb,” she sing-songs, “You have a cru-ush.”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t have a crush on mystery tiefling the same way I don’t have a crush on Fjord.”

Caleb frowns. “But- but you do have a crush on Fjord.”

“Exactly!”

“And – I say this with love, Jester – it is very apparent. Both to myself and to Nott.”

Jester nods, still grinning. “Exactly.”

“… It is at times like this, Jester, that I remember that you have demon blood in you.”

Jester smirks. “I think you mean that you’d like some demon blood in you,” she says, grinning lewdly, and the moment Caleb gets it he shuts his eyes and groans.

“Jester.”

“If you know what I mean.”

“I do.”

“I’m talking about-“

“I know, Jester. I got it.”

For a moment, there is no sound other than Jester’s quiet giggling before she speaks again. “Caleb…’ she begins, and Caleb opens his eyes and sighs.
“Yes, Jester?”

“If I am a prettier tiefling than this other one why do you have a crush on him and not on me?”

Caleb feels his face growing warm. He knows this. He knew to expect this. He knew to expect Jester’s unofficial, unlicensed, unrecorded but still somehow still strangely useful ‘therapy’.

That doesn’t mean he’s going to play along.

“I do not have a crush on him,” he says, “We just went over this.”

“Okay,” Jester says, no trace of belief anywhere to be found in her voice. “I believe you! But if you did have a crush on this tiefling—“

“A hypothetical crush.”

“A hypothetical crush on this tiefling, then why would you have a hypothetical crush on this tiefling and not a crush on me?”

Caleb smiles, just a little bit. “Because,” he says, and turns his gaze to where his hands are twisting in his lap, “Because I am- I’m- I am—”

“Gay?” Jester interrupts, and Caleb sighs quietly.

“Yes,” he says quietly, “I am- I am gay.” He doesn’t look up, but from the corner of his vision he can see Jester grin.

“You see!” she says, “You can say it!”

Caleb nods. Despite his reservations when he’d first realised what Jester was doing, getting him to say aloud that he liked men in their small, safe conversations, it was actually working. He’d undeniably become more comfortable with calling himself ‘gay’ in the last few months.

He clears his throat, wets his lips, and speaks again.

“I’m gay,” he says quietly, and Jester beams at him.

“You are!” she says delightedly, “You know it’s okay to like men, Caleb.”

“I know,” he says quickly, “I know, I know that.” He does. It’s not a lie. He’s never felt bad about liking men, now or in the past – save for one very bad, very unpleasant period in his life – but even with that, even with being surrounded by the positivity and constant encouragement from his small group of friends, many of whom are not-straight or not-cis themselves, it’s still something that Caleb struggles to say, even if he doesn’t know why. He’s getting better at it, though. He’s getting there.

“It’s okay to be gay,” Jester continues, and Caleb looks up and smiles slightly.

“I know.”

“It’s okay to call yourself gay, Caleb.”

“I know, Jester.”

“So, tell me again why you have a crush on this tiefling and not on me, the prettier tiefling.”

Caleb smiles, and can’t stop a small huff of laughter from escaping him. “Because,” he says, “I am
gay, and lovely as you are, Jester, you are not exactly my type.”

“You type being…?”

“…Men.”

Jester beams. “That is the only acceptable reason for you not to have a crush on me,” she says, and Caleb can’t stop a small huff of laughter from escaping him.

“Yes, well, rest assured that if I was not- if I was not gay then I’m sure that I, like everyone else, would have a crush on you,” he says, and Jester somehow grins wider.

“Good. You have my permission to continue definitely not crushing on the tiefling.”

“Do I need your permission?”

“To like someone other than me? Yes.”

“Can we talk about something other than the tiefling now?” Caleb asks weakly, and Jester sighs and deflates a little.

“Fine,” she says, “We can- Oh! My show! Caleb, you and Nott should come see my performance at the carnival! It’s going to be really good!”

“Is this the one you’ve been telling me about for the last few months?” Caleb asks with a smile, “The, um- the trapeze one?”

Jester nods. “Yeah!” she says, “Yeah, that’s it! With the new guy! He’s a tiefling too! I didn’t mention that!”

Caleb smiles slightly. It’s hard not to smile around Jester and her endless enthusiasm – sometimes he feels like he can see the exclamation marks in her words. “Suddenly it seems there are a lot of new tieflings in our lives;” he says quietly, and Jester grins before shrugging.

“As long as I am still the prettiest tiefling,” she says, flipping her hair, and Caleb laughs.

“I think you will always be the prettiest tiefling, Jester.”

“Even prettier than your mystery tiefling, who must be really pretty.”

Caleb frowns, tilting his head to one side slightly. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, he managed to distract Mr Caleb Widogast-“

“Professor. Or Doctor. I worked hard for that PhD.”

“Professor Caleb Widogast, PhD in nerd, who is impossible to distract and once worked through a fire alarm-“

“It was a drill, Bryce let me know in advance, they knew I had a deadline coming up.”

“It was still really loud, though! I’ve heard the fire alarms at your office, Caleb, and they’re, like, really loud.”

Caleb shrugs. “I had a chapter to finish,” he says simply, and Jester groans.
“This is exactly what I mean, Caleb! You don’t get distracted, like, ever, which means that mystery tiefling must be super, super hot!”

“He is very colourful, that is all. He—he is hard to miss.”

“I’m colourful, and you miss me all the time. Remember? There was the one time when I was sitting on the counter talking to Nott when you got back and you put your bag down right next to me and then I said ‘hello Caleb’, because I am your friend and I am polite and nice like that, and you yelped and tried to throw your bag at me because you hadn’t noticed I was there.”

“…That was one time.”

“Four times,” Jester corrects matter-of-factly, and Caleb glowers at her. “So, I ask you again: how can you miss me, a colourful tiefling, and not miss mystery tiefling, who is apparently also very colourful?”

“He annoys me,” Caleb says again, and Jester, Gods damn her, only grins wider.

“Well,” she says, and Caleb groans and leans back immediately. *Fuck.* Whatever she’s about to say, he knows that he doesn’t want to hear it. “You know what that means, don’t you?”

“No,” Caleb mutters, “No, Jester, I do not, but I am sure you are going to tell me anyway—“

“*Hate sex.*”

Caleb groans again. *Jester.*

“Just, dicks everywhere—“

“Jester.”

“—and you’ll be all ‘oh, mystery tiefling, I hate you so much, you’re so attractive’—“

“I do not sound like that.”

“—and mystery tiefling will be all ‘oh, Caleb, you’re so stuck-up and stuffy and you smell like books’ and then you’ll make out—“

Caleb groans, and buries his face in his hands. “Please go back to telling me about your carnival performance,” he mumbles and Jester, mercifully, seems to take pity on him.

“Alright,” she relents, “But consider the hate-sex idea. It can be a lot of fun.”

“Okay.”

“Was that an okay as in ‘okay, I will consider it’, or an okay as in ‘I will say whatever I need to say to get you to stop talking about hate-sex’?”

“…It was one of those.”

Caleb doesn’t see it, but he can feel the weight of Jester’s glare even through the protective shield of his hands.

“It better be the first one,” she warns, but the teasing edge is still very much present in her voice.

Caleb drops his hands. “Your performance?” he prompts, not willing to re-enter the discussion about
himself and Molly potentially doing… things. The thought of it makes him feel hot and twitchy under his clothes, and he doesn’t like it.

“Oh!” Jester says, “Oh, yes! You should come, and you should bring Nott! It’s going to be so good, we’ve been practising so much and Beau’s been going to the gym with me so now I am super strong, and the new guy is really good as well and—“

“When is it?” Caleb interrupts, knowing from experience how quickly Jester can get herself off topic. “I will be there if I can, I just— I will need to know when it is first.”

“We open this weekend! You should come see the Saturday performance in the evening.”

Caleb nods slowly. “I am- I could do that. I will have to check if Nott has work, but I believe we will be able to attend.”

Jester grins. “Great! Then you could hang out with us all afterwards if you want to!”

“I am not sure—” Caleb begins, and Jester immediately cuts him off, her expression dropping in moments.

“Caleb,” she begins, turning the full force of her puppy-dog eyes on him, “You should come hang out with us. You need to meet more people and leave your office occasionally, you know. It’ll be good for you.”


“Like what?”

“I saw Pumat just the other day.”

“Were you buying lunch?”

“… Maybe.”

Jester sighs. “Caleb. You need to actually meet people occasionally! New people! Who you haven’t spoken to before!”

“I spoke to someone new yesterday,” Caleb says quietly.

“Ooh!” Jester says, perking up immediately. “Caleb! Well done! I’m so proud of you!”

“Thank you.”

“Who was it? Were they nice?”

“They were nice,” Caleb replies, and he feels his smile becomes just a little more secretive. “They were- it was unusual, but they were very nice.”

Jester wiggles in place, already starting to enter what Caleb had dubbed ‘excited and curious puppy mode’, and leans forwards again. Caleb leans back, feeling the arm of the couch nudge gently against his spine. “Caleb,” Jester says, “Who did you talk to? Don’t leave me hanging.”

“It was the mystery tiefling,” he says quietly, and watches as Jester just about implodes.
Caleb hardly sees Molly in the lead up to Saturday.

It takes him almost until the first day of Molly’s absence to realise why the entire day had felt off – it’s not uncommon for Caleb to not see Molly in the mornings, seeing how sometimes Caleb arrives early or Molly runs late, but Molly’s been beneath Caleb’s window almost every single day for the last couple of months and actually every single day for the last few weeks. It’s become pattern, routine, for Caleb to glance out of his window and catch a glimpse of purple skin and swirling flame and colourful tattoos, and he doesn’t realise how accustomed he’d grown to it until it’s suddenly not there.

He doesn’t realise how accustomed he’d grown to Molly.

Caleb doesn’t miss him. He doesn’t. He has absolutely no reason to miss a tiefling who he has, at most, traded a few hundred words with over the course of one very short, very strange conversation. He’s barely spoken to Molly and he definitely can’t call himself Molly’s friend, and he’s been complaining about Molly practically since the day he first started practising in the yard and Caleb does not miss him.

He definitely doesn’t catch himself glancing towards his window multiple times a day, hoping to see a lavender-skinned hand tapping against the glass to get his attention. That would be ridiculous, and would imply that Caleb was in some way obsessed with Molly – a crush, whispers the Jester in his head – and he’s not. He’s a respectable academic who is absolutely delighted to be left relatively undisturbed for several days so that he can knuckle down and get to work on his research.

Caleb catches himself fiddling with the post-it on the second consecutive day of Molly’s absence. He’s looked at the doodled tiefling and the line of numbers above it so many times now that he feels that even if he didn’t have a photographic memory the exact shape of them would be etched into his brain forever anyway. On more than one occasion he finds his thoughts drifting, straying towards the possibility of actually using the numbers given to him to see if Molly’s alright; it would be so easy, after all. He’d just have to pick up his phone, dial the numbers, and simply wait long enough for Molly to pick up before hanging up again. He wouldn’t even have to talk. He wouldn’t even have to remind Molly of how he, undoubtedly as a mistake or a slip of the mind, gave Caleb his number. He’d just have to call, and hear Molly’s voice again, and then his worries would be assured.

It’s not like Molly to be absent, and Caleb would be lying if he said that it didn’t concern him. His arrival times haven’t been consistent but his presence has been, and to have something that had been so regular in his life for the last few months suddenly vanish makes him feel unsettled, unbalanced; it makes him feel like when he leaves his bag in his office and wonders at the absence of weight on his shoulders.

He’s fine, Caleb tells himself, running his fingers over the creases of the note again as he glances out of the window for the fifth time in as many minutes. He’s fine, I have no reason to be worried, and I can always call him if I get too concerned.
He breathes in, breathes out, and then he looks back down at his hands, sees the doodled tiefling winking back at him, remembers the late-night conversation he had with it, and puts the note away again.

It’s a relief when Saturday finally arrives. For all that Caleb loves his office and his messy desk covered with teetering piles of books he does find himself getting tired of the small room from time to time, when he gets distracted or frustrated or he feels like his research is going nowhere and he should just give up. After all, he already has a PhD. It’s not like he needs another one.

It’s when he starts thinking like that that he knows that he needs a change of scenery, and the carnival is the perfect excuse.

He’s awoken on Saturday morning by a text from Jester, and busies himself with chores for the rest of the day before catching the bus that stops near the carnival with Nott. The carnival is loud and bright and busy when they arrive, the air heavy with the smell of sugar and the blurring sounds of people talking and carnival games playing music, and Caleb has to stop himself from wincing at the immediate sensory overload. Besides him Nott reaches out to take his hand, and Caleb curls his fingers around hers without a second thought. They both know how Caleb is with loud, busy environments, and the carnival definitely qualifies as one of those. For Caleb, it borders on being damn near overwhelming, but he knows he can deal with it, unpleasant though it is. He has before, and he will again.

It’s easier to bear it when he knows that he doesn’t have to stay amongst the noise and crowds and lights for too long – almost immediately after he texts Jester to let her know that he and Nott have arrived he gets a flurry of texts in return.

[From: Jester] calebb!!!!!!!!! i know i said id meet you outside the tent but I have to warm up rn im sorry :( :(  
[From: Jester] but!!!! i am sending someone to meet you!  
[From: Jester] [message format not recognised]  
[From: Jester] shit i forgot i cant send pictures to your crappy phone >:(

[To: Jester] My phone is not crappy. It does everything a phone should do.

[From: Jester] your phone is super crappy caleb we all know this  
[From: Jester] ANYWAY because i cant send a picture of her to your CRAPPY phone you need to keep an eye out for a super tall super buff woman in a security jacket. she’s got long dark hair that goes white at the ends and she’s really really pretty and almost as strong as me and super cool and she’s got really cool makeup on and also she’ll be by the main entrance so you can find her  
[From: Jester] i got you really good seats ;) ;) ;)

[To: Jester] I do not trust those winky faces.

[From: Jester] ; ;) ;)

Caleb sighs and pockets his phone again. “Come on,” he says quietly, tugging on Nott’s hand slightly to get her attention, “Jester is sending someone to meet us.”

“Oh,” replies Nott, looking up at him, “Who is it?”

Caleb shrugs. “I don’t know. I didn’t get a name.”

“How are we meant to know who they are? Did she send you a picture?”
“You know my phone can’t receive pictures.”

“You need to get a new phone.”

“My phone works fine. Besides, she gave me a description.”

“So who are we looking for?” Nott asks, and Caleb nods over in the direction of the main entrance, tugging gently on Nott’s hand as he starts to walk.

“Someone over here, apparently,” he says, “Jester says that she is very tall and has, uh, dark hair. But it goes white at the ends.”

“Ooh, sounds interesting.”

“Ja, it does.” Caleb rises up on his tip-toes for a second, scanning over the heads of the crowd as Nott pulls him forwards – he trusts her enough to know that she won’t deliberately walk him into people – and soon they’re close enough to the main entrance for him to spot-

“Oh.”

Oh. Well then.

The woman standing by the main entrance fits Jester’s description perfectly, but that’s not what causes Caleb to pause and stare for a moment.

He recognises her.

Standing next to the main entrance, arms crossed over her chest, is the same woman that Caleb has seen before in the yard beneath his office window, watching on in silence as Mollymauk practised.

“Come on,” Nott hisses quietly beside him, tugging on his hand again, and Caleb lets himself be dragged closer. “Do you think this is her?”

“I- I think so,” Caleb murmurs back. “She looks how Jester described.” He doesn’t mention how she is also, very possibly, the friend of mystery tiefling. Nott doesn’t need to know that. It’s really, definitely, absolutely not important.

Caleb tries to remind himself of that. He’s not sure it works.

Nott brings them both closer to the woman, and within a few seconds they’re standing before her, being subjected to her almost dismissive gaze. She has, Caleb notices absently, two different coloured eyes, one blue and one faintly purple, and before he can start dwelling on that particular type of heterochromia he feels Nott’s elbow dig into his side.

Oh, right. Introductions.

“Um,” Caleb says, swallowing, “Hello. I’m- we- Jester told us you would meet us here? We’re her friends. She got us seats inside.”

The woman nods, glancing over them, and Caleb spots what he thinks is a flicker of recognition in her eyes when he speaks.

“Are you Caleb Widogast and Nott?” she asks, and Caleb nods.

“Uh, ja, that is us,” he says, trying desperately to remember her name – he’s sure that he’s heard Molly say it at some point, but right now nothing’s coming to mind.
The woman nods. “Great. Follow me. Jester got you seats close to the front. You should have an excellent view.”

“Will you be watching too?” Nott asks.

“In a manner of speaking. I do security, so I will be there but not as part of the audience.”

“Oh!” Nott exclaims, and Caleb can see her perk up immediately, her ears twitching upright as her mouth curls into a grin. “I do security work too!”

“Do you now?” the woman says, and her tone is more thoughtful than Caleb would have expected. She steps back a little, her gaze darting over Nott, and Caleb watches as a small smile tugs at the corners of her lips. “Huh. I suppose you get underestimated by a lot of people?”

“All the time,” Nott confirms, “They think that because I’m small I won’t be able to restrain them or take them out, but what they don’t realise is that I’m at perfect groin-punching height.”

That actually gets the woman to grin – she barks out a short burst of laughter, lifting one hand to cover her mouth, and Nott positively beams.

“I suppose you are,” the woman says. “We must have very different approaches to doing our jobs.”

“What do you do?”

“Well, if they get rowdy I punch them, mostly. Or tackle them.”

Caleb nods to himself. “I assume you must be very good at that,” he says quietly, “You look, uh, you look like you must be strong.”

“I am very strong.”

Caleb nods again. “Well, I, uh…” He’s not good at this. “… That’s good.”

Besides him, he nears Nott sigh quietly. “He’s not great at people,” she says, and Caleb glances away.

“That’s alright,” he hears the woman say, “I’m not- I’m not great at people either. That’s why I don’t normally talk to them.”

There’s a few moments of uncomfortable silence.

“… Would you like me to show you to your seats now?” the woman asks, and Caleb nods, forcing himself to look back at her. It’s polite, he hears the Jester in his head say quietly.

“Yes,” he replies, “Yes, that would-“

“Before we do,” Nott interrupts, “I must ask: what’s your name?”

For a brief moment, the woman looks almost caught off guard, but barely a second passes before Caleb sees the first hints of a smile cross her face.

“I’m-“

Yasha, some part of Caleb’s brain supplies quietly.

“Yasha,” the woman finishes, and in that moment Caleb realises something.
The woman standing before him now is Mollymauk’s friend – that much had been quietly apparent since Caleb had first spotted her, his memory not allowing him to forget the sight of the tall, pale-skinned woman who hung around with Molly in the yard on occasion – and everything that Caleb has seen Molly do so far could well have something to do with carnival acts. He spins fire (there are fire spinners at the carnival) and he does some truly ridiculous stretches (there are contortionists at the carnival), and add to that that every single time Caleb has seen Yasha Molly has been somewhere close by and Caleb can’t help but come to a very plausible realisation.

Mollymauk could be here somewhere, Caleb’s brain says, and he feels his breath catch a little in his chest. He tries to glance around in as subtle a manner as possible, but only manages to surreptitiously look for a second or two before Yasha speaks again.

“Come on,” she says, holding open the door for them, “I’ll show you in.”

Yasha leads them to their seats and leaves once they’ve been pointed out, to a cheerful farewell from Nott and a slightly distracted farewell from Caleb. The seats are, as Jester promised, front and centre in the front row, and Caleb reaches down to pick up and inspect the glossy piece of paper on his seat as he sits down.

“The Magnificent Lucien and Lavorre: The Tiefling Trapeze,” he reads quietly, tilting the flyer slightly when he feels Nott’s familiar weight settle against his side as she leans against him to read it too. “I wonder what their act will be like. Did Jester tell you anything at your last girls night?”

Nott shakes her head, leaning in to inspect the illustration on the flyer; the silhouette of two tieflings soaring through the air, surrounded by rich colours and more detailed decoration than Caleb would have imagined was necessary for a flyer so small. “No,” Nott says, “Just that she gets to be ‘super-strong’ and show it off to everyone. She said she didn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt Jester’s skill,” Caleb says, “She has- she has proven herself more than enough times for me. It is this Lucien who I am not so sure about. I’ve never even heard of him.”

“I’m sure if he was bad or annoying or evil or anything Jester would have told us all about him,” Nott assures him, “She’s very good at that.”

“Besides,” Nott adds, “We’ll see how he stands up soon enough – I think they’re just about to start.”

Caleb hums, still looking over the flyer, but when the main lights start to dim he looks up, his gaze drawn towards the now brightly illuminated platform contraption thing standing in the middle of the stage. The first person to emerge from behind it is Jester, shimmering and sparkling in a gold and royal purple leotard with a short skirt that Caleb could only described as ‘floofy’ attached to it. The ties around her horns and tail are a familiar sight to Caleb now, present as they are in any carnival look that Jester dons, and following behind her is a figure that Caleb can only assume is Lucien. Caleb can’t fully see him yet, hidden in shadow as he is, but once Jester has done her quick round of waving and blowing kisses to the audience members she recognises Lucien steps into the light, and Caleb feels his heart freeze.

Oh.
Oh Gods.

Lucien is Molly.

Caleb shrinks back in his seat, and tries to make himself as unnoticeable and easy to miss as possible. Oh Gods. Suddenly everything makes sense. Suddenly everything makes perfect, flawless, horrifying sense. Jester’s new partner is mystery tiefling and mystery tiefling is Molly and Lavorre is Jester’s stage name which means that Lucien must be Molly’s stage name because Lucien is Molly.

Lucien is Molly, and he’s dressed in a shimmery black skin-tight leotard, a whole load of body glitter, and absolutely nothing else.

Fuck. If Caleb makes it through this entire performance without having a heart attack or combusting in his seat it’s going to be a miracle. He struggles enough when Molly is just doing stretches in yoga pants. He’d thought those were about as skin-tight as clothing could get.

He’d thought wrong.

Distantly he hears something being said through the loudspeakers, but he doesn’t pay attention to it. He can’t. How is he meant to pay attention to anything when Molly is grinning and waving and shimmering under the lights, climbing up onto the first platform alongside Jester with flowing, cat-like grace? He moves onto the platform above her as Jester does something with a sturdy looking belt-like thing, settling into a comfortable stance on the lower of the two platforms, and then Molly steps onto her shoulders, Jester’s hands coming up to grab onto his ankles, looks over at the audience, gives them one final wink, and falls backwards.

And swings.

Caleb gets it now. There is no trapeze because, in this instance, Jester is the trapeze. She keeps her grasp firm on Molly’s ankles, swinging him in the area beneath the platform a couple of times to build momentum before bringing him up on one swing and-

Letting go.

Caleb hears the entire audience gasp around him as Molly tucks his body in, somersaults several times in the air, and reaches out just in time for Jester to grab onto his wrists.

After that the rest of the show passes in a blur. Caleb tries to pay attention to it, he really does, but every time he looks back at where Jester stands in the middle of the platform, her muscles visibly bulging as she swings Molly and flips him and catches him like he weighs no more than a sheet of paper, he gets immediately distracted by the person she’s swinging and flipping and catching. Molly is- he’s- he’s bendy. He’s so bendy, doing all sort of bendy things with his body that Caleb doesn’t know the technical terms for, and he’s flinging himself through the air with such ease and grace and absolute, unfiltered confidence in himself and his abilities and Jester that it looks completely effortless. It’s amazing. It’s enthralling.

It’s really, really hot.

Caleb sinks down further into his seat, and tries to make his face feel less like it’s on fire.

He barely even notices when the first part of the show comes to an end a few minutes later, catching himself applauding along with the rest of the audience before he even realises what he’s doing. He’s still watching Molly, unable to stop his eyes from tracing over the shape of his body – and Gods bless and Gods curse Jester for getting them front-row seats, because Caleb swears he can see things beneath the clinging layer of fabric – and he has to physically shake his head to make himself look
back over at Jester, his friend who he is there to support and not use as an excuse to stare at a purple annoyance of a tiefling.

He’s still applauding when he hears the soft crackle of the speakers coming to life, making a hush fall over the audience.

“And now,” comes the announcer’s voice, booming out over the stadium, “We will need a volunteer from the audience!”

Oh, Scheisse.

Shit. Shit. How the fuck had Caleb missed that? It wasn’t every act at the carnival that had audience participation but he knew from experience based on the sheer number of times that he’d attended to watch Jester’s performances that the shows that did have audience participation typically announced it at the start. Had he missed that? Had he really been so distracted by Mollymauk fucking Tealeaf that he’d completely missed the announcement?

Apparently so.

And, Caleb realises with a slowly growing feeling of dread, Jester had given both him and Nott seats for the front row. It was, he knows logically, a very sweet act on her behalf, ensuring that they wouldn’t have to peer awkwardly around the heads of everyone else – especially useful for Nott, who was smaller than the vast majority of attendants - but it also means that Caleb is in the exact area where the vast majority of audience participation members are picked from.

Caleb shuffles back, tries to make himself as small and easy to miss as possible, and starts doing his very best to dig his way back through his uncomfortable plastic seat with his shoulder blades alone. He sees Jester glance over at him but a swift and miniscule shake of his head is all it takes to dismiss her attentions – she’s known him for long enough now to know that it is public attention above all else that makes Caleb feels like his lungs are going to burst and his heart is going to invert on itself, and Caleb knows that for all her teasing and horrifically unsubtle remarks her heart is in the right place. She knows Caleb. She knows to leave him out of anything that involves possibly making a fool of himself in front of strangers.

Molly, Caleb realises abruptly, doesn’t know that.

He pauses in his attempt to recreate The Great Escape: Carnival Edition, looks up, and glances over in Molly’s direction.

Fuck.

Molly is looking his way.

Molly is smiling. Molly is smiling and his tail is waving and he’s starting to walk in Caleb’s direction, his skin shimmering and his tattoos damn near luminous under the bright stage lights. He glances around at some other audience members, makes a small show out of looking over some other potential candidates, but the whole time he’s walking closer to Caleb and Caleb’s attempt to dig through his seat and escape into the crowd doesn’t seem to be working at all, and before Caleb knows it Molly is standing before him in all his shimmery, shiny glory.

Caleb doesn’t enjoy eye contact a lot of the time, but today he tries his very best to maintain it. It’s better than letting his gaze drop and accidentally come to rest on Molly’s-

Well. On Molly.
“What about you?” Molly asks, leaning down to be better at eye level with a sharp, curling grin. Caleb glares at him. “Want to join me and Lavorre up on the trapeze?”

Caleb shakes his head. “No,” he says, “I am- no.”

“You sure? I promise you, you’re going to be absolutely fine – it’s a really simple thing, it’s not that high so don’t worry if you’re afraid of heights, we’ve practised it a thousand times, you’ll be in good hands, and we’ve got a harness and everything,” Molly soothes, and Caleb glares at him harder. He doesn’t need Molly’s soothing, and he doesn’t need Molly’s calming, and he definitely doesn’t need his own damn body to be actually relaxing under Molly’s words and Molly’s voice like a traitor.

He also doesn’t need his brain to be dwelling on just how good Molly’s hands could be in a different situation. He really doesn’t need that right now.

Caleb shifts in his seat again, and when Molly smiles at him winningly he shakes his head and presses back closer against the hard plastic seat.

“If you ever want to flirt with me again, Mollymawk Tealeaf,” he hisses, “You will leave me alone, and you will find someone else, and you will keep me as far away from that stage as possible.”

“Oh,” Molly says, and Caleb watches as all the carnival charm falls away from Molly’s face in a second. “Oh, I- fuck, Caleb, I’m sorry. You’re in the audience participation seats, so I-” He breaks off, shaking his head briefly. “Sorry,” he says again, and Caleb’s lips, damn them, twitch up into a tiny smile on their own.

“It’s alright,” he says quietly, before he can remind himself that he’s not supposed to like Molly, “You weren’t to know.”

“No, but I could have noticed it. I should have backed off.”

Caleb shrugs. “Well, you know, it could just have been a fear of heights as you thought.”

“Yes, but-“

“Find someone else,” Caleb interrupts, “You can apologise more than is necessary later if you really must.”

“Right,” Molly says, nodding, “Excellent point.” He pauses, a grin growing, and then adds, “Does this mean we can talk later?”

Oh, right. Caleb did say that.

“…I suppose,” he concedes, and has to pull his gaze away from Molly before his face can grow any redder. It’s probably not medically healthy, he thinks, for this much blood to be rushing to his face, and from the corner of his eye he sees Molly stand back and nod.

“Right,” he mutters again, and then Caleb watches as, like a switch being flipped, Molly turns his carnival charm back up to maximum and turns to face Nott, who had been sitting in the chair next to Caleb and damn near vibrating with excitement at the possibility of having a go on the tiefling trapeze for the entirety of Caleb’s little conversation with Molly.

“What about you?” he asks, not even blinking at her blatantly goblin form. “I don’t suppose you’d like to have a go with Lavorre on the trapeze, would you?”

“I absolutely would!” Nott replies, her voice shrill with excitement, and Caleb can’t help but smile at
the delight present in her face when Molly, with all his showman’s grace, performs an elaborate bow and holds out a hand to her. Nott takes it eagerly, hopping down from her seat, and Molly turns them to start walking back towards the stage.

“We have a volunteer!” he calls out, his voice loud and clear above the quiet babbling of the audience, and on the far side of the ring Jester turns with a wide grin, clapping her hands together in delight. Together they get Nott up on stage, and Caleb watches on as they spend the next few minutes flinging and swinging her about, to Nott’s obvious delight and Caleb’s low-key terror. It’s not that he doesn’t trust Jester and Molly to keep her safe – Caleb trusts Jester with his life and it’s clear that both she and Molly are extremely well trained and practised in their art, and unlike Molly Nott is even strapped into a safety harness beforehand – but he worries all the same. It’s simply what he does.

After Jester sets Nott back down on her feet and has her bow with them to the audience Nott scurries back to her seat by Caleb’s amongst tumultuous applause, grinning wider than Caleb has ever seen her grin, save for one time when she managed to take Jester’s earrings out of her ears and replace them with her own earrings without Jester noticing. She climbs back onto her seat next to him as the applause dies down and soon the audience is silent again, all attention focused once more on Molly and Jester.

“Caleb,” Nott whispers quietly, leaning over to him as Jester and Molly climb onto the trapeze platform again for what Caleb assumes is their closing routine, “Lucien told me to tell you that he’s really very sorry if he made you feel uncomfortable, that was never his intention, he apologises profusely for trying to get you up on stage.”

Caleb frowns. Lucien?

“And,” Nott continues, unaware of the quiet confusion going on in Caleb’s head, “He told me to tell you that if you want you can stay around afterwards for the afterparty, even though Jester already invited us so it’s not like we need his invite, and apparently you have everything you need to reply to this message, whatever that means.”

The penny drops.

Caleb’s known almost since he met Jester that she has a stage name – Lavorre, because ‘it sounded pretty’ – but somehow he had completely forgotten that Molly has one too, despite learning it all of ten minutes ago.

Lucien.

Caleb rolls the sound of it over in his head, and looks back towards the stage, where Molly is coming to the end of his routine, supported aloft by Jester in some sort of upside-down splits position, balancing by their held hands alone. It’s very impressive. It makes Caleb’s mouth grow dry and his heart start to beat just a little faster.

It doesn’t make Molly look like a Lucien, despite his shimmery black getup and the body glitter that makes the peacock on his face and neck (and shoulder, and chest, as Caleb knows) seem almost alive. To Caleb, Molly just looks like Molly – he just looks like the tiefling who spins fire and does yoga and climbs Caleb’s office building to give him his thermos back and also doodles a little tiefling on a post-it along with his phone number for some unknown reason. He looks sparkly and he looks beautiful and he looks a little bit ethereal, a little bit fey, but he is still the Molly that Caleb knows and recognises.

He’s still stunning. He’s just not a Lucien.
Abruptly, Caleb feels something jab into his side. He blinks, looking down, and meets Nott’s piercing yellow gaze.

“Caleb,” Nott says, and from the tone of her voice it seems like she must have said it a few times already, “What does that mean? That you have everything you need to reply to Lucien?”

Oh.

“But why would he have said it? It seemed like he recognised you.”

“He-“

“But he can’t be mystery tiefling because you hate mystery tiefling and you seemed annoyed but you were definitely blushing when Lucien talked to you just then.”

Caleb feels himself blushing redder still. “He is,” he starts, “He is, uh…”

“…Caleb?”

“… It doesn’t matter,” he says eventually, and pointedly doesn’t look at Nott.

“Alright,” Nott replies slowly, the distrust evident in her voice. “If you say so.”

Caleb doesn’t say anything in response to that – he doesn’t like lying to Nott, and Nott has known him long enough to know when he’s withholding something. The safest thing to do in these scenarios, he’s found, is to simply not say anything at all.

He’s still maintaining his silence a few minutes later when the audience starts to disperse; he reaches out to place a hand on Nott’s and quickly shakes his head.

“Jester’s afterparty,” he reminds her quietly, and her eyes widen a little as she nods.

“Right,” she says, and Caleb withdraws his hand as he feels his phone buzz in his pocket. He fishes it out, and clicks it awake to check the tiny screen.

[From: Jester] don’t forget you said you’d come backstage for the afterparty :)  
[From: Jester] yasha knows this and she’s not going to let you leave until you come backstage >:)
[From: Jester] though if you really hate it you can go but you should at least try it! meet new people!
[From: Jester] also i want to talk to nott bc we need to plan another girls night

Even over text, Jester has never been one for keeping things succinct.

Caleb smiles slightly, pocketing his phone again, and looks up in time to see Yasha walking back towards them as another bouncer ushers the remaining guests towards the exits.

“Come on,” Yasha says once she’s reached them, tilting her head towards the back wall behind the stage where a single fire exit sign softly illuminates the door below it, “I’m going to take you guys backstage – otherwise Beau will stop you at the door and she’ll get all annoyed and suspicious and that’ll just annoy Jester.”
Caleb blinks. “You know Beau?”

“… You know Beau?”

“Only through Jester,” Caleb explains, “She is- she is Jester’s flatmate. We have not spoken much but I have seen her around. How do you know Beau?”

Yasha shrugs. “Security,” she answers simply, and starts herding Caleb and Nott towards the stage door. They follow Yasha through it, down a corridor, and through a few more doors, the distant sounds of music and conversation growing louder all the time, until eventually they come to a stop outside a door flanked by a shorter woman also in a security jacket, her dark hair cut into an undercut. She brightens up the moment she spots Yasha, but then her gaze drifts to Nott and Caleb, and Caleb watches as confusion colours her expression.

“Hey!” she says, her voice loud and a little confused, and Caleb musters a faint smile.

“Hello,” he answers.

“You’re… um…” Beau says, snapping her fingers a few times, and Caleb quickly takes pity on her.

“I’m Caleb.”

“Caleb!” she repeats, “What the fuck are you doing here, Caleb?” There’s no meanness in her voice, despite the words used.

“I’m, uh-“ Caleb starts, gesturing weakly towards the door. “Jester.”


“Thank you,” Caleb says quietly, and he takes Nott’s hand in his as they step through the door.

“So, Yasha,” he hears from behind him, the door starting to swing shut. “You, uh, you free Frida-“

Carnival folk, as Caleb knows, are loud. Carnival folk celebrating post-successful-opening night are even louder. The room isn’t enormously crowded but the sheer volume from the combined voices and background music makes it feel like it is, and Caleb immediately wants to do no more than find Jester, fulfil his apparent social obligation and leave. He has a very nice book at home that he could be reading. The book would be much quieter than this.

Caleb takes a step forwards, glancing down and to the side in search of Nott, who had vanished from his grip almost the first moment the stepped foot in the room, and bumps into someone almost immediately.

“Scheisse,” he mutters automatically, “I’m- Scheisse, I’m sorry-“

“Nothing to apologise for,” says a horribly familiar voice, and Caleb feels a hand wrap warm and solid around his upper arm to balance him.

Oh no.

Caleb looks up, and immediately comes face to face with Mollymauk.
Thinking logically, Caleb probably could have seen this coming.

The afterparty, he knows is for carnival people. Jester is a carnival person. Molly, as Caleb had just discovered, is also very clearly a carnival person. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise to see Mollymauk, a carnival person, at an afterparty for carnival people.

Caleb is surprised all the same.

He can’t think of anything to say, either, and as the seconds grow longer he finds himself still staring mutely at Molly, tracing the line of the peacock tattoo on his neck as Molly’s expression, which had started off as something that Caleb could only really call delight, starts to edge towards concern.

“You alright?” Molly asks kindly, and Caleb realises that Molly’s hand is still wrapped around his arm. He doesn’t move to shake it off, though, not how he normally would - where touch from most people feels unpleasant and cloying, like it’s clinging to his skin and leaving behind a residue, this actually feels… nice. It feels pleasant. Molly’s touch is warm and his voice is warm, soft and gently concerned, and Caleb is still standing there in silence like an idiot.

Caleb shakes himself. “Oh,” he says quietly, “Ja, I am fine.” He can feel his blush, which had been slowly fading since Molly and Jester finished their performance, starting to return in full force, staining his cheeks red in a terrible contrast to his hair. “Hello.”

“Well indeed,” Molly replies with a lazy smile, and Caleb swallows. Shit. Fuck. This isn’t good. This isn’t going to go well. He can already feel his heart starting to speed up, tripping into overtime and making his ribcage feel several sizes too small. It feels a lot like how his anxiety makes his chest feel sometimes, but… different.

Warmer.

Caleb’s not entirely sure what it is, this lightning-beneath-his-skin feeling, and he’s not sure if he likes it. It’s not exactly unpleasant, isn’t exactly an awful feeling, but it’s unexpected and it’s making breathing a little bit tricky and Molly is still right there, standing in front of Caleb with a hand on Caleb’s arm and a relaxed smile of his face, looking softer and more approachable than Caleb has ever seen him look before.

It’s also now that Caleb realises that he has never before had a conversation with Molly in which they were both on the same level, which means that for the first time since meeting the tiefling Caleb realises that he is taller than Mollymauk.

It’s unexpectedly endearing, and Caleb hates it.

He tries to remind himself that this is the same tiefling who’s been distracting him non-stop for the last few months, making him have to explain to himself and his supervisor why his thesis isn’t getting written quite at the rate they’d expected. He tries to remind himself that he doesn’t like Molly, that he doesn’t know Molly, that Molly is the bane of his academic life and that it will be so, so much easier to return to his office on Monday and ask Bryce to politely escort Molly off university grounds if he turns away from the conversation now.
Caleb tries to remind himself of all of that, and fails.

Before him Molly’s smile grows.

“You looked like you were going to fall over for a second there,” he says, patting Caleb on the shoulder before letting go of his arm entirely and leaning back, and Caleb tells himself that he doesn’t immediately miss the warmth of it.

“Oh,” Caleb says, “No, I, uh-“

“Caleb!” a voice interrupts suddenly, and Caleb flinches as a new hand lands on his shoulder. He’s quick to relax a second later though when he glances over and sees Jester, now changed out of her sparkly leotard and into a much more comfortable looking sweater and shorts combination. “There you are!” She looks over and seems to notice Molly for the first time. “Oh, and Molly is here too!” Caleb has no idea how Jester missed Molly earlier – even in just a loose, over-sized t-shirt and tapered sweatpants Molly is still far and above the most eye-catching individual in the room.

Or at least, he is in Caleb’s mind.

“Have you met Molly?” Jester is saying from beside him, and before Caleb has time to really respond she continues. “Well, you might know him as Lucien – he is my partner on the trapeze! Wasn’t he really good, Caleb?”

“Oh,” Caleb says, startled into replying, “He was, um, ja, he was very good. You were also very good. You were both very good.” He doesn’t look away from Jester, but he can see Molly smiling from the corner of his eye all the same as he stumbles over his words. “It was- you were- it was very impressive.”

“I know, I was so strong,” Jester says, flexing slightly and making Caleb smile. “Oh, and Molly, this is Caleb Widogast! He is a dork but a good friend so be nice to him and don’t scare him off!”

“I’ll do my best,” Molly promises with a smile, and Jester grins wider.

“Good! I’m trying to show Caleb that new people aren’t always scary.”

Caleb pointedly does not mention that he’s not sure that he would consider Molly a ‘new’ person. He really, really doesn’t want Jester knowing that Molly is his mystery tiefling. That, he feels, could only lead to awful, awful questions.

“I’ll do my very best not to be scary,” Molly is promising, and when Caleb zones back in it’s to see Jester bounce forwards and lean up a little to kiss Molly on the cheek before Molly returns the action.

“Good!” Jester says again, and glances off to one side. “Oh, I see Nott! I need to talk to her!” She turns, poking Caleb gently in the chest. “You should stay here and talk to Molly,” she adds, her voice a little gentler, “You promised me you’d try to talk to new people. And Molly’s super nice. He won’t bite.”

From beside them, Caleb thinks he hears Molly mutter, “Not unless you ask for it,” but he dismisses it. There’s a lot of people talking. Anyone could have said it, and he can’t think of any reason why Molly would have said that to him.

“I did promise,” he agrees quietly. “I will- I will stay for a while.”

Jester beams at him. “Good!” she exclaims, and stretches up on tip-toe to quickly kiss Caleb on the cheek before turning and disappearing into the crowd.
For a moment, neither Molly nor Caleb talk.

“So,” Molly says, when a few seconds have passed, and Caleb turns back to face him, feeling his lips threatening to turn upwards into a smile. “Hello, Caleb.”

“Hello, Mollymauk,” Caleb replies, smiling faintly, “Or is it Lucien?”

Molly grins. “It’s Molly,” he says, “Lucien’s just a stage name.”

Caleb nods. “It, uh…” He doesn’t want to say the name suits Molly, because it doesn’t. It suits him somewhat when he’s in the air, being flung around by Jester and generally looking shimmery and cool and mysterious in his black ensemble, but back on the ground, wearing sweatpants and a loose t-shirt with traces of body glitter still clinging to his skin, Lucien doesn’t really suit Molly at all.

“It’s an awful name, isn’t it?” Molly says suddenly and Caleb, caught off-guard, can’t hold back his short burst of surprised laughter. “Just terrible. It doesn’t suit me at all. It makes me sound like I should be swanning around pretending to be a vampire or something.”

“Well,” Caleb says quietly, feeling a smile tugging at the corners of his lips, “You certainly have the eyes to be a vampire.”

Molly gasps. “Caleb,” he says, his voice layered with mock offense, “How dare you! I have lovely eyes.”

“You do!” Caleb replies before he can stop himself, “You- um- they are very nice. Very pretty.”

“Well I’m glad you think so,” Molly replies, fluttering his eyelashes, and Caleb blushes even harder and looks to the side. He needs to move the conversation away from compliments before too much of his blood ends up in his face and he actually dies.

Caleb clears his throat. “If I can ask…” he begins, and he trails off as soon as Molly smiles at him.

“Ask anything you want, Caleb.”

“Why did you choose ‘Lucien’ as a stage name?”

Molly shrugs. “Someone told me I looked like a Lucien once, and it matched Jester’s stage name pretty well and we were mostly certain that we were going to be performing together, so I figured I’d keep it.”

Caleb frowns. “That person was wrong,” he mutters quietly, and Molly beams. “You look nothing like a Lucien.”

“Oh?” he says, sounding positively delighted, “You think so?”

“I- I just- I mean-” Caleb stammers, “You- you look like a Mollymauk. That is all I am saying.”

“And what does a Mollymauk look like, to you?” Molly asks, and Caleb gives a slight shrug and waves a hand in Molly’s general direction. “Purple skin and tattoos and jewellery?”

“And glitter,” Caleb adds quietly, and Molly beams even wider than before and angles his head to look down at his shoulder, which is still shining and sparkling beneath the somewhat dim lighting.

“And glitter,” he agrees. “Tell you what, though – glitter is lovely and I love it and I love sequins and anything sparkly – Yasha calls me ‘maggie’ sometimes – but body glitter is right bastard to get rid of. It’s going to be all over my sheets tonight.”
Caleb tries not to think about Molly’s sheets. He tries not to think too much about many things. “Magpie is a sweet nickname,” he says instead, and hopes that his slight flush can’t be seen in the dimness of the room. “It is—uh, yeah. It is very sweet.”

“Isn’t it just?” Molly agrees, and Caleb nods and looks away and they both lapse into silence.

“Do you want a drink?” Molly asks suddenly, shattering the growing awkward silence between them, and Caleb ponders the question for all of a second before nodding.

“Yes,” he says, “That would—yes, please.”

“Great,” Molly replies, “Follow me,” and he turns away from the door, facing out into the still-growing crowd of people, and starts walking.

Caleb does his very best to follow him.

It doesn’t go well.

Caleb knows that he rarely deals well with people at the best of times, even in one-on-one environments. He struggles to follow their thoughts, struggles to understand their body language, struggles in general, and even with Nott and Jester and Bryce he still fucks up more times than he cares to think about.

Even with Nott and Jester and Bryce he is wary and twitchy around body contact.

Unfortunately, body contact isn’t something that can be avoided when moving through a crowd of somewhat intoxicated carnival folk. Caleb gets barely a step in before someone steps back and slams into his side, and his resulting stumble makes him knock into someone else’s back, prompting them to turn and look at him with a frown, and, very quickly, Caleb remembers why he wasn’t so sure about going to the afterparty.

It feels like they’re all looking at him, wondering and staring at this person who is so blatantly out of place, and Caleb can feel his heart start to pick up and his chest start to constrict and by the time he’s finally standing by the table, open beer bottle in hand, Caleb’s feeling very sure that he’s wearing what Nott likes to call his ‘overwhelmed by people face’. Apparently it makes him look like a scared cat. Apparently it very much gives off the impression that he is Not To Be Spoken To.

And apparently Molly’s noticed it, and has noticed the way that Caleb’s free hand keeps curling and twisting in the fabric of his coat, his thumb rubbing over the worn-smooth part of the fabric, because he catches Caleb’s eye and gives him a small, unexpectedly understanding smile.

“Introvert?” Molly guesses, and Caleb pulls a slight face.

“Ja, but it is mostly the social anxiety,” he replies bluntly. He can already feel his palms starting to sweat, can feel his heart starting to pick up beneath his ribcage. There are people all around him and he doesn’t know any of them and he can’t see Jester or Nott and the only person he recognises is Molly and people keep on bumping into him and it’s awful. He doesn’t have the mental energy for niceties now. “I do not do very well at events such as this when I do not know anyone.”

“You know me.”

…Oh.

Well.
Caleb supposes that he does.

He looks up at Molly, and Molly gives him a small, swift smile. “I’d understand completely if you’d rather not talk to me, though,” he says, and Caleb frowns a little. Why wouldn’t he want to talk to Molly? “I can go find Jester or Nott for you if you’d want, if that’d help.”

Caleb shakes his head. “No,” he says immediately, “No, thank you. That is- that is not necessary.” He looks down, twisting his hands together. “It is even worse if I know no one at all.”

“I get that. Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t right?”

“Ja.”

There’s a long, expectant silence, and eventually Caleb looks up at Molly, his frown immediately met by Molly’s wide grin.

“… The joke is that I’m a tiefling,” Molly says when another few seconds have passed, and Caleb makes a quiet, understanding sound and nods slowly. “Part devil.”

“…I though tieflings had demon blood though?”

Molly waves a hand. “Demon blood, devil blood, it’s all blood in the end.”

“Well, yeah, maybe so, but your blood gave you horns and a tail.”

“And yours gave you very nice blue eyes and shiny hair. What’s your point?”

“My point,” Caleb says, trying very hard not to blush again, “Is that- it-…”

He trails off into silence, frowning down at the ground. *Fuck*. He can’t actually think of a good point to make. He just knows that he *has* one, and that every second that he has to spend still in the middle of the crowd, being jostled and nudged and suffocating under the weight of the sound just makes him more anxious and more annoyed and more *everything*.

And it’s like Molly can see his discomfort rising to the surface of his skin, because Caleb doesn’t stand there for more than a second before Molly taps his foot gently against Caleb’s.

“Come on,” Molly says, his voice softer than it had been, and he nods towards a corner of the room. “Let’s talk over there. It’s quieter and out of the way so you won’t be jostled as much, and we can sit down. Sound good?”

Caleb nods. “Yeah,” he says quietly, “That would- that would be good.”

“Alright,” Molly replies, and with a quick glance back at Caleb to make sure that he’s following he makes his way effortlessly through the crowd, slipping between bodies as Caleb does his very best to follow him. It’s a little awkward and he’s sure that he elbowed more than one person, but soon enough he’s standing by Molly before a battered looking green couch with a very colourful coat flung over it tucked away in a corner behind some overflowing boxes full of what look to be outfits. Caleb watches as Molly, his beer bottle dangling from one hand, reaches down to grab the coat and lifts it up before dropping it carelessly over the arm of the couch.

“Will the owner mind that we moved their coat?” Caleb asks quietly, frowning a little, and the moment Molly looks over at him he shakes his head and laughs quietly.

“He shouldn’t,” he replies, “It’s my coat. I’d be amazed if I got mad at myself for moving my coat.”
“Oh.”

“Come on,” Molly says, flopping down on the couch and patting the space next to him, “Sit down, get comfy. Now we can talk in peace and no one will bump into you!”

Caleb nods, and settles himself on the other end of the couch. He tries to keep some degree of distance between them, but immediately upon sitting down he discovers that the couch, which had seemed perfectly capable of holding two full-sized humanoids, was in fact much smaller once sat on. Caleb can feel Molly’s knee brushing against his leg every now and again.

He tries not to think about it.

“I told you it was nicer here, Professor,” Molly says. “Are you a professor, by the way? I just kind of assumed, never knew for certain, but you seemed to roll with it every time I called you ‘Professor’ so…” Molly trails off, giving a small shrug, and Caleb smiles.

“I am a professor,” he says, “I do not teach often and my area is rather niche, but I am employed by the university so, ja, I am a professor.”

“What are you a professor of?”

This is a good conversation topic. This is a safe conversation topic. Caleb knows that he can sometimes talks about his chosen subject for far too long, until either Jester or Nott need to shake him to stop him from flat-out info-dumping on them, but it’s still much, much safer than continuing to dwell on the graceful, easy way that Molly holds his bottle or the way that the jewellery on his horns jingles faintly every time he moves his head.

“Etymology,” Caleb says, and Molly gives a faintly confused frown.

“Is that the one with bugs?”

“Nein, that is entomology. Etymology is the study of language; it is to do with where words came from and how they and their meanings have changed throughout history. It is… It is much more interesting than it sounds, honestly. If you’re like me.”

“And what does being like Caleb Widogast entail?” Molly asks, and Caleb surprises himself by huffing out a short burst of quiet laughter.

“Well for starters it involves being a reclusive academic who has to be forcefully evicted from his own office by the head of security from time to time,” he begins, and Molly blinks at him for a few seconds before bursting into laughter. It’s loud and delighted and Caleb almost feels like he can feel the joy in Molly’s voice settling in along his bones, making him grin in response.

“Oh, yeah. Bryce has found me asleep under my desk before. That did not go well. Nott was very unhappy.”

“Nott?”

“My flatmate. She tells me that I work too hard.”

Molly grins. “No offence, Caleb, but I think if you have to take naps in your own office then she may be right.”
Caleb shrugs. “Ja, well, maybe, but I had work to do. I had a meeting approaching and I wasn’t as far along as I should have been. I had been, uh… distracted.”

“What distracted you, if you don’t mind my asking?” Molly asks, and Caleb swallows and looks away. Scheisse. “You strike me as a very focused person, Caleb.”

Caleb can’t bring himself to look at Molly. “Well,” he begins slowly, “If you truly must know, it was- I-“ He pauses, takes another sip of his drink, and tries to continue again. “There was a tiefling,” he continues quietly, “Practising outside my office.”

“Oh,” Molly says, and Caleb watches as his face falls instantly. “I’m- shit, Caleb, I’m sorry, I didn’t realise I was distracting you.” Caleb opens his mouth, ready to tell Molly that he used to it by now, but before he gets the chance to Molly continues. “Are then any days when you really need to get work done?” he asks, “Because I can- I could not practise under your window on those days. Or are there any certain times you’d like me to not be there? If you need me to- I can find somewhere else to practise entirely, if you want. I mean, shit, Caleb, I’m so fucking sorry. I swear to every God I know that I wouldn’t have started practising there if I knew it was going to distract you or anyone else-“

“Molly,” Caleb interrupts, and he almost startles himself by reaching out slightly, brushing his fingers against the back of Molly’s hand and startling him into silence. “It is alright.”

“It’s not, Caleb!” Molly retorts, “You have- you have actual important academic shit to do!”

“Mollymauk,” Caleb says more firmly. “It is alright. You are- I am accustomed to your presence now.”

“You shouldn’t have to be accustomed to it.”

“But I am now, so there is no point in apologising. I would have got distracted by something anyway or had another nap under my desk and been equally unproductive if you had not been there. You were not to know, and it is not your fault.”

There’s a long pause, and then Molly says: “I can still move my practise location. If you want.”

“I do not want,” Caleb says firmly. He still doesn’t know why he’s being so adamant about this. Literally earlier that day he’d referred to Molly as ‘the purple annoyance’ to Nott. “I enjoy your presence these days, Mollymauk. It feels strange when I do not see you there.”

“Well… thank you, Caleb. I know some people find me a little obnoxious at times.”

“If it is any consolation I have never found you obnox- no, I tell a lie,” Caleb says, but his tone is still light enough to keep Molly’s faint smile on his face. Good, he thinks, I like seeing him smile. “I did find you somewhat annoying and obnoxious when you first showed up, but now you are… not. You are almost comforting.”

Molly raises an eyebrow. “Am I now?”

“Ja. I see you and I know that even if my research does not go well I can always rely on a purple tiefling to show up almost every day, nice and regular. It is… pleasantly consistent.”

Molly smiles wider. “I’m glad I’m pleasantly consistent,” he teases, and Caleb gives a short burst of laughter. “So, Caleb,” Molly continues, leaning back across the couch and absentely swinging his bottle a little bit. The motion tugs on his shirt, making the hem rise up, and Caleb tries not to stare when he catches sight of the little trail of hair leading from Molly’s navel down into his sweatpants. “Tell me what it’s like for you in your building. Regale me with tales of the antics of etymology
Caleb jerks his gaze away. “We- uh- not much, actually. We are not the most wild department. That would likely be economics.” He pauses. “Or the architects,” he adds thoughtfully. “An architecture student once found their way into my office after a party on the other side of campus – I had left my office open and came in on Monday to find them asleep on my floor. I had to threaten them with a book to get them out. Bryce wasn’t in the building and I didn’t know any other security people so I just picked up the closest book to hand and, y’know, poked them with it until they woke up and then sort of waved it at them until they left.”

There’s a pause, and Caleb almost begins to worry that he somehow said something wrong, said something that Molly didn’t like, but then Molly grins, snorts, and bursts into laughter. “You’re a strange one, Widogast,” he says around his giggles, lifting his bottle to take a sip, and Caleb watches as Molly’s lips wrap around the neck of the bottle and, very abruptly, thinks, Oh.

And thinks, Oh, fuck.

Caleb doesn’t hate Molly. Caleb doesn’t hate Molly at all.

No, he realises, watching in dumb-struck silence as Molly tilts his head back to finish off the last of the bottle, he doesn’t hate Molly. He almost wishes he did, because that would be much easier to deal with than the truth of the situation. If he hated Molly it would be easy to box that feeling up and ignore it, or to accept it and deal with Molly so that he could continue to work on his very important research without getting distracted every ten minutes because a certain purple-skinned tiefling had decided that today of all days he was going to do his stretches topless.

If only Caleb hated Molly. If only.

But alas, Caleb doesn’t hate Mollymauk Tealeaf.

Instead, Caleb realises as he watches Molly put the empty bottle down on the ground beside the couch, the dim overhead light catching gold on his jewellery and in his eyes, he just has one hell of a crush.
Hours pass.

Talking to Molly, Caleb discovers, is easy. It’s shockingly easy. Molly is bright and loud and colourful and curious and nice, asking questions about Caleb and Caleb’s subject and Caleb’s research and actually seeming to be interested in Caleb’s responses, staying engaged and questioning even when Caleb is sure he’s doing what both Nott and Jester call ‘info-dumping’. He gets to explain his current PhD research, gets to tell Molly about the ins and outs of part-time lecturing, gets to tell Molly all about how much he loves cats and how much he wishes he had one and in exchange Molly tells him stories of carnival life, of living with his flatmate Fjord, of the shenanigans that he and Jester got up to within minutes of meeting which cemented their friendship and stage partnership more firmly and certainly than any contract ever could.

It’s absolutely lovely, and Caleb shocks himself when he glances down at his watch at random to see that it’s already past midnight.

_Scheisse_.

“I need to go,” Caleb mutters to himself, still looking at his watch. “It is- I need to sleep and I do not know how late the buses run.”

“You got the bus here?” Molly says from the other end of the couch.

“_Ja,_” Caleb replies absently, standing up and shifting up on his tip-toes for a second to peer over the head of the crowd. “_Scheisse_, I cannot see Nott or Jester… I should let them know that I am going…”
“I can do that,” Molly offers, “I’m going to be here all night anyway – I can pass the message along if you want.”

Caleb glances over at Molly, and looks back at the crowded room. He could hunt his way through the crowd, but the idea of re-entering the busy, jam-packed, noisy space where he knows that he’s going to be elbowed and nudged and accidentally touched time and time again is just awful. “I would greatly appreciate it if you would do that,” he says.

“Would you also like me to walk you to the door? I make a fantastic crowd buffer, I can promise you that.”

“That would… that would be nice, yeah,” Caleb says absently, standing from the couch and quickly patting his pockets to make sure that he hasn’t left anything. He catches sight of a blur of glittery purple to one side and then a moment later Molly is standing before him, sparkling and resplendent and much, much too attractive in his over-large t-shirt and casual sweatpants. It’s almost ridiculous how good he looks.

“You got everything?” Molly asks, and Caleb looks back at the crowd and nods. “Alright, good. Just stick close to me and you shouldn’t be jostled too much,” he adds, and turns to start walking through the crowd.

Somehow, by some miracle, it actually works – Caleb arrives at the door to the room in mere seconds having received no more than two elbows to the side and one person stepping on his feet, and he’s soon through the door and safe in the quiet, calm, blessedly cool hallway on the other side of it.

The door shuts behind them, and for the first time in several hours Caleb feels like he can actually breathe.

“Thank you, Mollymauk,” he says quietly, giving him a smile, and Molly smiles back, shrugging slightly.

“Not a problem,” he replies, and then does something odd; he opens his mouth and inhales as if he’s about to say something, and then doesn’t.

Considering how cheerfully talkative Molly’s been all night, Caleb really doesn’t know what to make of it.

“… Were you going to say something?” he asks, frowning slightly.

“… No,” Molly replies, and Caleb frowns more, until Molly sighs and twists a hand in the fabric of his t-shirt, painted fingernails rubbing against the soft-looking fabric. “Listen, Caleb, I know- it’s- I know I’ve already given you my number, and there’s no pressure to ever, you know, use it or text me or call me or anything, but I was wondering-” Molly breaks off, glancing away, and Caleb belatedly comes to the realisation that, for perhaps the first time since he met him, Molly actually seems almost nervous. “I was wondering,” he repeats, “If I could- if you-… could I get your number?” he blurts out all at once, and Caleb stares at him.

Several seconds pass.

“…Or not!” Molly says suddenly, starting to take a step back, “That’s fine! No pressure, no hassle, no worries-“

“No!” Caleb interjects, “I- nein, Mollymauk. You can- you can have my number. That is fine.”
Fuck, it’s more than fine. It’s brilliant. It’s wonderful.

It’s probably not going to result in anything, not once Molly learns more about him, but for now, for this evening, Caleb lets himself hope.

““You can have my number,” he says again, softer, and Molly’s face slowly breaks into a smile.

“Really?” he asks, “I- great! That’s great. Let me just-“ He pats at his pockets, fumbling for a second, and eventually fishes out his phone, safely protected in a case that seems, at a glance, to be full of swirling glitter. He unlocks it and quickly taps away at the screen and then holds it out to Caleb, already open on the screen to add a new contact. Caleb fumbles a few times adding his own information – his own phone is about as far from touchscreen as it’s possible to be – but he hands Molly’s phone back soon enough, his details saved inside it.

“There you go,” he says quietly, and the smile he gets from Molly in return is the warmest and softest one he’s seen all night.

“Thanks,” Molly says softly. “I don’t know if you still have my number – I totally get it if you don’t by the way, no judgement – but if-“ Molly cuts himself off, pausing for a bit, and then continues. “… Can I give you my number too? So that you know it’s me texting you. And- yeah.”

“I have your number memorised,” Caleb says before he can think better of it, “But- yes. That sounds like a good idea.” He glances away, unable to maintain eye contact, and starts reaching into his coat for his phone.

“Oh, Gods,” he hears Molly say in disbelief as he pulls his phone out of his pocket, and he glances up with a frown. “Is that a brick?”

“… No. It’s a phone.”

Molly laughs again. “No,” he says, “I meant, isn’t that the phone that everyone calls the brick? The indestructible ancient one?”

Caleb looks down at the phone in his hand. “I… I don’t know,” he confesses, “I have had it for a while and it has never broken on me, so perhaps it is.”

“I though they didn’t make them anymore.”

“I don’t know. Nott got it for me.”

“Nott seems like a good friend,” Molly says, as Caleb clicks through his phone before handing it over.

“She is,” Caleb replies quietly, “She is a very good friend.”

“Mm,” Molly hums, and then falls silent entirely as he slowly enters his own contact details, swearing occasionally under his breath as he tries to use the keypad on Caleb’s phone. For Caleb, who is entirely accustomed to having to hit ‘7’ four times just to type a single ‘s’, it’s a very amusing sight to see.

“There,” Molly finally says triumphantly, handing the phone back, and Caleb takes it with a smile. “Done. Gods, I forgot phones were once like that.”

“Mine still is.”
“I know! I just had to use it!”

Caleb feels his smile grow and looks down at the phone in his hands.

“… Caleb?”

Caleb looks up. “Yeah?” Before him Molly shifts his weight from foot to foot for a moment, his tail twitching behind him, and Caleb starts to frown a little in confusion before Molly speaks.

“Could I- would it be alright if I took your photo? For your contact picture.”

“… I would rather you didn’t, actually,” Caleb says, lifting a hand to awkwardly fiddle with a loose strand of hair. “I am… not the most photogenic person.” He can feel himself blushing and knows that out here in the corridor, under the harsh fluorescent light, there is no way to hide it.

“Oh,” Molly says, “Well, that’s alright. I’ll just get a picture of a cat or something instead.”

Caleb smiles. “I think that would be fitting,” he says, and Molly grins back at him.

“I’ll do that then. Did you say you were getting the bus home?”

“Yeah.”

Molly nods, silent for a moment. “… Would you like me to walk you to the carnival entrance?” he asks, “Stop you getting lost in the maze of hallways back here?”

That… sounds surprisingly nice, actually, and Caleb catches himself nodding a little. “I would like that,” he says quietly, and Molly grins.

“Fantastic. Come on then, Professor. Follow me.”

“Why do you call me Professor?” Caleb asks as they walk along, his hands buried deep in his pockets.

“… Because you’re a professor,” Molly says slowly, “You earned that title, I’d assume. You deserve to have people acknowledge the effort.”

“Hmm. You are not one of my students, though.”

“I can call you Professor all the same. It feels polite, and most of the time people like to reminded of their accomplishments.”

“I feel I should be calling you Mr. Tealeaf in return.”

“Mr. Mollymauk, please,” Molly says, grinning, “Let’s not stand on formality.”

Caleb smiles back. “Mr. Mollymauk,” he says, as Molly slows to a stop at the entrance.

“Professor Widogast,” he replies, and Caleb pulls a face.

“You sound like my students,” he mutters.

“How about I call you Mr. Caleb instead?” Molly offers.

“… Mr. Caleb works,” Caleb replies, and sees Molly’s tail sway behind him.

Molly smiles. “Well, Mr. Caleb, we’ve arrived,” he says, and gestures to the still, silent street before
Caleb glances along the road. It’s still empty, no buses anywhere to be seen, and from here he can see the bus stop he needs to go to sitting in a puddle of light. “I should go to the bus stop,” he says quietly, finding himself strangely reluctant to leave Molly’s company, and he thinks he hears Molly sigh quietly next to him.

“Yeah,” Molly agrees, “You probably should if you want to get home soon.”

Caleb nods, looking back over at Molly. “Goodnight, Mollymauk,” he says, and Molly gives him a small, soft smile.

“Bye, Caleb,” he replies. “Get home safe.”

“I will certainly try to.”

Molly gives a quiet laugh at that. “Go on,” he says, nodding his head toward the bus stop. “Get your rest.”

“You too,” Caleb replies quietly, and with that he smiles at Molly, ignores the warmth that blooms in his chest when Molly smiles back, and turns to walk to the bus stop.

“Hey!” he hears Molly call, and he pauses and looks back to see Molly shifting from foot to foot a few times. “… Say hi next time you see me practising, alright?”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Caleb replies, and Molly beams at him before Caleb turns around and continues walking.

When he glances over his shoulder halfway there it is to see Molly still watching him from the carnival entrance, and it’s only when Caleb is sitting on the uncomfortable metal bench of the shelter that Molly turns and leaves, his tail swaying gently behind him.

There’s very few buses out this late and by the time Caleb arrives back home it’s just gone 1am, the city still and mostly quiet around him as he climbs the stairs to his apartment and lets himself in. The flat is dark and silent, and Caleb pads across the main room to his bedroom without bothering to switch the light on – he may not have darkvision the way Nott does, but he’s lived in the flat for long enough to know the layout of it off by heart. He doesn’t even bother to turn his bedroom’s main light on, instead crossing to his bed to turn on his bedside lamp before checking the window lock and changing out of his clothes and into his pyjamas. The bright light of the bathroom makes him squint for the time that he spends in there but he’s back in his own room soon enough, more than ready to do his level best to try to put the conversation with Molly out of his head so that he can knuckle down and get some sleep.

He fails almost immediately. As soon his head hits the pillow, his light still softly illuminating his room and the area around him, Caleb remembers the way that a similar light had shone off Molly’s jewellery and eyes and skin, catching on the miniscule flakes of glitter and making him shimmer with every subtle, graceful movement. Molly had been damn-near mesmerizing, both on stage and off it, and Caleb…

Caleb doesn’t know what to do with that.

He rolls over, turns his light off, and does his best to go to sleep.

After a few seconds of silence there’s a quiet buzz from his bedside table.
Caleb rolls back over and reaches out to grab his phone. He also switches his light back on, knowing how his phone’s lack of a backlight makes it impossible to read in the dark, and checks the text he just got.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] hey Caleb, just wanted to make sure you got home safe 🫤

…Oh.

Caleb can say for a fact that he wasn’t expecting that. It’s unexpected, and also unexpectedly sweet, to know that Molly wanted to check up on Caleb. Caleb recognises the strange symbol that follows the text in the message too – it had taken several days of confusion and ten minutes of Jester googling for him and Jester to figure out that the strange ‘question mark in a diamond’ symbol that Caleb’s phone often displayed meant that someone had tried to send him an emoji, but his phone, ancient as it was, was unable to recognise it.

Still, it’s endearing all the same. Caleb doesn’t know what emoji Molly was trying to send him, but that fact that Molly even thought to text him at all is more than enough to have him smiling like a fool in the darkness of his room.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I did, thank you.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’m glad to hear that 🫤
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] it’s late and you said you didn’t have a car and I know that public transport can be awful late at night so I thought it would be good to check

Gods. Gods. Caleb’s so glad there’s no one in his room with him.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] It is indeed late, Mollymauk.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Thank you for checking. I assure you I am home and fine. [unsent]

After a moments deliberation, Caleb modifies the last message before sending it.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Thank you for checking. I assure you I am home and fine 🙁

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] is that an old-fashioned emoticon 🤔 that’s adorable

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] It is. My phone cannot send or receive emojis.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] 🤔 so you don’t know what I just sent you?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] That is correct. To me they are displayed as very small diamonds with question marks in them

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] 🤔🤔

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Mollymauk, I have no idea what you just sent me.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] stack of books emoji, sparkles emoji, levitating man in business suit emoji.

Caleb actually laughs at that, letting out a small sound that was really more of an amused snort. He shifts a little in bed, rolling onto his back and shuffling around slightly so that he can sit up against the headboard in a more comfortable position as he slowly taps out his reply.
Levitating man in business suit? There is an emoji for that?

he’s called walt.

Caleb laughs again, and lifts a hand up to stifle the sound of it as he grins down at his phone. Gods, this was in no way how he’d thought his evening was going to go.

Still, he’s certainly not complaining.

I think this is why I will stick to emoticons. Emoji seem very confusing.

oh yeah there’s loads of them it’s great. there’s emoji for everything
you cant tell but that was a cat emoji
also why are you still replying?? you said you had to go home to sleep so go to bed

That’s fair. Caleb had said that.

I was about to go to bed when you texted me, Mollymauk. I thought it would be rude not to reply.

fair point, well made.
go to sleep, professor.

Goodnight, Mollymauk.

goodnight, Caleb :)

sleep well

Caleb reaches out, puts his phone back down on his bedside table, and turns his light off again.

The gorgeous art in this chapter was drawn by zemniannights on tumblr! My thanks and love is eternal x
Caleb doesn’t see Molly on Sunday.

It’s not a surprise, but for some reason he feels disappointed all the same – he’s never seen Molly on Sunday, has never had any reason to, and he felt that after spending several consecutive hours with Molly on Saturday he would’ve been able to wait at least until mid-week to see him again. After all, in the course of that single conversation Caleb had more interaction with Molly than he has in all the time Molly has been outside his window combined, and crush or not that should surely be enough Molly exposure for Caleb to be content with not seeing him until the week starts again and he can go back to his office.

Apparently not.

Caleb doesn’t know what it is about Molly, but by the time Sunday evening rolls around he absolutely cannot wait for Monday to arrive so that he can go to campus, climb the stairs to his office, and maybe, if he’s lucky, bump into Molly outside the building so that they can say hello to each other.

He’s lucky, as it turns out; Caleb sees Molly on Monday and on Tuesday. They’re only quick meetings, fleeting things when they cross paths outside Caleb’s building, but they’re nice all the same. They’re wonderful. Caleb starts replying to Molly’s greetings, glancing over at him when Molly greets him with his typical ‘good morning, sir,’ and saying a little hallo of his own in response, and the first time he does it on Monday Molly smiles wider than Caleb had ever seen before.

He says hello on Tuesday too, to much the same result.

Beyond that, though, they don’t really speak much in person – Caleb is still busy with his research and teaching and meetings and Molly is still practising in the yard for a fair amount of the day, providing Caleb with some lovely views through his window which are, frankly, much nicer to look at than the pages of text covering his desk, and thanks to Nott’s grumblings and glares Caleb actually remembers to pack and bring lunch with him on both Monday and Tuesday which means that he doesn’t need to run past the yard to go to Pumat’s. The upside of this, of course, is that Caleb actually eats and Bryce doesn’t have to call Nott because Caleb forgot that eating was necessary for survival several days in a row again. The downside is that Caleb doesn’t get to see Molly on his way to Pumat’s. Instead Caleb spends most of his day in his office or in the library or in the professor’s lounge, refilling his thermos with terrible, terrible tea which he sips while sitting at his desk, completely engrossed in his work except for the odd occasion when he finds himself staring out of his window, completely engrossed in watching Molly instead. Bizarrely, he’s found himself to be less frequently distracted by Molly stretching outside, but there’s a very, very good reason for that.

Instead of being distracted by Molly outside, Caleb has just been distracted by Molly on his phone instead.

They’ve been texting since Saturday, and it’s been far, far nicer than Caleb ever would have expected. Molly replies somewhat erratically, often having breaks of up to several hours between replies, but Caleb can’t begrudge him for it – he knows from Jester that carnival life can result in somewhat unpredictable hours, and he does very much the same thing himself, frequently only replying to Nott or Jester after they’ve sent him a follow-up text to make sure that he saw the first text
at all.

Or rather, he used to be like that. Not anymore.

Since Sunday morning Caleb’s felt like his brain has been on high alert for the little buzz from his phone that means he’s got a text. Before he met Molly he hardly ever payed attention to his phone, only checking it if he actively knew that he was going to be getting a text that he would need to reply to, but since giving Molly his number it’s felt like there’s been a wire connecting his nerves and his phone, tugging on his attention the second a text arrives.

It is, truth be told, a little bit ridiculous. Caleb thinks he must be feeling much the same way that kids experiencing their first crush do. Everything about Molly is just fascinating and wonderful to him, right down to the way that he texts.

Molly is an… interesting texter. He texts a lot, often sending barrages of messages in much the same way that Jester does, and he seems fond of breaking his messages up with emoji that Caleb’s phone can’t receive. Molly’s already been trying to adapt to using emoticons for Caleb instead of emojis but he still forgets occasionally, sending Caleb the odd ‘�’ that he can’t decipher, but he’s always quick to follow them up with a written description of the emoji in question. For Caleb, entirely accustomed to receiving at most the odd emoticon from Jester and the very rare emoticon from Nott, it’s a bit of a learning experience.

For starters, he had no idea there were so many emoji.

There seem to be thousands of them for every possible scenario, and according to Molly some of them have colour options too. Caleb’s not entirely sure what that means, having never really seen the emoji himself, but Molly’s been very keen to add in that detail to all the descriptions that he sends, clearly differentiating between ‘dark skin-tone thumbs up’ and ‘blue skin-tone OK-hand’. It’s a tiny thing, completely irrelevant, but somehow Caleb swears that it makes his crush on Molly, now that he’s realised he has one, grow even more. He doesn’t know why, but he definitely can’t stop it. He just looks down at his phone when he gets that particular text about the blue skin-tone OK-hand from Molly on Tuesday evening, grins ridiculously widely, and almost walks into his bedroom door.

Even texting Molly, it seems, can be dangerous. Caleb doesn’t dare to think what it’s going to be like when he next sees Molly again, whenever that is.

‘Whenever that is,’ it turns out, is Wednesday.

Caleb’s sitting at his desk mulling over a lecture plan when his phone, resting face down next to his keyboard, buzzes once. His hand is on it before he’s even consciously aware of the sound, flipping it over and clicking the screen awake so that he can see who sent the message – the last person who texted him was Nott telling him that he’d left his lunch at home like an idiot, and Caleb doesn’t want to get his hopes up that it’s Molly but he simply can’t help it. He wants it to be Molly who’s texting him. He really wants it to be Molly who’s texting him, and he last glanced out of his window to see Molly doing some lovely, lovely stretches about fifteen minutes ago, so there’s a not-insignificant chance that it is Molly who’s texting him.

Caleb opens the message and checks.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Caleb have you heard of the unicode consortium??

Caleb beams. He has no idea who or what the Unicode Consortium are – possibly some sort of sci-fi villain or film or book series going by the name – but that doesn’t matter. It’s a Wednesday afternoon, Molly last texted him on Tuesday night, and Caleb literally saw Molly for a minute or so
outside the building all of several hours ago and yet here he is, grinning like an absolute idiot just because one purple tiefling who still has body glitter on his skin sent him a text about something he’s never heard of before.

*Gods.* He’s completely fucked.

He lifts his phone and, still smiling like a madman, texts back.

[**To: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] I have not.

His phone buzzes again very nearly immediately, and Caleb rather suspects that Molly had been composing his next text even as Caleb sent his response. He knows that Molly texts fast, much faster than Caleb can on his number pad, but even for Molly this is an exceptionally speedy reply.

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] I’ve kind of stumbled across them because it turns out that you can’t exactly avoid them when you have to google what different emoji are actually called
[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] 🤖 <- that one’s ‘two men holding hands’
[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] they’re both humans but apparently they’re working to add race modifiers soon so it could be dwarf and elf holding hands or halfling and gnome holding hands or human and tiefling holding hands

It’s a sweet mental image, Caleb can’t deny it. Even if he doesn’t know what the emoji itself looks like.

Or who ‘they’ are.

[**To: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] Who is ‘they’?

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] the unicode consortium!
[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] apparently they’re trying to add race modifiers to unicode so that the emoji are more inclusive
[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] they already have skin tone tags but they don’t have gender tags yet but they’re getting there, they added different-gender emoji a while ago which was brilliant but also I still can’t send a peacock so I’m honestly not that impressed

[**To: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] So the Unicode Consortium decide on emoji?

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] no!! that’s just the thing! so many people thing they do but they actually do so much more than that
[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] Caleb you’re going to absolutely love this this is exactly your kind of thing

“Excuse me,” says a voice from the door, and Caleb jerks upright from his hunched position over his phone.

“You really need to start knocking, Bryce,” he says, feeling his heartrate start to calm.

“I do knock,” Bryce replies easily, “You apparently did not hear me today.”

“Oh.”

“Has something got you distracted?”

Caleb tries not to glance guiltily at the phone still in his hand. “…No.”
“Alright,” Bryce replies easily, clearly not believing him, “If you say so.” They tilt their head up, nodding over at the clock. “Anyway, it’s lunchtime. Do you think you’ll be able to continue the streak today? You’ve got two days under your belt so far.”

“Uh,” says Caleb, and almost immediately the phone in his hand buzzes again. He fights not to glance at it, trying his very best not to give away how deeply invested he already is in this silly little conversation about the Unicode Consortium, whoever they may be, but after less than a second his eyes flicker over to the screen.

**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** they’re dedicated to making sure that every language can communicate with all of their letters in their alphabet on any system, anywhere, no matter what! even really, really old languages! how wonderful is that? 😄😄😄😄😄

**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** they’re putting every alphabet from every language into unicode!

“Caleb?” Bryce asks, and Caleb hums absently, his thumbs already flying across the number pad.

**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** Mollymauk you know that I cannot see those emoji.

**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** But that really is very wonderful.

He pauses, very aware of Bryce’s watchful eye, and sends one last text before he tucks his phone away in his pocket.

**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** Do they have the Ancient Sylvan alphabet?

Caleb looks up, and the moment Bryce catches his eye they raise an eyebrow.

“…What?” asks Caleb, after a long pause.

“Interesting conversation?”

“… Yes.”

“Hm. I’m glad to see you’re no longer distracted by the tiefling outside your window,” they add, in a tone that heavily implies that they understand exactly why Caleb is no longer distracted by the tiefling outside his window but is now significantly more distracted by his phone. “I take it you won’t need me to escort him off site?”

Caleb shakes his head. “Mol- the tiefling is fine to remain, Bryce.”

“Alright,” Bryce replies, and there’s another moment of silence before Bryce nods up towards the clock. “Did you bring your lunch?” they ask.

Caleb’s phone buzzes in his pocket again.

“No,” he says, after a moment’s very quick thought, because he just remembered that *Molly is outside*. “I, uh- I left it at home.” Not a lie. Caleb did leave his lunch at home today. He just doesn’t need Bryce to know that he has ulterior motives for walking around the building and past the yard to go to Pumat’s to buy a sandwich.

“Do you have your wallet?” Bryce asks, and Caleb nods.

“*Ja.*”

“Good. Go get lunch.”
Maintain the charade. If Bryce finds out then Nott will find out which means that Jester will find out and Caleb is not in any way ready to deal with that. “I am not hungry.”

“Maybe not, Caleb, but you said that when I found you writing at 2am and you told me you couldn’t remember when you’d last eaten. Your sense of when to eat is, frankly, extremely poor.”

Caleb tries to glower. He’s not sure how well it comes across but it feels necessary to maintain the illusion. “…Fine,” he says eventually, and Bryce narrows their eyes at him for a moment before nodding.

“Good,” they say again, and tilt their head towards the door. “Go and get lunch, Caleb. Your studies and research will still be here when you get back.”

“I know, I know…”

“I’m sure you do,”

Caleb doesn’t have to fake his glower this time. “Do not be sarcastic with me, Feelid.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Widogast,” Bryce replies, and they quirk a smile as they step through the door. “Goodbye, Caleb!”

“Goodbye, Bryce,” Caleb mutters, and the moment he’s sure they’re gone he glances back down at his phone.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] give me just two seconds, let me go check for you
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] they do! :D
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’d send you some but I don’t know if your phone can receive them

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] You do not need to send them to me, Mollymauk. I just wanted to know.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I am happy to know that Unicode does contain Ancient Sylvan.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Thank you for checking for me :)

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] no problem :)

Caleb looks down at the little smiley face and smiles back at it for a good few seconds before tucking his phone into his pocket, checking that he has his wallet, and leaving the building.
It doesn’t take him long to walk around the side of the building, and before he knows it he’s walking past the grassy yard where Molly likes to practise. He tries not to glance over, not wanting to disappoint himself if it turns out that Molly has already packed up and gone home for the day – and he could have, in the nearly half an hour since Caleb last glanced out of the window at him – but within moments that risk vanishes completely.

“Caleb!” comes a cheerful voice from his right, and Caleb can’t suppress his smile when he glances over and catches sight of Molly sprawled out across the grass on his stomach, his tail tracing lazy patterns through the air above him as he waves his phone at Caleb. “You getting lunch?”

Caleb nods. “Ja, I am. I forgot my lunch today.”

“That’s a terrible shame,” Molly replies, smiling widely. “Want to come eat with me? It’s a lovely day, and it would be nice to have a little chat, catch up properly, see how our respective days are going.” He lifts his phone a little higher, waving it again. “Texting is lovely and all, Caleb, but I’d much rather talk face to face.”

That is… that is a very nice suggestion. Caleb would also much rather talk face to face.

“I’d like that,” he says, and Molly smiles again, pushing himself up into a sitting position. Caleb tries not to watch how the motion tugs on his shirt, revealing more of the winding flowers and snake tattoos that cover his arm all the way down to his hand.

Caleb fails.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Molly says, unaware of the desperate battle Caleb’s brain is having with his eyes. “It feels like I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Caleb mutters, and when he finally manages to draw his gaze back up to Molly’s face Molly just smirks at him, making Caleb flush a little. He only hopes that Molly can’t see it under his freckles.

“Glad to hear it,” Molly says, his voice soft despite the smirk. “Now go and get your sandwich. Jester has already told me how you apparently forget to eat a lot of the time.”

_Fantastic._ Now he has four people keeping an eye on him and, what he would have to call for lack of a better term, his diet.

“Jester,” Caleb mutters venomously under his breath, and it seems that Molly must have heard it because he laughs softly.

“Jester,” he agrees. “She’s lovely though. You can’t deny that.”

“… I can’t.”

“Thought so. Now go! Buy food so we can eat and talk.”

It’s as good an incentive as any. Caleb sighs again, more for dramatic effect that anything else, and turns back towards Pumat’s. “I will be back soon,” he says, and before he looks away he sees Molly smile.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

---
Caleb returns half an hour later with a sandwich in hand, and the moment Molly catches sight of him he grins again.

“Caleb!” he calls out, leaning over and patting the grassy ground in front of him. Caleb can see Molly’s bag next to him, now open, and on the ground beside him he can make out what he assumes is Molly’s lunch. “Come on, sit down. There’s plenty of space.”

Caleb nods slightly and starts to cross over, and it’s only when he’s sitting down across from Molly that he realises something.

There’s no Yasha.

“I,” he starts, nodding to the surrounding area, “I am, ah, I don’t see your friend…”

“Oh,” Molly replies, “Oh, nah, she’s not here. Yasha does her own thing a lot of the time, so it’s just us.” There’s a brief pause. “…Is that alright?”

Gods, it’s more than alright.

“That is fine,” Caleb says quickly, shooting Molly a quick smile. “That is- ja, that is fine. I, ah, I enjoy your company, Mollymauk.”

For a moment Molly simply smiles back at Caleb. Behind him his tail twists through the air, shifting and coiling into what Caleb would call, if he had to call it anything, happy patterns. “Well,” Molly says, “I’m glad to hear that. I enjoy your company too, Caleb.”

Caleb wishes he had something good to say to that. He wishes he had enough social skills and social graces that he could respond suitably, that he could keep Molly engaged and interested, that he could maintain a real, good conversation and perhaps convince Molly that he is an interesting, charming person.

Unfortunately, Caleb can’t do any of that, so he takes a bite of his sandwich instead.

“How’s the professor-ing going?” Molly asks after they’ve both been eating in silence for a while and Caleb shrugs, swallowing the bite of sandwich he just took.

“About as well as it can,” he replies, “I have mostly been researching, though. I do very little actual lecturing so I am more of a doctor than a professor, really.”

“A doctor?”

“Mmhm, ja. I can technically use either title while I am doing some lecturing.”

Molly frowns at him. “…I thought you were only called Doctor after you finish a PhD,” he says, sounding distinctly confused, and Caleb nods.

“Ja, that is correct.”

“… Aren’t you working on your PhD now? So you’re not a doctor yet?” There’s a brief pause, and then Molly pulls a slight face and shrugs a little. “I mean, I could be completely wrong,” he continues, “I don’t have any formal education to speak of that I can remember, so feel free to correct me.”

“No,” Caleb says, “No, that is how it works. You finish your PhD, and then you defend it, and then if you succeed you become a doctor of your chosen subject.”
“So you’re not a doctor yet because you’re working on your PhD?” Molly asks, sounding even more confused than before, and Caleb laughs a little, shaking his head.

“I am working on this PhD,” he clarifies. “I already have one, so I can already be called Doctor. I only go by Professor because I am teaching currently, even if it is very little and my class is very small.”

There’s a very, very long pause.

“You what?” Molly blurts abruptly. “This is your second doctorate?”

“Ja.”

“Caleb,” Molly says, his voice practically a groan, and Caleb very abruptly becomes extremely glad that Molly shut his eyes and tilted his head back as he said his name because oh.

Molly groaning his name, innocent as it may be, nevertheless sounds very, very nice.

Caleb glances away, feeling the flush rising in his cheeks, and tries not to let his brain think about… things.

“Okay,” Molly says quietly, opening his eyes again, “Okay. Okay. This is your second doctorate. You already have a doctorate. You – Gods above, Caleb – you’re insanely smart on top of everything else and you already have a PhD.” He pauses, taking an audible breath. “Alright,” he mutters, “Alright. This is fine.”

“… Are you alright, Mollymauk?” Caleb asks, genuinely starting to feel a little concerned, and Molly nods and runs a hand through his hair, rubbing an absent thumb over the curve and ridges of one of his horns.

“Oh, I’m fine,” he says, “I’m great. I’m just amazed that you already have a PhD and you didn’t tell me.”

Caleb shrugs. “It didn’t seem pertinent at the time, and I do not wish for it to seem like I am bragging.”

“Caleb, I’d hardly call mentioning that you have a well-deserved PhD bragging.”

“Still,” Caleb says, starting to shift a little. “It- I did- it did not come up.”

“Well it has now,” Molly says, shaking his head and still smiling slightly. “Two PhDs,” he mutters quietly to himself. “Gods.” He shakes his head again and looks back up at Caleb. “What is- what is your current doctorate in?” Molly asks, and Caleb frowns a little. He’s not sure if it’s a trick of the light, but he could swear that Molly cheeks are a little darker than they were before. Maybe it’s sunburn.

“The etymology of pre-divergence Sylvan,” he answers and watches silently as Molly’s cheeks grow darker and his eyes grow wider.

“I have no idea what any of that means.”

“The origin and meaning of words in the Sylvan language before the divergence,” Caleb explains. “Also known as Ancient Sylvan. It is my primary area of research and study.”

“… Is this why you were asking me to see if Ancient Sylvan is in Unicode?” Molly asks, and Caleb
“... Maybe.”

“Caleb,” Molly says, clapping a hand over his chest, “I am wounded. I can’t believe you’re using me for my Unicode knowledge and ability to Google things.”

“You seemed excited and you didn’t seem to mind at the time,” Caleb reminds him, and Molly grins instantly.

“I’m kidding,” he says, “I didn’t mind at all. I was able to help you out and answer your question so I’m happy.”

“Well... thank you,” Caleb says, and Molly smiles at him before continuing to eat his own lunch.

For a while there is nothing but silence as they both eat in peace.

"Can you speak it?" Molly asks suddenly, just as Caleb finishes a bite, and Caleb tilts his head at him curiously.

"Speak what?"

"Ancient Sylvan? Or is it like one of those languages where we don't actually know how it was pronounced? A- what is it, a dead language? Something like that?"

Caleb frowns a little. "It is a dead language, Mollymauk, but we know what it sounded like. Well, we- we mostly do. We can extrapolate from current Sylvan and their records and their rhyming structure to get a reasonable idea."

Across the grass from him Molly sits up a little straighter, and from the corner of his eye Caleb catches his tail flickering back and forth, the sunlight catching on the gold bands adorning it. "So can you speak it?" Molly asks, and Caleb can't miss the excitement in his voice.

He smiles. "... A little," he admits, and Molly's tail waves faster.

"Can you speak some to me?"

"'Z813 7d.2v58 kJj.5g,' Caleb says, and it might be his eyes playing tricks on him but he thinks he sees Molly's cheeks grow a little pink beneath the lavender of his skin.

"Fuck me," Molly breathes. "What did you say?"

“For the trade of two copper.”

“What?” Molly exclaims, and Caleb smiles wider. The faint blush, he notices, is still there. “Is that really what you said?”

Caleb shrugs. “A lot of the remaining ancient Sylvan records are trade messages and accounts and similar; messages that they thought to preserve for record-keeping, much like how we keep hold of our more important documents. To them, important documents were best preserved as enchanted items that would not age and decay or as stone tablets that would not be lost to time.”

“Oh,” Molly says, his shoulders slumping a bit. “Well that's- I mean, it makes sense, I was just-“

“You were hoping for something more interesting?” Caleb says, his lips twitching into a smile, and Molly shrugs.
“Well- yeah.”

“ coleg. 32 2b e2f 02 d2 g2 3w lgn.1z,” Caleb says calmly.

There’s a brief moment of silence as Molly simply gapes at Caleb. There’s no doubt about it now – Molly’s cheeks have undeniably become darker, his eyes wide and mouth slack as his tail curls through the air as though it has a life of it’s own and Caleb-

Caleb...

Caleb feels he shouldn’t be as happy and smug about that as he is.

“And what does that mean?” Molly says eventually, his voice hoarse. He pauses, swallows, and darts his tongue out to wet his lips, his flush still very much present. “I- that- yeah, what does it mean? It sounded pretty.”

*It means ‘he was beautiful in the sunlight’,* Caleb thinks, and does not say.

“I’ll tell you later,” he says instead, and Molly groans.

“Caleb.”

“I studied for many years to be able to understand Ancient Sylvan, Molly.”

“Yeah, so people like me could ask smart people like you to sound all sexy speaking it.”

Caleb doesn’t know how to respond to that. He doesn’t know how to respond to Molly apparently thinking that Ancient Sylvan sounds *sexy* when spoken by Caleb. He goes to take another bite of his sandwich instead only to realise that he had apparently finished it while talking with Molly and somehow hadn’t noticed.

Molly notices.

“Pumat does good sandwiches,” he says casually, nodding down to where there had once been a sandwich, and Caleb, grateful for a change of topic away from the idea of Molly possibly finding him *sexy*, nods immediately.

“He does,” he agrees.

“Pumat prime makes them the best, though. Don’t know how since they’re all technically the same person.”

“… Pumat prime?” Caleb asks cautiously, and Molly grins widely.

“Pumat prime! Caleb, have you not noticed that there’s more than one Pumat?”

“I have but I have only ever seen two at once. I assume one of them is the prime? I thought they were twins with the same name..”

“Not twins,” Molly says, “They’re the same person. And there’s four of them.”

---

They talk. And then they talk some more. They keep talking up until Caleb, lifting a hand to absentely brush back some strands of hair that had slipped loose of his ponytail, catches sight of the time on his watch.
“Fuck,” he mutters, staring down at his wrist, where the time stares accusingly back at him. “I have to- I need to- I need to get back to work.”

“Oh,” he hears Molly say softly. “Damn. I was really enjoying this.”

“I was too, Molly,” Caleb says with a sigh, running a hand through his hair as he stands. “But I have to get back to my office. I’m a bit behind with my work right now and cannot afford to waste time, unfortunately.”

“Is everything alright with your research?”

“Yes, it’s fine. I was just- I have been somewhat distracted for the last few weeks,” Caleb admits.

“I can still move if you want me to.”

“No,” Caleb says immediately, “No, you are fine to stay where you are. I’ve been working better recently. Do not concern yourself about it.”

“If you’re sure,” Molly replies, and Caleb nods as brushes grass off his legs.

“I am sure,” he says firmly, “You are welcome to practise here, Molly.”

Molly smiles at him. “Thank you,” he says, and Caleb smiles back.

“You’re welcome. Goodbye, Mollymauk.”

“Bye, Caleb,” Molly replies, and Caleb turns and starts to leave the yard, making it most of the way before a sudden voice causes him to stop. “Caleb!” Molly calls from behind him and Caleb pauses and turns, right on the boundary between the little yard and the rest of campus.

“What?”

For a few long moments Molly says nothing, his mouth opening and closing a few times as his tail twists nervously through the air, the motions of it quicker and sharper than its usual lazy sway. “I was wondering if you’d like to get lunch with me sometime?” Molly asks eventually, and Caleb frowns.

“We just had lunch,” he says, more than a little confused.

Molly stares at him. “I meant-“ he starts, and then cuts himself off, taking a visible breath before trying again. “I know we did, Caleb, I just meant- as- you know what, nevermind.” He looks down and plucks a single blade of grass from the ground, slowly twisting it between his fingers. “Nevermind,” he says again, softer, and when he looks back up there’s a smile on his face, and it’s awful.

Caleb may be lacking in people skills, but even he can tell that Molly’s smile is fake.

“Okay…” he says slowly, and Molly continues to smile. “I will- I will see you around, Mollymauk. It was nice seeing you again.”

“Yes,” Molly says, and there’s an undertone to his voice now, an almost defeated one. “Yeah, it was good seeing you too, Caleb. Good luck with all the books and words and doctorate stuff.”

Caleb smiles a little. “Good luck with all your stretching and firespinning and carnival stuff,” he says, and watches as Molly’s smile becomes a little more genuine.
“Thanks. See you later, Caleb.”

“Goodbye, Mollymauk.”

Caleb turns, and leaves the yard.

Within ten minutes of him getting back to his office his phone buzzes with a text.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I didn’t mean it when I said ‘nevermind’
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I wanted to ask if you wanted to get lunch with me
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] like as a date
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] if you don’t want to that is absolutely fine there’s no pressure or anything things don’t have to be weird we can just still be friends
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] or yard acquaintances
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I just wanted to ask you on a date and kind of panicked a bit

Oh.

Oh, Gods above.

Caleb can’t- he doesn’t- he can’t deal with this. He likes Molly, knows he likes Molly, knows that he has a crush on Molly but this is-

It’s too much.

It’s too much, and Caleb doesn’t deserve any of it.

Caleb breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth, puts his phone down on his desk, and doesn’t reply.

Chapter End Notes

The absolutely adorable art in this chapter was drawn by kawaii-rookie on tumblr! Endless thanks and love x
Chapter 6

Molly wasn’t supposed to like Caleb. Molly was never supposed to like Caleb. He was supposed to tolerate him, and maybe enjoy his presence a little bit, and perhaps occasionally put up with him for long enough for them to have a conversation so that Caleb could at least pretend that he had a chance with this terrible, unexpected, ever-growing crush, but he was never supposed to like Caleb. No one was supposed to like Caleb.

Molly certainly wasn’t meant to ask Caleb on a date and seem to be as sincere over text as it’s possible to be.

Caleb still hasn’t replied by the time he leaves the building. He spends the rest of the day hidden safely inside his office, determinedly looking anywhere but out of the window or down to where his phone lies innocuously on his desk. It doesn’t buzz again but he still catches himself glancing at it every few minutes, his gaze pulled towards it and away from where the mouse cursor blinks at him accusingly from the blank page onscreen as though by some inescapable magnetic force. He hasn’t been able to focus on his thesis since Molly texted him. He hasn’t been able to focus on anything since Molly texted him, hasn’t been able to think or read or write or focus and he wants to, wants to be able to distract his mind enough that he can put aside thinking about Molly until later. He wants to work on his thesis and sample exam paper for his students and pretend that Molly never texted him.

Mostly, Caleb just wants the day to be over.

For the first time that he can remember since he started his first doctorate he leaves the office almost exactly at 5pm. He packs up his bag at 4:30pm and spends the next half an hour sitting in his chair with his leg jittering away under his desk as he waits for the hands of the clock to slowly creep towards 5pm. He’s heard 5pm is when most people leave their jobs, but where before 5pm always seemed to arrive much too early now it feels like the exact opposite is happening; it feels like time has slowed down and turned to molasses, dragging to a crawl and forcing Caleb to wade through it second by second. It’s awful. It’s agony. Caleb hates it.

Caleb desperately wants his phone to buzz again to break the silence of his office.

He wants to reply to Molly. He wants to pick up his phone and text Molly, wants to tell him that he would love to go on a date, wants to tell him that he thinks that Molly is engaging and fascinating and unspeakably attractive and that his excitement over his discovery of Unicode is sweet and delightful and warms Caleb to him further and that Caleb still can’t get the way that Molly’s cheeks turned darker when he spoke Ancient Sylvan for him out of his head. He wants to tell Molly all of that. He wants to learn about Molly and Molly’s past and Molly’s quirks and Molly’s interests and hobbies and habits and likes and dislikes and everything, wants to learn what the embroidery of his coat feels like beneath his fingertips and what Molly’s lips feel like against his own.

He wants to learn all of that, and knows that it would be so, so simple to take that first step.

But he doesn’t deserve it, and so he doesn’t.

Caleb’s had a very clear idea of what he deserves for a long time now. He deserves his apartment (just) and he deserves his PhD (barely) and he deserves Nott’s friendship (or at least he thinks he does on good days). He doesn’t deserve much more than that. Not when he’s done what he’s done.

Not when he still occasionally dreams of fire and sparks and screams.
Caleb leaves his office at five on the dot, swinging his bag onto his shoulder and exiting the moment the minute hand ticks over onto twelve. He shuts and locks the door behind him and speed-walks along the corridor and down the stairs, entering into the little entrance area and walking hurriedly past where Bryce is sitting inside the little ancient porter’s box by the door in the hopes that they don’t notice him and ask him any questions.

It’s a futile attempt, of course. Bryce is accustomed to spotting people trying to sneak out and Widogasts trying to sneak in. Speed-walking alone is absolutely no match for their sharp eyes, and Caleb barely makes it halfway across the entrance atrium before he hears Bryce shifting.

“Widogast.”

Caleb freezes.

“What are you doing?”

He doesn’t turn around, doesn’t look over at Bryce. “Leaving?” he says, and it comes out sounding much more like a question than he intended for it to.

“At 5pm?”

“… Ja. People do that. That is when most people go home from their jobs.”

“Most people,” Bryce repeats back at him, “Not you.” There’s a pause, and when Caleb finally turns his head to look over at Bryce it’s to see them watching him curiously and looking, if anything, a little concerned. “… Are you alright, Caleb?”

“Yeah,” Caleb replies much too quickly. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t normally leave so early.”

“Oh, you know how it is – sometimes you just can’t wait to get home.”

Bryce narrows their eyes at him. “I have never seen you leave this building before six and I have been working here almost as long as you have.”

Caleb doesn’t have a counterpoint to that, so instead he says nothing at all.

There’s a long, unbroken silence as Bryce continues to watch him and Caleb continues to not speak. He can feel himself growing more nervous with each passing second, wishes that Bryce would just say something so that he can reply and make his excuses and continue towards the door and go home to where everything is safe and known and comfortable. Thankfully, he doesn’t actually have to wait forever; after what feels like much, much too long Bryce finally seems to hear the clamouring in Caleb’s head and they speak again.

“Hmm,” Bryce says, and they look over Caleb once again before leaning back in their chair. “Look after yourself,” they say, and nod towards the door. “Off you go. Say hi to Nott for me.”

Caleb frowns. That was easy. “… I can go?”

“It’s your building, Caleb. You work here. You can leave whenever.”

Caleb doesn’t push it – he knows that Bryce is always careful and sensible with their questions but he still doesn’t want to run the risk of Bryce asking anything… uncomfortable. He doesn’t want to risk Bryce asking him anything at all about Molly. Logically, he knows that Bryce won’t, but there’s
still discomfort and uncertainty and the soft, quiet worthless feeling he recognises so well coiling around his mind, and even though Caleb knows Bryce, trusts Bryce, his mind is still quietly insisting that at any moment Bryce will open their mouth and reinforce every worry living inside Caleb’s skull.

So he nods, and mutters his thanks and promises that he’ll tell Nott that Bryce said hi, and then he leaves, walking swiftly to the door and stepping out into the still-bright afternoon; something that he hasn’t experienced upon leaving the office in a long time. He doesn’t know what time the buses run in these earlier hours but they seem to arrive much more frequently than they do later in the day, and Caleb barely has to wait five minutes for one to arrive and drop him off a few streets away from his flat a little while later.

“Bryce says hi,” is the first thing he says upon entering his flat, his mind still a tangled mess, and he doesn’t look to see if Nott is even home to hear it before he turns around to push the door shut, taking a moment to shut his eyes and breathe as he does so. The bus ride home hadn’t helped anything, shockingly enough. It had been a quiet journey, all things considered, but the bus was still a bus and with his brain how it was Caleb had struggled more than usual to block out all the sound and noise and extra sensory distractions and focus on… anything. Something not in his head.

He’d ended up just holding on to what Bryce told him. Say hi to Nott for me, they’d said, and so Caleb had. He’d done one thing right that day.

One thing.

“Oh! That’s nice of them,” he hears Nott reply from somewhere across the room and Caleb opens his eyes again, pushes the door the remaining inch or so until it shuts with a click. “How was your day?”

“Gut,” he answers automatically, taking off his shoes and setting them down on the rack besides Nott’s boots before crossing to the couch, dropping his satchel down on the battered coffee table in front of it.

“It doesn’t sound good.”

Caleb doesn’t respond to that – he hates lying to Nott but he also hates acknowledging when days like this happen, hates taking away from her joy and her happiness by moping and being sad and being worthless and awful and shit.

But, technically, it wasn’t a lie; she only asked how his day was. She didn’t ask how he was.

Satisfied with his loophole, Caleb drops down onto the couch and leans back into the worn-soft cushions. If she pushes it, he will talk. He knows that Nott will not judge him, knows logically that it can sometimes be good to get these kinds of things off his chest, but his brain is bad and shivery-sharp and it feels like a mass of brambles inside his head, bad memories and bad thoughts and bad bad bad all drawn up to the surface like barbed wire shifting and stirring in oil-dark water.

He doesn’t want Nott to see that. He doesn’t want Nott to be touched by it.

He knows that she has seen it and heard it before and that she will not mind doing so again, but knowing that doesn’t appease the brambles in his head at all.

Caleb sighs softly, and drops his head back against the couch cushions. From the kitchen he hears the soft sounds of Nott slipping off a stool – or possibly a counter – and dropping to the floor, padding over to him on quiet feet.

“Are you alright?” Nott asks quietly, and a moment later Caleb feels the couch dip beneath her slight
weight as she climbs up next to him. She doesn’t lean against his side the way she normally would, though. Not yet. Not until she knows if touch will make Caleb feel worse or not.

Caleb smiles a little despite himself at that thought. He doesn’t know what he did to deserve her - scratch that, he knows that he doesn’t deserve her, doesn’t deserve her in the slightest – and he really, really doesn’t know how on earth he ended up with a friend who cares the way that Nott does. She’s not perfect, sometimes a little too blunt with her words or a little too coddling with her actions, but she tries and she cares and, above all, she makes sure that Caleb is comfortable. She remembers what makes him worse and what helps when his brain gets like this, and when something could do either she always waits and checks and gets confirmation that it’ll help him before doing anything at all. Even, like with right now, with something as simple as a hug.

Caleb answers her unspoken question with an unspoken answer of his own; he shifts a little, leaning to one side just enough to nudge their shoulders together. Touch is okay, the action says, and Caleb knows that Nott understands it. “I’m alright,” he says quietly, and wonders how true that statement actually is. “I am- well- I am. Not alright, but not- not alright.” He glances over to look at Nott, and sees her give him a tiny, understanding smile.

“Okay,” she says quietly, “Bad brain day?”

“… Ja.” He doesn’t like admitting it. He knows that he should.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Nott says again, and she presses against his side a little more heavily, reaching out to fiddle absently with the loose threads of Caleb’s tatty cardigan. “If you want to talk about it, or about anything, you know that I’m here.”

“I do,” Caleb replies softly, “I know that. Danke, Nott.”

“Of course. You want me to stay here?”

He doesn’t need to think about that. “Please,” he replies quietly, and sees Nott smile and nod and curl up more comfortably against his side before they both settle into a comfortable silence. There is no pressure to speak and Caleb is more grateful for that than he knows how to explain.

The quiet helps too. The longer it goes on the more Caleb finds himself becoming almost willing to speak, the unbroken silence giving him the time he needs to find the exact words to say what he needs to say until, eventually, he feels that they are ready. He doesn’t know how much time has passed like this, with him sitting in silence as Nott leans against his side as a small, comforting weight, but he has a good idea. He almost always has a good idea of how much time has passed or of what time it is, even when he gets like this. Even when his brain is full of brambles and he feels both far too present and far too absent, unerringly certain in a few small truths about himself for all that his logical brain argues against them.

Logic doesn’t matter when he’s like this. He knows what it is in his head in a calm, disconnected sort of way, and he knows it to be the truth.

“There is something,” Caleb says slowly, breaking the silence of the flat, “that I want to do. Very much. It is- it is scary and it is quite exciting and I think I would very much like to do it and I like him but I don’t-”

“Caleb…”
“-But I don’t deserve it,” Caleb finishes quietly. He looks down at his hands in his lap, twisting them together and scratching absentlly at his left wrist, pressing just hard enough to feel the soft-sharp blur of quiet pain. “I don’t deserve it,” he says again, and feels Nott’s arms wrap around his shoulders as she pulls him sideways into a hug.

“Caleb,” she says again, softer, and Caleb cannot bring himself to look at her. He keeps looking at his hands, tracing the lines of tendons and bones in the feeble light that the overhead lamp casts in the living room. Nott pulls him in closer, pressing against his side as if she could banish the thoughts from his mind with her presence alone – and she’s tried, she’s tried so many times, almost every time this has happened that Caleb has mentioned it to her – and squeezes. Her arms are small and slight but there’s strength behind them and Caleb tilts a little, appreciating the pressure that the hug provides. When he gets like this, when his brain starts to feel untethered, pressure can help to draw him back.

“You deserve everything,” Nott whispers, her hair tickling Caleb’s ear, and he smiles humourlessly where she cannot see it.

“I don’t,” he says quietly. Behind his eyes he watches tongues of flame flicker and grow.

“You do.”

“What I’ve done-“

“Is in the past.”

“But I-“

“You didn’t know what would happen, Caleb. You couldn’t.”

“It was my fault,” Caleb whispers. “I am a garbage person.” He doesn’t cry. There is no reason to cry about this, not when he is simply stating the truth.

“Do you regret it?” Nott asks, her voice soft, and Caleb frowns.

“…Was?”

“What happened, do you regret it?”

“Of course I do…”

“Then you’re not a bad person,” she says, her voice absolute and unarguably certain. “You regret it and it was an accident and you are not a bad person, Caleb. You deserve good things. You deserve this.”

“Nott,” he whispers and she leans back, brushes his hair out of his face and gives him a soft, fond smile.

“You deserve it,” she says. “Whatever this is, whoever this is, if they make you happy then go for it. Even if you don’t think you deserve it you do, so go for it. The worst that happens is that it all goes horribly wrong and then I’ll- I’ll take care of them.” Caleb smiles a little at that. It almost feels genuine. “You deserve to be happy, Caleb,” Nott says simply, and she leans in to press a kiss to his forehead.

Caleb squeezes his eyes shut, and when Nott moves away he follows after her, pressing his face to her hair as he wraps his arms around her waist. He can feel tears gathering at the corners of his eyes
but refuses to let them fall, refuses to let himself break.

Refuses to let himself break again.

“Caleb,” Nott murmurs again and Caleb feels his heart clench in his chest as one of her hands starts carding through his hair. “It’s alright. It’s alright.”

Caleb doesn’t speak. He can’t. He just squeezes his eyes shut tighter, breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth the way Jester taught him many months ago as a calming technique, and waits.

And breathes.

And settles.

“I have to go to work,” Nott says, what could be minutes or hours later. Caleb doesn’t know. He feels empty, wrung dry and hollowed out for all that this was far from the worst thing his brain has done to him recently. He twists a little so that he can see Nott and she smiles up at him, soft and sweet and kind, before reaching up to brush a thumb over his cheek. “Are you going to be alright?”

“Ja,” Caleb mumbles. “I will- I will be fine, Nott.”

“I can find someone to cover my shift if you need me here.”

“No, no, this is- I’m alright. I’m alright. I will call Jester or Bryce if I need to.”

Nott’s smile widens a little. “Okay,” she says, and she kisses his forehead before climbing off the couch and crossing to the door to put on her ‘kick-your-teeth-in’ work boots, as she had affectionately dubbed them. “Don’t forget to have dinner,” she says, shrugging into her hoodie and jacket, and Caleb nods from the couch.

“I won’t,” he says quietly.

“Good. If you make something tasty leave me some so I can have it when I get back.”

“I will.”

“Thank you.” Nott zips her jacket up and turns to Caleb with a smile. “See you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Nott,” Caleb says, and Nott smiles a little wider.

“Goodnight, Caleb,” Nott replies, “Remember what I said about this person, alright?”

“… Alright.”

“Good.” She reaches up, opening the door, and slings her work bag over her shoulder. “Sleep well.” With that she steps through the doorway, tugging the door shut, and punctuates her farewell with the click of it closing.

The silence of the flat is nearly deafening in her absence.

Caleb looks down at his hands again, and runs his thumb along the red mark he left on the side of his wrist earlier. It doesn’t hurt now, not anymore, and he knows that it will soon fade back into nothingness; a temporary touchstone for when he needs to keep himself grounded. It’s not a good technique and he knows it, but he doesn’t know any better ones and it’s always worked for him.
Absently, he scratches at his wrist again. “Okay,” he whispers to himself, “Okay.” He doesn’t know what time it is but outside the window it’s growing dark. It’s late, then, or late-ish. Evening time, most likely. “I should eat,” Caleb murmurs to himself, and after a long pause he pushes himself to stand and crosses to the kitchen to set about making dinner. He makes enough for Nott as well, and as promised he boxes it up and leaves it in the fridge before doing the dishes. He runs through the rest of the evening on auto-pilot, wiling away the hours until it becomes late enough for him to go to bed, and as soon as he can he brushes his teeth and turns off the living room light and enters his bedroom, grabbing his pyjamas from his bed.

Caleb changes for bed the way that he always does: facing away from the mirror. He’s quick and efficient in his actions, stripping and getting into his pyjamas without really seeing himself, and soon he’s turning around again with his folded clothes in hand ready to put them down out of the way, but tonight something catches his eye as he turns.

In his reflection in the mirror he can just about make out the ugly shapes of burn scars peeking out from under the short sleeves of his pyjama top. He can barely see them, can only see the very edge of them, but it’s all that he needs to see. Caleb knows them off by heart. He knows their shape, knows their twisted lines and ugly blotches and ruined, disgusting expanses where they cross over his back and chase along his spine. He knows their form and their look and their cause. He knows their origin.

He knows what he did.

Caleb breathes, and breathes again. There is no soot in his lungs and no ash on his tongue but there is more than enough of it in his mind, embers drifting at the far end of memory. He breathes again. No embers in his room, no sparks against his skin. Breathe. His bedroom. Breathe. His mirror. Breathe. His skin and his body and himself.

“Mir geht es gut,” he whispers, and does not believe it. I’m alright.

Caleb shuts his eyes for a moment, breathes again, and puts his clothes away, placing them down neatly on top of his dresser before checking the window latch and climbing into bed.

He is sure he will dream of fire tonight.

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Caleb does not end up dreaming of fire, but he doesn’t sleep easily either. When he wakes in the morning he feels like his eyes have been glued together with sawdust, his eyelids coated and weighed down with dust and grime, and even after his standard morning cup of tea it still takes until he steps off the bus by the university for him to actually start to feel human.

He feels better, though, a little bit. As awful as they are the feelings and thoughts that plague him on bad brain days thankfully don’t stick around for long, and though he feels tired and worn out he still feels better. He still feels more himself.

He doesn’t feel like he’ll be able to face Molly but it seems like he’ll have to, because almost the moment that he starts walking up the short path to his building he glimpses a flash of purple and a swirl of bright, colourful fabric from the corner of his eye and then Molly’s standing just before him, like it’s any other normal morning.

“Good morning, Professor,” Molly says the same way he always does, though his voice is quieter and less cheerful than usual, and Caleb can barely bring himself to look at him.
I don’t deserve this, he thinks, and he raises his head to meet Molly’s soft red gaze. He will not like me when he learns what I have done. He will regret this.

“Good morning, Mollymauk,” he replies quietly, and immediately looks away. Eye contact is too much right now. It’s too much a lot of the time.

“… How are you?”

“Good. You?”

“Yeah, I’m alright,” Molly replies, and when Caleb glances back over at him it’s to see him smiling faintly. Whatever Molly’s thinking, however Molly’s interpreted Caleb’s silence, it seems he’s doing his best to continue on as normal.

Caleb applauds him for it.

Caleb wishes he knew how to do that himself.

“I’m glad to hear that,” he says softly and Molly shrugs, making the bag on his shoulder shift and sway.

“Well, you know how things are,” he says vaguely. “Gotta keep going, right?” Caleb smiles faintly but before he gets a chance to reply Molly continues on. “Anyway, I’ve got to go practice, you know how it is. I’ll see you around, Caleb.”

Molly flashes Caleb another lightning-quick smile, and between one breath and the next he’s gone, walking down the path with his tail swaying as if nothing has changed between them.

Maybe nothing has.

Maybe, Caleb thinks as he pushes open his office door a few minutes later, setting his satchel down and sitting down in his chair, this is how Molly actually wants them to be. Maybe Molly has already realised his mistake.

 Maybe Molly already regrets sending that text, he thinks, and sinks down a little further in his chair. Maybe he knows. Maybe he doesn’t even want to be friends, or yard-acquaintances. Maybe he was pretending just then for my sake.

Caleb groans, and presses his hands over his face. Fuck. He hates this. He hates everything about this. He hates his own cowardice and he hates Molly’s easy conversation and pretence and he hates his stupid, awful, obnoxious crush on Molly for causing all of this bullshit in the first place.

He hates his fucking office right now, simply for having a window that he knows he could look out of to see Molly. He just got here but already he feels like he needs to leave or take a break or just distract himself with anything so that he’s not turning over endless maybe’s and what if’s in his head until the end of the day.

Caleb stands, leaves his office, fills his thermos with shitty tea from the professors’ lounge and throws himself head-first into his research.

1pm arrives, and it brings Bryce with it. Caleb hears their approaching footsteps before the door even opens and when it does he’s still hunched over his computer, writing what are almost certainly terrible notes in a desperate bid to keep his brain distracted from Molly and his window and his phone.
“Caleb,” he hears Bryce call from the door, and he doesn’t look up.

“I brought lunch,” he replies without looking at them. “It is in my satchel.”

“Do you have your wallet?” Bryce asks nonsensically and Caleb pauses, fingers stilling on the keyboard as he turns to look at them.

“… Yes?”

“Good. You should go and buy your lunch.”

“What?”

“I said you should go and buy your lunch, Caleb,” Bryce repeats, and Caleb frowns at them.

“But I brought my lunch with me,” he replies, more than a little confused, “You know this, I just told you-“

“I know,” Bryce says. “But I am suggesting that you walk past the yard and buy your lunch. From Pumat’s, from Gilmore’s, wherever. Just leave this building, buy your lunch, and see if you can’t bump into a tiefling on the way, alright?”

… Oh.

“Oh,” Caleb says quietly.

“I will even lend you money if you need it,” Bryce continues calmly, though with a faint smirk pulling at the corner of their mouth, and Caleb’s brain starts to desperately scramble through every interaction he’s had with Bryce recently, trying to figure out how the hell Bryce noticed Caleb’s pathetically massive crush on Mollymauk as Bryce continues to speak. “But for your own health, as your friend and as your friendly security enforcer, I highly recommend that you leave this office, get some fresh air, and talk to someone outside. Especially if that someone has purple skin and a lot of tattoos. Let yourself have something nice, Caleb.”

“I-“ Caleb starts, and then immediately pauses to swallow. He can feel the heat rising in his cheeks, knows that he must be turning a truly spectacular shade of red, but Bryce is being kind enough to not look at Caleb, instead keeping their gaze focused on the clock hanging on Caleb’s wall.

“It’s just a suggestion,” they say.

“Bryce…”

“It is just a suggestion, Caleb, and if it will make you happier then I would like to encourage you to follow through with it.”

Caleb narrows his eyes. “Nott told you,” he says quietly, and Bryce looks back at Caleb.

“Nott didn’t tell me anything,” they reply, completely sincere, and Caleb immediately feels bad for accusing them. For accusing Nott. “She texted me saying that you passed on my hello, and then we chatted for a bit. That was all. Any conclusion I came to was my own, Caleb.”

“Oh.”

“Oh,” Bryce agrees softly. “I am your friend, Caleb, or at least I think of myself as being your friend, and I like to see you happy. If this – whatever this is – is recoverable and you like it or you want it then know that you have my support should you need it.”
“Oh,” Caleb says again.

“Oh,” Bryce repeats back at him.

“… I should go and get lunch,” Caleb hears himself say, and Bryce nods, smiling faintly, and steps to one side of the door.

“You should,” they say, “And if you happen to see a fire-spinning tiefling while you’re at it do let me know. He’s a bit of a hazard.”

“I’ll do that,” Caleb mutters, and checks he has his wallet before walking out of the door in what very nearly feels like a daze.

It’s a daze that’s quick to dissipate, though – almost the moment Caleb steps outside the building it fades, leaving behind it nothing but a horrible, gut-twisting nervousness that only grows stronger the closer Caleb gets to the entrance to the yard. He finds himself standing before it far sooner than expected, his hands twitching nervously and already sweating, and he very nearly turns around right then and there.

But then he spots Molly, sprawled out across the grass with his jewellery shining in the sunlight, the sun casting deep purple shadows across his face and gilding his tattoos in gold, and, just for a moment, Caleb lets himself believe what Nott and Bryce told him.

*Let yourself have something nice, Caleb.*

He shuffles in place, tries and fails to calm his racing heart, draws in a deep breath, and clears his throat.

“Mollymauk.”

There’s no response. He was much too quiet, and he knows it. There’s no way that Molly heard him, not with how deeply he’s engrossed in his phone. Caleb breathes deeply and tries once more.

“*Mollymauk!***

Molly hears him this time – he looks up from his phone, and the moment he spots Caleb he scrambles to his feet, his tail swishing and his jewellery jingling as he stands upright.

“Caleb,” he says, smiling despite how his voice seems to lack its usual bounce, “Hi.”

Caleb swallows. “Hi,” he replies quietly, and makes a small, awkward gesture at the yard. “May I- can I come in?”

Molly laughs shortly, giving a slight shrug before flinging his arms wide. “It’s public property, Caleb,” he says, and Caleb gives a weak smile and steps through the half-rusted gateway into the yard. He takes a few steps in, closing the gap between them, and comes to a stop a little distance away from Molly, his hands tucked deep into his pockets as if in an attempt to ground himself.

It’s not working, and with every second of horrible, awkward silence that passes Caleb feels himself moving further and further away from saying what he knows he should say. What he *wants* to say.

The best way to do this, he knows, will simply be to jump right into it.

Caleb takes a breath.

“I wanted to apologise,” he says, “For not- not texting you back.”
Molly smiles, but there's absolutely no happiness to it. “It’s alright,” he says, his voice understanding and gentle and full of a false cheer that Caleb absolutely despises. “I completely get it, I made things awkward, there was- no harm, no foul, right? We can just be friends, or yard acquaintances, or I can go find somewhere else to practise if you want me to, it’s completely alright, I-”

“No,” Caleb interrupts, and he can hear the quiet firmness in his own voice. He's shaking, trembling beneath his cardigan and shirt and scarf and his palms are slick with sweat and his heart feels like it's just about ready to explode out of his chest, mere moments away from bursting out of his ribcage from the sheer pace that it's beating at but he is certain and sure all the same.

He's going to accept Molly’s date.

He wants to.

He can let himself have this one nice thing.

“No,” he says again, quieter, and Molly falls silent, his eyes wide and curious. “That is- it is not alright that I did not text you back, Mollymauk. You put yourself out there and it was rude and unthinking of me not to reply.”

“Caleb,” Molly says again, softer, and Caleb shakes his head.

“Please,” he says, “Just- listen.” He pulls in a breath. Holds it. Breathe out. This is okay. I am okay.

“It is not alright that I did not text you back,” he says again, “Because I- I…”


“I would like to have lunch with you,” he says, looking determinedly past Molly’s right horn. “As a-” Say it. “As a date. Today.”

He doesn’t look at Molly. He can’t look at Molly. Molly was the one who asked in the first place but Caleb is terrified all the same, is terrified that in his lack of reply and in his nervousness Molly has seen down to the soot-blackened creature beneath, has seen Caleb’s truth and Caleb’s past and has changed his mind entirely.

It is, Caleb knows, a ridiculous thought, but he thinks it all the same. Even now, years after the fire took place, he does not know how to stop the thoughts when they happen.

Caleb looks past Molly’s ear, sees in his peripheral vision as Molly’s face slowly loses its tenseness and worry and subtle sadness, and presses his fingernails into his palm to stop himself from bolting.

“Oh,” he hears Molly say, soft and shocked and, beneath it all, unmistakably quietly delighted. “Oh. Alright then.”

That sounded… good.

Caleb glances back over, and immediately comes eye to eye with a smile so gentle and so absolutely, entirely happy that he feels his own lips twitch into a tiny, weak copy of it within moments. “So we have a date?” he hears himself ask, his voice soft and nervous and almost incredulous, and Molly nods and grins even wider.

“Yes,” he says, “Yes, absolutely. If you want to have a date then we definitely have a date.”

“… Today?”
Molly laughs at that and it’s beautiful, soft and gentle and delighted and not at all directed at Caleb. “Caleb,” he says, his eyes damn near sparkling, “I’d be happy to go on a date with you any time, any day.”

Caleb smiles a little more. “Does that include today?” he asks, still wanting to be absolutely sure, and Molly nods.

“Yes,” he replies, “Yes, it completely does. If it works for you then it definitely works for me.”

“It works for me.”

“Fantastic,” Molly says, his joy evident in his voice, and Caleb can tell it’s not at all faked now. “Come on, Caleb.” He reaches down, picking up his ridiculous, beautiful coat, and swings it over his shoulders. “We have a date to go on.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The little bell above the door jingles merrily as Molly and Caleb step into The Invulnerable Vagrant, ringing out clearly above the gentle background chatter, and Caleb feels his lingering nerves settle a little as he looks around the familiar interior. Pumat’s shop is a nice place, and Caleb imagines that if he were ever to open a shop of his own that it would look very similar; Pumat’s shop feels homely, full of a slightly mismatched but still refined and comfortable looking collection of chairs and couches that all share the same warm, earthy colour scheme. There are potted plants dotted about the room and many of the tables bear vases containing neat collections of wild spring flowers, adding to the general pleasant smell of the establishment, and several framed scrolls and pictures adorn the walls. One piece, encased in a slightly out-of-place looking golden frame, shows one of the Pumats shaking hands with the esteemed Shaun Gilmore himself. Within another frame is an ancient looking text in a script that Caleb can’t read. He thinks it might be Draconic. He’s not entirely sure.

It is, all in all, a very nice place. There’s a reason it’s become Caleb’s go-to escape when he needs to get out of the office for a bit (or, more realistically, when Bryce orders him to leave under pain of telling Nott).

It’s a good place for a first date, Caleb thinks absently, and immediately feels his heart threaten to trip back into overdrive. Fuck. He’d managed to get over the worst of his nerves on the walk over, listening quietly as Molly told him about his day and commented on things around them and generally made wonderful small talk to fill the void left by Caleb’s silence, but now that he’s actually here, standing in line at Pumat’s with Molly standing next to him, close enough to touch and close enough to smell, it’s all Caleb can do to remember the breathing exercises that Jester taught him and try not to hyperventilate himself into unconsciousness.

It doesn’t work.

It doesn’t work, he realises on the third breath, because Molly smells really fucking good. On every inhale Caleb gets a lungful of lavender and incense, and while the smell itself is somehow already familiar and soothing to him the fact that some part of his brain really, really wants to see if it smells better right up against Molly’s skin is about as far from calming as it’s possible to get.

Caleb gives up on the breathing exercise. Instead, as the short queue moves forwards, he glances around and tries to look anywhere but at Molly instead. He can look at Molly later, he thinks. He can look at Molly when his heart feels less like he’s halfway through running a marathon.

Thankfully, in a place as uniquely decorated as Pumat’s, it doesn’t take Caleb long for to find something to look at that isn’t a purple tiefling who smells almost annoyingly good, and within a few moments his eyes settle on a framed spell scroll hanging on the wall next to the counter. It’s a familiar sight to Caleb, one that he’s seen countless times in the course of his years working for and studying at the university. It doesn’t take longer than a couple of seconds of him tracing the lines and curves of the runes and sigils that adorn it for Caleb to feel his nerves start to settle again. He knows the script this scroll is written in – it’s not Ancient Sylvan, but it is Celestial, and while Caleb might not be a qualified expert on the language he can read it all the same – and he catches himself murmuring the verbal component of the spell almost absentely. He doesn’t know the somantic part of it and has no doubt that he will never be able to afford the material components, but the words he can say. The words he knows. The words he knows as well as he knows Nott’s phone number, as well as he knows the layout of his own apartment. They roll off his tongue with ease, hanging still and
quiet and steeped with potential in the air around him, and beneath his skin he can feel his blood start
to shift and stir lazily as it recognises the taste of magic in Caleb’s mouth.

It has been so, so very long since Caleb last cast a spell. It has been almost fifteen years, but his
magic does not care for that. His magic was never powerful to begin with and there was never
enough of it to grow stale and so it still lingers like lightning in his blood, peaceful and slumbering,
until such a time as Caleb chooses to draw it forth again. He flexes his hand at his side, feels the
static-electricity brush of magic along the underside of his skin, and curls his fingers into a fist. There
will be no magic today. There will be no magic ever again.

“Ready to order?” says a voice from his side, and Caleb very nearly jumps out of his skin as he gets
pulled back to the present. He glances over and comes face to face with Mollymauk, smiling widely
as he gestures up at the board now that they’re one away from being the next people to order. “Or do
you need more time to choose?

“Oh,” says Caleb, “No, no, I am fine. I always get the same thing.” Inside his chest, he feels his heart
settle and calm at the sound of Molly’s voice.

“Really?”

“Oh, ja. I like to stick to what I know I like.”

Molly shrugs. “Fair enough,” he says, and steps aside as he gestures at the counter. “You order first;
I’m still trying to decide on what to drink.”

“The apple and mint tea is very good,” Caleb suggests as he watches the counter where Pumat is still
serving a customer. “I think Pumat puts honey in it.”

“Does he now?”

“Ja. And in summer he does an iced version.”

“Well,” Molly says, looking down from the board behind the counter to smile at Caleb, “Maybe if
we come back here in summer I can try it then.”

Caleb likes the sound of that. Caleb likes the sound of that very much.

“I’d like that,” he says quietly and sees Molly smile wider before he spots the last customer moving
away and steps up to the counter himself. Behind the counter Pumat still has his back turned,
working away at the coffee machine, and after a moment Caleb sees another Pumat pass through the
door from the kitchen to deposit a plate of food on the counter, giving Caleb a cheery wave as he
does so.

It’s hard not to wave back at the firbolg. Caleb lifts his hand in a small greeting, sure that it must look
strange and awkward, but the Pumat just beams wider as he disappears back through the door into
the kitchen. The other Pumat straightens up, placing a mug on the counter before the waiting
customer before turning around to face Caleb, and the moment he lays eyes on him his face breaks
into a slow, delighted smile.

“Well, hello there, Mr. Widogast!” he greets, and Caleb cannot help his smile when he replies. Pumat
– well, the Pumat’s – has always been a calming figure in Caleb’s life, ever since the first time Caleb
wandered into the shop in search of a change of scenery in the middle of his first PhD and promptly
spent fours hours tucked away in a corner, studying and annotating his way through a stack of books
as one of the Pumat’s brought him endless mugs of tea, telling Caleb that he could pay him back by
going home and getting some sleep.
Caleb hadn’t, instead returning to his office in an attempt to work through the night, and had felt so bad about betraying Pumat’s trust that he’d avoided the shop for the next month.

Not anymore, though. Now, with Bryce and Nott both looking out for him and making sure that he eats and sleeps and generally does all the things that humans need to do in order to survive in roughly the right amounts, Caleb has no qualms about walking into Pumat’s little coffee shop-café-eatery-bookshop store and ordering the exact same thing every single time.

“Hallo, Pumat,” he replies quietly, “Have you been well?”

“Oh, we’ve all been fine and dandy here, Mr. Widogast,” Pumat replies, “Serving customers and enjoying the weather. It’s a lovely day today.”

“It is a very nice day,” Caleb agrees and spares a glance to his side to look at Molly. There’s no doubt about it – despite the horrible, thorn-sharp anxiety that had been clawing at his mind for all of yesterday and the nerves that Caleb had felt even on the short walk over here, he can’t disagree that today has definitely turned out to be rather lovely.

He’s on a date with Molly, after all, which is simultaneous baffling and amazing.

Caleb glances back at Molly again, and Molly catches his eye and winks. Gods. Caleb feels his silly little smile widen even further as he looks back towards the counter and is sure that he’s already starting to turn red again, because he is on a date with Mollymauk Tealeaf and he has no idea how or why. Molly actually wanted to do this. Molly wanted to go on a date! Molly texted Caleb specifically to ask him on a date, an actual date, and Caleb spent an entire day tearing himself apart over it. But now he is here, and he can hear the fabric of Molly’s clothes brushing together every time he shifts, and they are standing in Pumat’s shop, and they are on a date.

Gods, Caleb thinks again, and looks back up at Pumat.

Pumat smiles.

“The same as usual?” he asks, and Caleb smiles a little wider. He can already see Pumat’s hand hovering over the jar of teabags for his tea of choice.

“Please.”

“Alrighty,” Pumat says, and reaches in. “One classic Widogast, coming right up.” He spends a few minutes bustling around behind the counter, pausing briefly to shout a food order to the other Pumat in the kitchen and to take Caleb’s payment, and then he turns to Molly, who had been watching with a slight grin through the entire exchange. “And what can I get for you, Mr Colourful Man?”

Molly steps up to the counter, turning slightly to face Caleb as he does so. “Mr. Widogast?” he mouths and Caleb simply shrugs helplessly, still smiling. He waits as Molly places his own order, eliciting a chuckle from the firbolg when he simply asks him to surprise him with his drink, and then the two of them move along the counter to the small collection area.

“Mr. Widogast?” Molly asks again when Pumat appears to be distracted making their drinks, and Caleb shrugs.

“He first knew me before I got my first doctorate,” he explains simply, “And by the time I obtained that doctorate, we were friends. It would have felt rude to ask that he call me Doctor or Professor.”

“You earned that title, though. You earned the right to have people call you by something that you worked hard for.”
“And he earned the right to call me Mr. Widogast, though he certainly never needed to. Pumat has been a good friend of mine for many years now, Mollymauk. He can call me by whatever he wishes.”

“Hm,” Molly replies neutrally, something indecipherable in his tone, and when Caleb looks over and catches his eye Molly grins cheekily. “What will I have to do to earn the right to call you Mr. Widogast?”

Caleb laughs a little. “You don’t need to,” he says, catching himself off-guard with his own reply. “You can already call me Mr. Caleb, if you so wish. We have already discussed that.”

“So we have,” Molly muses. After a moment’s pause he catches Caleb’s eye again. “… Mr. Caleb.”

Caleb smiles. “Mr. Mollymauk.”

“Mr. Widogast?” Pumat calls out, making Caleb jump, and Caleb looks away from Molly and his nearly blinding smile to step up to the counter and collect his order.

“Thank you,” he says automatically, reaching out and leaning in a little to pick up the tray, but before he can move away a large paw wraps around the back of his hand, holding him in place as Pumat leans in a little towards him.

“The booth in the corner has some real good lighting,” Pumat whispers quietly, and Caleb freezes. “Got some nice flowers on the table too, and it’s good and small. Nice and intimate, if that’s what you’re looking for.” Caleb glances up, completely aghast, and Pumat just smiles and winks at him. “Off you go now,” he says, and reaches out to pat Caleb on the shoulder with a large, furred hand. “You enjoy yourself, Mr. Widogast.”

“I- um- ja-“ Caleb stammers, and when Molly collects his own food a minute later and asks Caleb where he’d like to sit, Caleb finds his gaze immediately flitting to the aforementioned booth.

“Ooh,” Molly says. From behind, them Caleb hears Pumat quietly chuckling. “The corner booth? I like that, it looks cosy.”

“Ja,” Caleb mutters, trying not to look back at Pumat. *Meddling firbolg*, he thinks, and there is absolutely no venom in his thoughts. “Ja, it does look cosy.”

“Is that alright with you?” Molly asks, looking over at Caleb, “Or do you want to sit somewhere else? I’m not picky.”

Caleb shakes his head. “The corner booth is fine for me,” he replies, and Molly smiles.

“Fantastic.” He turns around, his tail flickering out behind him, and after a quick glance back at Caleb to make sure he’s following, Molly leads the way over to the corner.

The booth, as Pumat had promised, is very cosy. Even before they reach it to sit down Caleb can see that they’re going to be close together no matter what, hemmed in by the tables and couches around them and the window on one side. There is also, just as Pumat had said, a small vase of flowers on the table. They look to be fresh picked, a collection of bluebells and crocuses and some small, delicate blooms that Caleb can’t identify. They’re pretty, though. They remind Caleb of Molly’s tattoo, and as Molly brushes past him as they both move to sit down, Caleb cannot help but glance over at the flowers on his arm. He wonders what the flowers are. He wonders if they have any meaning.

He wonders if he’ll be able to ask Molly some day.
“So, Caleb,” Molly says as they slide into their seats, and Caleb glances up at him.

“How?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“You know Pumat well enough to consider him a friend, and have been here often enough for Pumat to know your exact order, but you didn’t know that there were four of him?” Molly asks, and there’s no judgement in his voice. Instead, there’s just a soft edge of teasing, perfectly matching the smile curling at the corners of his lips, and Caleb shakes his head and grins a little.

“I did not,” he admits, “I have never seen more than two of him at the same time before, and so I always thought that they were twins.”

“The fact that they both wear name badges that say ‘Pumat’ didn’t tip you off?”

“… I always thought I was talking to the same Pumat.”

There’s a pause, and then Molly bursts into laughter. He throws his head back, making the fine golden chain that connects his horn to his earring jingle merrily as he shakes with giggles, and, just for a moment, Caleb finds himself struck dumb.

Because Molly is… he’s beautiful.

No, scratch that; he’s more than beautiful. He’s fucking stunning.

Caleb knows that Molly is attractive. He’s known this since the very first time he saw Molly and has only become more aware of it since, but he’s known it in a sort of subconscious, absent way. He knows Molly is attractive the same way he knows that clouds are big. It’s an obvious thing, undeniable, but it’s not something he’s ever been able to truly wrap his head around, not even during that night spent sitting across from Molly at the carnival, watching him grin and laugh and drink in the soft, intimate lighting the room had been illuminated with.

Molly had been beautiful then, and he had been beautiful earlier in the yard, but somehow it is so, so different when Molly is being beautiful and gorgeous and stunning right in front of Caleb, close enough for Caleb to see the single curl of hair falling across his forehead and the sweep of his long, dark lashes and what looks to be glitter dusting his cheeks, making them shimmer and sparkle in the soft sunlight pouring in through the window next to them. It lights Molly up, catching on the curve of his jaw and the silver on his horns and painting his skin with a faintly golden hue that Caleb knows isn’t just from the glitter on Molly’s skin because he can see it on Molly’s exposed shoulders too, can see it everywhere that Molly’s skin is left uncovered by his loose, grey tank top. He can see the sunlight enriching the colours of Molly’s expansive, gorgeous tattoos, making the flowers redder and the peacock bluer and the sun curling around Molly’s left shoulder a strong, beautiful golden colour that Caleb didn’t even know you could get in a tattoo. Admittedly, he knows very little about tattoos in general, but he’s amazed all the same. Molly’s tattoos are stunning, and a significant part of Caleb’s brain cannot help but wonder what they all look like when there is no fabric to hide them.

He cannot help but wonder how far they go, and if the rest of Molly’s body is just as beautiful.

Caleb blinks slowly, props his head up on his hand in an attempt to hide his ridiculous smile, and watches as Molly gradually calms down from his giggles.

_Gods_, he thinks to himself. _I’m so fucked._
“Caleb?” a familiar voice says, and Caleb glances up to meet Molly’s eyes.

“Hm?”

Molly smiles. “Have I got something on my face?” he asks and Caleb, still caught up in his thoughts about how gorgeous Molly looks in the sunlight, only smiles and shakes his head a little.

“Nein,” he says, and gestures to his own cheeks. “You are just- you are very sparkly today, Mollymauk.”

“Oh!” Molly replies, a hand flying to his cheek as he grins delightedly. “It’s this great shimmery highlighter that Jester got me. Isn’t it lovely?”

“It is very sparkly,” Caleb agrees, “It’s- you- you look very, uh, very sparkly.”

Molly grins wider. “You said that already.”

“… Oh,” Caleb says, looking down at the table. “Sorry, it is- it still holds true, so I-“

“No!” Molly butts in quickly, and before Caleb can react Molly reaches out to place a hand on top of his. Caleb jumps a little, startled by the unexpected contact, but bizarrely he doesn’t find himself immediately moving to pull his hand away as he so normally does. On the contrary: Molly’s touch is actually… nice. “No,” Molly says again, quieter, and when Caleb looks up to meet his gaze Molly gives him a soft smile. “You don’t have to apologise for that, Caleb.” He pauses, and then adds thoughtfully, “Well, so long as you didn’t mean it as an insult. I’m sparkly a lot of the time.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it as an insult,” Caleb replies, and Molly smiles wider and sits back in his seat, moving his hand off Caleb’s to instead pick up his mug. Caleb tries to tell himself that he doesn’t miss the warmth of it. “It is- you look good. You look good sparkly. It suits you.”

“Oh,” Molly says, and there’s something in his voice and in his face that Caleb can’t quiet place. He smiles a little, his cheeks turning a darker shade of lavender beneath the glitter and the sparkle, and something about his smile is gentler than it had been before. “Well. That’s good to know.”

“Ja,” Caleb says, more out of a need to fill the silence than anything else, and takes a sip of his tea. He looks around, searching for anything he could possibly turn into a topic of conversation, and soon his gaze settles on the spotty blue mug that Molly is holding, full of some sort of drink piled high with whipped cream and drizzles of syrup and what look to be tiny marshmallows in all the colours of the rainbow. Caleb didn’t even know that marshmallows came in that many colours.

He nods down to it. “What did Pumat make for you?” he asks in an attempt to stop himself from thinking about the blush on Molly’s face or the matching blush that’s surely present on his own, and Molly picks the mug up with a shrug.

“No idea!” he says cheerfully. “Some sort of hot chocolate, I think. I’m always down for new experiences so I told him to surprise me.”

“What did Pumat make for you?” he asks in an attempt to stop himself from thinking about the blush on Molly’s face or the matching blush that’s surely present on his own, and Molly picks the mug up with a shrug.

“No idea!” he says cheerfully. “Some sort of hot chocolate, I think. I’m always down for new experiences so I told him to surprise me.”

“Ja, I heard.”

Molly grins. “Do you want to try it?” he asks. “If you like it maybe you can start branching out from the Classic Widogast.”

Caleb shrugs. “I have tried plenty of Pumat’s drinks before. I prefer to stick to what I know I like.” He pauses, thinking for a moment. Both Nott and Jester have told him that he needs to try new things from time to time, Jester in particular. He supposes that it’ll be safe enough to start with something as
innocent as a drink. “Perhaps…” he adds slowly, and Molly smiles encouragingly. “Perhaps, if you let me know if you enjoy it, then maybe I will try it myself some day.”

Molly grins.

“I’ll do that. Bottoms up,” he says, and raises the mug to his lips to take a long drink. When he lowers it a few moments later there’s a layer of white foam still clinging to his lip, and Caleb watches, spell-bound, as Molly hums quietly and then, with no thought or consideration for Caleb’s poor, old heart, licks his lips clean.

His tongue is forked.

_Scheisse_, Caleb thinks, and across the table from him Molly makes a small, content sound and licks his lips again. Caleb doesn’t turn red. Caleb doesn’t turn red because he’s pretty certain that there’s no blood left in his face to _make it turn red_ because every last drop of it has, very abruptly, decided to start heading south.

“Hmm,” Molly muses quietly, looking down at the mug in his hand, and he takes another sip. Part of Caleb’s brain whimpers when Molly licks the cream off his lips again. For a single, horrifying second, Caleb thinks that he may have made the sound out loud too because Molly looks up at him almost immediately. “Want to try it?” Molly asks, and Caleb blinks.

“Ugnh,” he manages to say intelligently and doesn’t know if it’s a good thing or not that there’s no blood left in his face to make him blush. He swallows, clearing his throat, and tries to speak again. “Was it- what is it like?”

“It’s pretty good!” Molly replies immediately, “Very sweet, tastes a little bit like salted caramel? Whatever it is, it’s good.”

“Pumat makes good drinks,” Caleb says usefully, and Molly nods.

“He does. Do you want to try it?”

Caleb considers that. Molly certainly seems to be genuine with his offering, holding the mug out towards him, and Caleb _did_ say that he would consider trying it at some point. There’s no reason why ‘some point’ can’t be now.

_You need to try new things, Caleb_, says a voice in his head that sounds suspiciously like Jester, and Caleb caves.

“Yes,” he says, and Molly passes him the mug. Caleb takes it, raising it to take a small, cautious sip of the hot chocolate, and when he looks back at Molly after lowering the mug and pausing to lick the foam off his lips, it’s to see Molly staring at him with a slightly stunned expression.

It’s hard to tell where pupil-less red eyes are looking, but Caleb has a lingering suspicion that Molly’s looking at his lips. He’s really not sure what to do with that thought. He certainly doesn’t object to it, because the idea that Molly might be looking at Caleb’s lips for the same reason that Caleb was looking at Molly’s makes something warm settle low in Caleb’s stomach. But at the same time…

At the same time, Caleb is very quietly, very certainly sure that Molly wouldn’t be thinking that. Not about him.

Across the table, Molly coughs quietly. “So,” he says, and Caleb’s sure that his blood still hasn’t completely returned to his brain because he could swear that Molly’s voice sounds just a little hoarser than it did a few moments ago. “What do you think? Is it good?”
Caleb looks at the mug. He hadn’t expected to like it, normally preferring for his food and drink to be simpler in taste so as not to overwhelm him, but the hot chocolate had actually been alright. Maybe not Caleb’s new favourite drink from Pumat’s, but he could definitely see himself ordering it again. “It was alright,” he says, “It was- yeah, it was quite good.”

“Good enough to change up the Classic Widogast?”

Caleb shrugs. “Perhaps. I am still undecided.”

“Need a larger sample size? More drinks to try?”

Caleb laughs a little at that, lifting a hand to cover his mouth slightly, and beneath the table he thinks he can feel Molly’s tail swishing back and forth, the arrow-head tip brushing against his calf every now and again. It’s not an entirely unpleasant feeling. “I think a larger sample size would be useful,” Caleb admits. “But as I said, I like to stick to what I know I like. It is cheaper that way.”

“Well, if we’re ever here again, you’d be more than welcome to try my drink, Caleb,” Molly says. “See if we can’t find you something that you like.”

“Thank you, Mollymauk,” Caleb replies softly, and Molly smiles at him.

“Of course.”

Caleb smiles back at Molly, takes a bite of his lunch to stop himself from saying anything stupid, and the two of them lapse into a comfortable silence.

“Tell you what,” Molly says out of nowhere when they’re both about half-way through their meals. “Pumat really looks like the firbolg emoji.”

Caleb nearly chokes. “He- what?”

“He looks like the firbolg emoji. I only just noticed.”

Caleb turns around, glancing back towards the counter where one of the Pumats is serving another customer, and frowns. He’s not entirely sure why he looked. He has no idea what the firbolg emoji even looks like. “How so?”

There’s some shuffling from the other side of the table. When Caleb looks back, it’s to see Molly pulling his phone out from his pocket, unlocking it and quickly tapping something open. “Hold on,” he says, glancing up to meet Caleb’s curious look. “I’m just- there!”

He leans forwards over the little table, holding his phone out, and without thinking Caleb leans forwards too, nearly butting heads with Molly in the middle of the table as Molly turns his head to look at his phone.

“That’s it?” Molly asks excitedly, gesturing down at his phone screen, and Caleb pulls his gaze away from Molly to look at the phone himself. It’s open on a text conversation, and in the message box Molly has typed out the firbolg emoji. Caleb squints a little, leaning closer in. After spending a few seconds committing the little image exactly to memory he sits up straight, turning his head to look past Molly’s shoulder and over at the Pumat at the counter.

Pumat catches his eye, glances at the vanishingly small distance between him and Molly, and gives Caleb a knowing smile. Caleb looks away.

“That’s it?” Molly asks again, prompting Caleb to turn his attention back to the little screen. Now that
he’s looking for it, he can see the similarities between Pumat and the emoji: they both have the same broad, cow-like nose typical of firbolgs, which is to be expected, but the emoji has a pair of small, circular glasses that are identical to the ones that Pumat wears, which is not.

“Wow,” Caleb murmurs.

“Yeah.”

Caleb looks closer. The emoji is even dressed in a green top, similar to the ones that the Pumats wear while working at the shop. “Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“That is incredible,” Caleb mumbles, and it’s only then that he glances at the rest of the screen for long enough to recognise the conversation.

> I didn’t mean it when I said ‘nevermind’
> I wanted to ask if you wanted to get lunch with me
> like as a date
> if you don’t want to that is absolutely fine there’s no pressure or anything things don’t have to be weird we can just still be friends
> or yard acquaintances
> I just wanted to ask you on a date and kind of panicked a bit

This is… oh.

This is the last few texts that Molly sent him, Caleb realises, and immediately he feels guilt start to curdle in his stomach. He glances up at Molly, briefly worried that Molly will suddenly realise what a terrible person he is for not replying, but Molly just meets his eyes with a wide, delighted grin.

“See?” he asks again. “I told you Pumat looked just like the emoji.”

“He- ja, he does,” Caleb replies, and Molly just grins wider.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?”

Caleb nods a little, still feeling a little off-balance by seeing his own lack of a response from Molly’s perspective, and looks back at Molly’s phone. Molly clears the firbolg emoji from the message box and is about to turn his phone off entirely when Caleb abruptly stops him.

“Wait,” Caleb says, noticing something at the top of the screen, and Molly freezes with his finger hovering over the home button. Along the top of the screen is Caleb’s contact name.

And it’s not quite as he remembers entering it.

“My name…” Caleb says slowly, still looking at the screen, “You have me saved as…”

“Caleb Widogast,” Molly says promptly, “Followed by a sparkles emoji, a stack of books emoji, and a cat emoji.”

“Why a cat?” Why the sparkles?

Molly shrugs. The motion makes his bare shoulder brush against Caleb’s, and even through the layer of his cardigan, Caleb is sure that he can feel the warmth of Molly’s skin. It’s tantalising.
“You said that you liked cats,” Molly says, and Caleb forces himself to pay attention to the conversation at hand. “At the afterparty at the carnival. You mentioned how much you liked cats and how much you’d like to have one, so I felt that a cat emoji was fitting.”

It’s unexpectedly thoughtful and unexpectedly sweet. Caleb can feel his cheeks growing a little red at the realisation that Molly cared enough to remember the conversation. He feels very glad that, with how they’re both awkwardly leaning over the table to see Molly’s phone, Molly very likely can’t see Caleb’s face.

“Do you give all of your saved contacts emojis?” Caleb asks curiously and hears Molly give a short burst of laughter.

“Only those I consider my friends.”

“Am I your friend, Mollymauk?” Caleb asks before he can stop himself. Beside him, Molly leans back a little, looking up at him, and Caleb shifts to meet his warm, red eyes so that they’re face to face once again.

“I’d like to think so,” Molly says softly, and Caleb can’t stop his gaze from flitting down to follow the shape of Molly’s mouth as he speaks.

Molly is close. He’s so close.

His breath smells faintly like salted caramel and chocolate, and Caleb desperately wants to know how it tastes inside his mouth.

But he can’t do that. He can’t do that, and not just because he doesn’t know how Molly would react, doesn’t know if Molly would even want Caleb to kiss him in the first place. He can’t kiss Molly because, despite everything that Nott and Bryce have said to him over the last few days, Caleb still knows as sure as anything that he does not deserve it.

Molly is too good for me, he thinks, and looks away. He sits back a little, ignoring how much he wants to lean back in, how much he wants to stay in Molly’s space and in Molly’s presence, and as he reaches out to pick up his mug the sleeve of his cardigan rides up slightly, revealing the watch beneath it.

It’s very nearly the end of Caleb’s normal lunch break.

“Oh,” he mutters, and tilts his wrist to see the time better. “Oh, Scheisse.”

“What is it?”

“It is almost the end of my lunch break…”

“Do you have to go?” Molly asks, sounding faintly worried, and Caleb looks up from his watch to see a frown marring Molly’s features. “I know you’re busy with your professor-ing. I don’t want to intrude on your time, but this has been really nice, and-“

“No,” Caleb butts in quickly and moves his arm, hiding the watch face from view. “No, Mollymauk, I am- I can take time out for this.” He pauses. “I want to,” he adds, a little bit quieter, and Molly’s frown vanishes instantly, replaced instead by a soft, happy smile. “And besides, I suspect that Bryce will bar me from entering the building if they have any reason to think that I have cut this- this date short because of work. They have been, uh, encouraging…”
“Bryce knows?” Molly asks, and Caleb takes a sip of his tea and nods.

“Oh, yeah. Bryce knows everything. It is their job.”

“I thought they did security for the building?”

Caleb shrugs a little. “With academics that is very nearly the same thing,” he says, and Molly gives a short huff of laughter and smiles wider. “Bryce has realised that the best way to keep the building safe is to prevent the people inside it from doing anything ridiculous, and to do that they have to know what we are getting up to. Bryce knows more about what goes on inside that building than I ever will.”

Molly leans forwards, pushing his plate to one side so that he can rest an elbow on the table and prop his head up on his hand. “Really?” he asks, and Caleb nods. “Have they ever told you anything interesting?”

Caleb smiles faintly, secretively. “… Maybe.”

Molly’s eyes go wide, and beneath the table Caleb is sure that he can feel Molly’s tail starting to twist around his ankle. “Caleb.”

“Hm?” Caleb hums, and he raises his mug to finish off the dregs of his tea in an attempt to hide his smile.

Molly’s tail-tip gently swats Caleb’s calf. “Tell me. Please.”

“Tell you what?” Caleb asks innocently. “You haven’t told me what you would like to know yet.”

Molly groans. It’s an unexpectedly lovely sound; Caleb feels himself shiver a little beneath his cardigan. “You’re a tease.”

_Gods, if only._ “You’re the one who has not been asking me any questions, Mollymauk.”

Molly groans again. “Caleb, darling, will you please tell me all the wonderfully juicy gossip about your fellow professors, who I do not know, so that I can tease Jester with it? Please?”

_Darling._ That would be very nice to hear again, Caleb thinks, and he finally relents to Molly’s pesterig.

“I will tell you some things,” he says, ignoring the slight flush he can feel on his cheeks. Molly immediately sits up straighter, his eyes wide and almost sparkling in the sunlight. “If,” he adds, “You promise that they will not leave this room. This is confidential, ja?”

“I promise,” Molly says immediately. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“That seems a little excessive.”

“Cross my heart and swear to lord this glorious and private information over Jester for as long as I live.”

Caleb smiles. “That seems more reasonable,” he says, and jumps into a retelling of how Bryce found two masters students and three PhD students attempting to perfect a dry spaghetti and marshmallow duplicate of the building at 2am after a particularly out-of-hand celebration.

From there, time passes quickly. It’s a shock to Caleb, who’s normally so good at knowing what time it is, to glance down at his watch what feels like a few minutes later and discover just how much
time has really passed.

“Oh,” he says, and Molly leans in a bit, peering across the table so that he can see the time on Caleb’s watch; over a solid hour past when Caleb normally finishes his lunch.

“Oh,” he agrees quietly, and Caleb sighs.

“I am sorry,” he says, reaching up to rub and hand over his face, feeling it catch on his stubble. “I am- I am normally better with my timing than this… I should have given you some notice…”

“Hey,” Molly says, “It’s alright. I know you’re busy.”

Caleb swallows. “I’m sorry,” he says again, quieter.

“Did you have fun?”

Caleb looks up at Molly and frowns. Of course I did. “I- ja, I did, I had a lot of fun.”

“Well, I had fun too, but now we’ve run out of time. Nothing to apologise for about that; it happens to everyone.”

“But I should have-“

“Caleb,” Molly interrupts, and Caleb falls silent. “It’s alright,” Molly says again. He shifts a little, reaching down to pick up his bag from where he placed it by the table, and nods towards the door. “Do you need to go back to your office?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent,” Molly says, and Caleb feels his frown deepen at the light-hearted cheer in Molly’s voice. “I need to go back to the yard for a little bit longer – we could maybe walk back together? If you’d be alright with that.”

“Of course I would be alright with that.”

Molly smiles. “Great,” he says, and he stands from the table, swinging his bag onto his shoulder. “Come on, Professor. Let’s get you back to your stuffy office.”

“It is not stuffy,” Caleb mutters under his breath as he stands, but he’s trying not to smile as he speaks. Somehow, despite the potential for awkwardness that Caleb had felt hanging in the air mere moments ago, the situation already feels easy again. “It is a perfectly pleasant office, Mollymauk.”

“Mm, I’m sure it is. It looked stuffy when I saw it through the window, though.”

“It looks better from the inside.”

“Really?” Molly asks, pushing open the door of Pumat’s shop and making the bell jingle again.

“Ja,” Caleb replies, “I will show you some time.”

Molly raises an eyebrow. “Is that a promise?”

“Perhaps,” Caleb replies, still trying not to smile too much, and the rest of the walk back to the yard is easy. Molly seems to get quieter as they approach it, seeming to be mulling over something, but Caleb does not push it; he enjoyed their lunch, far more than he thought he would, and he does not want to push Molly to speak only to discover that Molly had been thinking about something…
unpleasant.

He does not want to discover that his lack of social understanding has betrayed him again, and learn that Molly had been lying earlier.

This is already far, far more than he deserves, and he knows it. But for now, in this moment, he wants to hold onto it for as long as he can.

“Caleb?” Molly asks when they reach the gate back into the yard, and Caleb looks over at him. Molly looks nervous almost, fidgeting with the strap of his bag, and Caleb frowns. From everything he knows, from everything he has seen from Molly, he would not have expected him to be nervous about anything.

“Yes?”

“Can I-“ Molly starts and then immediately cuts himself off, taking a breath and looking past Caleb’s ear. “Could I walk you to the door?” he asks, his voice soft and a little uncertain, and Caleb blinks.

Inside his chest, behind the protective cage of his ribs, he feels something grow a little warmer.

“Oh,” he says. “Oh, I- ja. I would- that would be very nice.”

“Good,” Molly says quietly, and the word is more of a relieved sigh. He looks over at Caleb, meeting his eyes with a small smile, and Caleb cannot stop himself from smiling back. “Come on,” Moly adds, already starting to sound more like his normal, confident self, and the two of them continue their walk.

They don’t say much on the short walk between the yard and the door to Caleb’s department, but Caleb finds that he doesn’t mind. He keeps catching himself glancing over at Molly, his eyes drawn to the glitter on his cheeks or the tattoos sprawling across his shoulders and down his arms, and on more than one occasion, he glances over to find that Molly is already looking at him, his red eyes unexpectedly soft. They reach the front of Caleb’s department much sooner than he would have liked, and for a moment he thinks he sees a flash of unhappiness cross Molly’s face before it vanishes again.

“Well, here we are,” Molly says.

“Here we are,” Caleb echoes. He doesn’t want to go inside, he finds. He doesn’t want to leave Molly. He knows that he has to. “Goodbye, Mollymauk.”

“Goodbye, Caleb,” Molly replies, giving him a soft smile. “See you tomorrow?”

“Yes. I will- I will see you tomorrow.”

Molly smiles wider. “Have a good day,” he says, and Caleb can’t stop himself from smiling back.

“You too,” he replies, and turns to head inside before he ends up standing outside trading farewells with Molly for even longer. He walks up to the front of his building, climbing the few small steps to the door, and when he glances back it’s to see Molly still watching him, his tail swishing gently back and forth above the pavement. Molly catches his eye and grins.

“Go on,” he says with a slight laugh, and waves a hand towards the door, “Go on, go do your important and impressive Professor-Doctor duties.”

Caleb ducks his head in an attempt to hide his smile, opens the door, and steps inside.
The entrance atrium looks exactly the same as it did when Caleb left. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to him, seeing how it hasn’t changed in the last three years at least, but it still feels like it should have. The world feels lighter, somehow, in the wake of his date with Molly (and Caleb feels himself smile like a fool when he thinks that - when he remembers that it was a date), and it’s almost strange to find that nothing in his life has actually changed as a result of the last few hours.

He’s still smiling a little when he walks past Bryce in the porter’s booth, only noticing their presence when the quiet ‘Widogast’ rings out across the old, tiled floor.

Caleb turns to look at them, and Bryce doesn’t even look up from the book that they’re reading.

“Did you have a good lunch?” Bryce asks him, all detached innocence, and they turn a page with a soft shush-ing of paper on paper.

Caleb grins.

“Yes,” he says simply. “Yes, I did.”

Chapter End Notes

This fic now comes with incredible fanart! Endless thanks to zemmniannonights and kawaii-rookie for the gorgeous art <3 (The pieces have also been added to the relevant chapters!)

In addition to this, extra thanks today go to the wonderful CodeSculptor, leaver of countless lovely comments and now comma, hyphen, and general punctuation-fixer for this chapter. Thank you x
“Jester wants to have another girls night,” is the first thing that Nott says when Caleb gets home that day. She’s sitting upside down on the couch, her feet resting on the backrest and her head dangling off the cushions, and her yellow eyes seem to glow almost ominously in the dim light of the apartment.

If he weren’t completely accustomed to it, Caleb feels it could be a rather unsettling sight. As it is, though, he’s seen Nott in far, far weirder positions. The time that he entered the flat to find her perched on top of the fridge with half a burger in her mouth was definitely a memorable one.

Caleb leans against the wall and starts tugging his shoes off. “Oh?” he asks, and he glances across the room in time to see Nott nodding.

“Yeah. She said it was nice to see us at the carnival party but we need to have a proper catch up.”

“Am I invited to this girl’s night?” Caleb stands upright, crossing to the couch. Nott nods again, the motion making her dangling, braided hair swish a little against the floor.

“Of course you are. You always are. It’s going to be a girl’s night featuring Caleb, just like it always is.”

“I still do not understand why you need me there.”

“Because you’re the best at braiding hair, and Jester says it’s the only time she ever sees you outside the library.”

“She saw me at the carnival just a few days ago,” Caleb replies, dropping his satchel on the coffee table and sinking down into the ancient couch cushions. “She doesn’t always see me at the library.”

Nott lifts her head up to look at Caleb, quirking an eyebrow. “As I just said,” she says, “Jester said that it was nice to see us at the carnival but that we need a proper catch up. All three of us. Possibly with some other friends. A catch up with snacks and movies and gossip, somewhere that isn’t so loud that you can’t hear or talk properly and end up hiding or leaving. And somewhere that isn’t a library, where all you do is struggle to pick up books until Jester takes pity on you and offers to help.”

“…That doesn’t happen that often.”

“Jester told me that happened two weeks ago.”

Caleb glowers at the floor. Nott’s right, and he knows it, but that doesn’t make it any less annoying. It’s hardly his fault that linguistics and etymology books have a tendency to be massive tomes that Caleb can barely lift. And besides, it’s not like Jester’s ever complained about it; if anything, she seems to enjoy it, making a big show of flexing and stretching and smiling charmingly every time Caleb gives up and texts her in desperation to ask if she’s on campus to help him.

“So,” Nott continues, unaware of Caleb’s internal justification of asking Jester and her muscles for help. “Are you going to come to girl’s night?”

Caleb sighs. “Ja,” he says, trying to give the impression that it will be some great sacrifice on his behalf, even though he knows that he’ll enjoy it. Nott, of course, sees right through his ploy. “I
suppose I must. Will anyone else be there?"

“…Let me check.” Nott shuffles around on the couch cushion, quickly extracting her phone from one of the many pockets on her person. She clicks it awake, quickly tapping and scrolling her way through the screens. After spending a few moments humming and muttering to herself as she flicks through messages, she nods. “Yeah!” she says, “It’s going to be you and me and Jester! And maybe Beau and Yasha. Jester says that they might be there too.”

Caleb nods. He knows Beau; he’s met her a few times before at Jester’s flat, bumping into her in the hallway or seeing her leaning against the doorway to the living room with enough interest on her face to imply that she was thoroughly enjoying the quiet gossiping between Nott and Jester. Caleb can’t recall Beau ever partaking in girl’s night before, but it would not surprise him if Jester had simply convinced her to join them. Jester, as he knows from experience, can be very persuasive.

He’s not so clear on why Yasha would be joining them, though.

“Is this the same Yasha who met us at the carnival?” Caleb asks, looking over at Nott, who nods absently.

“Yeah, that’s her. I saw her the other day when I was at the carnival again,” Nott replies, scrolling through her messages for a little bit longer before putting her phone away. “She’s really nice. Very cool. I can see why Beau likes her.”

Caleb frowns. “You were at the carnival again?”

“Yeah,” Nott answers, and there’s a few beats of silence before she seems to spot the confusion in Caleb’s eyes. “Oh!” she adds, immediately sitting up as much as she can. Thanks to her position on the couch, she ends up more or less hovering above the floor, her lower back on the couch itself and the rest of her body sticking horizontally out into space. It’s rather impressive. Caleb imagines it must be hell on the abs.

“Oh?” he asks.

“I forgot to mention!”

“Forgot to mention what?”

Nott shimmies a little, still horizontal, and then sits up properly, tucking her legs underneath her body so that she’s kneeling on the couch. “I got offered a job! At the carnival!”

“Oh!” Caleb replies. “Nott! That’s fantastic!”

“Yeah!”

“Is it a temporary job or…?”

Nott shimmies excitedly again. It is, Caleb assumes, probably much easier to shimmy excitedly when you’re not hanging out into space supported only by your abs. “It’s permanent!”

Caleb can’t stop himself from smiling, and Nott grins right back at him. It’s a somewhat crooked, wonky grin, full of an almost disconcertingly large number of needle-sharp teeth, but Caleb likes it. It’s Nott’s grin. And if Nott’s grinning, then she’s either very happy or someone else is about to be very, very upset.

Caleb also likes Nott’s grin because it has, on more than one occasion, been enough to scare away
people who hadn’t noticed Caleb’s ‘overwhelmed by people’ face and had continued to try to talk to
him. Caleb really likes Nott’s grin then.

“That is wonderful, but how did you get the job?” Caleb asks curiously, and Nott grins wider.

“Did you meet Gustav at the carnival?” she asks, and after a moment of flicking through his
memories of the last week, Caleb shakes his head. “Well, Gustav sort of runs and owns the whole
show. Jester introduced me to him when she was trying to find Fjord. She must have told him about
what I do, because we talked for a bit, and then he mentioned that he had been looking for another
security person to hire! And then he offered me the job! And then I put the button that I stole from
him back in his pocket when he wasn’t looking!”

“Nott…”

“In my defence, it was a really shiny button, and there was free alcohol at the party, and I was left
completely unsupervised.”

“You are an adult–“

“Free alcohol,” Nott says, ticking the items off her fingers as she speaks. “Unsupervised. Shiny
button.”

Caleb sighs. She did put it back, so he supposes there’s not much he can really complain about. “As
long as he did not notice.”

“He didn’t! Promise. No one saw me. I can be very sneaky.”

“I know you can. You have nearly given me a heart attack on more than one occasion.”

“And I am very sorry every time it happens.”

Caleb smiles and leans sideways to wrap an arm around Nott’s shoulders and pull her in for a quick
hug. “I know you are, Schatz. It’s alright.”

“Hm. If you say so,” Nott replies. She leans into the hug, and the two of them sit like that for a little
while until Nott leans away, shuffling around on the couch to face Caleb. “So,” she says, “That was
my day! How was yours? Did you have a good day? You seem happy.”

Caleb smiles. “I had a good day,” he confirms quietly, “I- ja, it was very good.”

“Did your research go well? Did you have any meetings?”

“Work was… fine. It was quite normal.”

“Did anything special happen today?”

Caleb looks over at Nott with a frown. Nott smiles innocently back at him. Or, at the very least, she
attempts to. With teeth like hers, it doesn’t quite work. “…What did Bryce tell you?”

“Nothing!” Nott says immediately, “They just texted me to say that I should be proud of you! That’s
all! We both respect your privacy, Caleb.”

“Oh.”

“But if you want to share with the class what special event happened today, then I’m not going to
complain.”
“…There is no class here.”

Nott sighs quietly and gives Caleb a small, fond smile. “I meant share with me, Caleb,” she says, and Caleb feels his stomach twist slightly. He looks down at the carpet between his socked feet and pauses. “You don’t have to tell me,” Nott continues, clearly noticing Caleb’s hesitation, “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

“…I want to tell you this,” Caleb says quietly, still not looking up, and he feels Nott’s hand squeeze his shoulder reassuringly. He knows that Nott does not mind his hesitation. He knows that she will not judge Caleb for what he did earlier that day. He knows that, if anything, she will only encourage him and support him and possibly threaten Molly with the removal of his kneecaps if he even considers hurting Caleb. Because, despite the significant age difference between the two of them, Caleb is nevertheless entirely aware that Nott sees herself as the parent in their friendship.

Caleb is aware of all of that.

He is afraid all the same.

“I want to tell you,” he says again, even quieter, “But I am- this is- I am not ready to share this with anyone else. Not yet.” Not for a while, Caleb feels. This thing he has with Molly is… new. Very new. It’s new, and it’s precious, and it’s his. It’s something that belongs to Caleb and only Caleb, and earlier today it seemed so good that it almost didn’t feel real, and Caleb…

Caleb, deep down, is afraid that if he tells someone about it then the illusion will shatter, and it will turn out that he was imagining things all along.

He’s imagined things before. He knows just how real delusions can appear to be.

“I am not ready to share this with anyone else,” he repeats, and Nott nods.

“That’s okay,” she says softly. “You don’t have to tell me, Caleb. I understand.”

“I want to.”

“Then you can take your time. That’s okay, too. There’s no rush.”

Caleb smiles. He looks up, moving his hand to cover Nott’s and giving it a slight squeeze. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Silence gathers about them again, close and soft and comforting. Caleb breathes quietly, feeling Nott’s small hand beneath his own. She will not judge him. She will not mind. She will only be happy.

“I-“ he starts, before immediately cutting himself off and trying again. “I have- You know how I- I have been wanting to do something, recently. For, ah, for a while, now.”

“Is this the thing you were talking about yesterday?” Nott prompts quietly and Caleb nods.

“Ja,” he says. “Ja, it is.”

“Did you do it?”

“I did.”
“Was it good?”

“It was. It was very good.”

Nott doesn’t say anything else. She knows how this goes, knows that Caleb feels safest and most comfortable when there is silence to act as a safety net, encouraging the words out of him with no pressure or hurry.

Caleb knows that she knows this, and he’s thankful for it. “I had a date,” he says quietly, when the silence has lasted long enough to coax the words out of him. He smiles a little, the corner of his lips twitching upwards, and repeats the words again. “I had a date.”

He thinks he hears Nott gasp beside him. When he glances over, it’s to see her wide, yellow eyes shining at him in the light of the lamp. “Caleb!” she says, sounding delighted and proud all at once, “That’s fantastic! I’m so proud of you!”

*I’m proud of me too*, Caleb thinks, but does not say.

“Who was it with?” Nott continues. “Can I know? You don’t have to tell me; it’s completely your decision, I will absolutely respect your wish for privacy, if that’s what you want, but I am extremely curious.”

Caleb can’t help himself – he smiles a little at Nott’s attempted self-restraint, feeling his mind shift back into its normal thought patterns. This he knows. This is their normal, easy conversation. “No,” he says, “No, no, I will tell you. It was with-“

It is at that point that Caleb’s phone, abandoned on the coffee table, buzzes once. The sound of it almost seems to echo in the small apartment, and Caleb is sure that he and Nott turn to look at it almost in unison.

There’s a beat of silence.

And then, quite abruptly, Caleb’s phone erupts into a rapid sequence of buzzes.

Caleb practically lunges for it. He can already feel his heart hammering away in his chest but, unlike yesterday, this time he cannot tell if it’s from fear or excitement. Logically, he knows it could very well just be Jester texting him. Or Bryce. Or one of his co-workers or colleagues, trying to get his thoughts or opinions on a subject that is, if not in his field of expertise, at least in his meadow of interest, but he doubts it.

His hand closes around the smooth plastic of his phone, and it doesn’t take more than a glance at the screen for Caleb to confirm his suspicions.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] hi Caleb
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I know it was probably very obvious but I wanted to let you know that I had a lot of fun at lunch
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I was wondering if you’d maybe like to do something like this again?
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] it doesn’t have to be lunch, it could be anything
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] whatever you’d like

Caleb’s not going to lie; it’s more than a little reassuring to read those words. He knows that he had fun, despite his nerves, and it had certainly seemed that Molly enjoyed it too. But Caleb knows that, when it comes to reading body language and social situations, his skills are poor to non-existent.
And he really, *really* doesn’t want to presume anything about this.

**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** This would be as a date, ja?

**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** if you’d like!  
**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** no pressure if you don’t  
**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** but I would really like to go on another date with you, Caleb.

Caleb takes a breath, leans back against the couch, and tries not to let the ridiculous smile that he can feel approaching envelop his whole face.

**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** I would like to go on another date with you too, Mollymauk.

**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** 🐱🐱🐱 !!

“What are those boxes?” Nott asks from Caleb’s shoulder.

“He is trying to send me emoji, but my phone cannot receive them,” Caleb replies absently.

“I need to get you a better phone,” he hears Nott mutter, but before he can think to reply, his phone buzzes again.

**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** oops  
**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** -beaming face with smiling eyes tiefling emoji- -smiling face tiefling emoji- -cat emoji-

**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** Cat emoji?

**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** it’s you  
**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** I know you like cats but you don’t have a cat so I thought I could send you cat emojis instead for happy things

That’s… well.

It’s fucking adorable.

Caleb can’t fight his ridiculous smile any longer. It spreads across his face, and he feels that if Nott weren’t in the room then he would almost be hugging his phone to his chest in delight, because Molly is gorgeous and sweet, and he remembers that Caleb can’t receive emoji and that Caleb really loves cats and desperately wants one, and he *cares*.

Caleb doesn’t deserve that care, but he’s going to hold onto it for as long as he possibly can.

He looks down at his phone, bites his knuckle for a moment to try and get his grin down to a more reasonable level, and then texts back in a flurry of thumbs.

**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** That is very sweet of you, Mollymauk.

He hits *send* before he can let himself think otherwise, and his phone buzzes almost immediately.

**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** ^.^  
**[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** I do my best, darling

Caleb doesn’t know how to respond to that. After a moment’s consideration, he replies with
something that he thinks Molly will appreciate.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :)

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :)  
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] so, Caleb, we have another date!  
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] is there anything that you want to do? I’m open to any and all suggestions

“Who’s Mollymauk Tealeaf?” Nott asks suddenly, leaning over Caleb’s shoulder, and Caleb jumps, so caught up in their text conversation that he’d barely noticed Nott reading from over his shoulder. She reaches out, jabbing a clawed finger at the top of the tiny screen of Caleb’s phone, where Molly’s name shows in miniscule letters. “I don’t recognise that name. It sounds fake.”

Caleb frowns, confused. “You met him at the carnival. He offered to tell you that I was leaving to go home so that I would not have to find you in the crowd.” He pauses, struck by a sudden thought. “…Did he not tell you?”

Nott shakes her head. “I don’t know who this ‘Mollymauk’ is,” she says, putting air quotes around his name, “But Lucien found me and Jester to tell us that you were leaving.”

*Oh.* Well. That explains it.

Caleb smiles. “Nott,” he says, “You know how Jester has a stage-name, *ja*?”

“I do.”

“Did you ever consider that ‘Lucien’ might also be a stage-name?”

Nott’s eyes grow wide. “…Oh.”

“His name is Mollymauk.”

“That still sounds like a fake name.”

Caleb shrugs. “I like it. It suits him.”

“Hmm,” Nott hums distrustingly and looks back at the phone. “And you have a date with this Mollymauk?”

“…Yes.” He’s smiling like an idiot. He knows that he’s smiling like an idiot, and he is powerless to stop it.

“Do you know what you want to do for it?” Nott asks. Caleb shakes his head.

“Not really,” he admits, “I have- You know I do not have much experience with this.”

“Hmm, that’s true… Well, you could get a drink together? Or lunch? That’s a standard date activity.”

“…That is what we did today.”

Nott grins and gently elbows Caleb in the side. “Nice!” she chirps. “But I guess you might want to change it up for the next date.”

*Ja,* my thoughts exactly. I do not wish to be seen as:-“ He pauses, wrinkling his nose, and then continues. “I do not wish to be seen as *boring.* I know that I am, but I would- I would like to
maintain the illusion of being an interesting individual. At least for a while.”

“Caleb,” Nott says softly, and Caleb looks down to see her frowning up at him. “You’re not boring. You’re just bookish and quiet. They’re different things.”

“They’re very similar. And it is possible to be both.”

“Caleb,” Nott says again, more sternly. “You are not boring. You’re a very smart and very interesting man, and this ‘Molly’ should consider himself lucky that he got to go on one date with you, let alone two. And if you really can’t think of anything, then I will suggest some date activities for you.”

Caleb’s not sure how suitable Nott’s date activity suggestions would be, but he doesn’t say that out loud. He never would, to begin with, and he especially can’t now. Not after what Nott just said. He smiles at her, soft and a little uncertain, and leans over to press a kiss to her forehead.

“Thank you, Schatz,” he says quietly, and when he leans back, it’s to see Nott smiling back at him.

“Of course,” she says, and then claps her hands together. “So. Date ideas!”

“Ja. Please. I have none, so... please.”

“Say no more,” Nott replies. Caleb clicks his phone awake, quickly navigating back to the conversation with Molly and waiting with his thumbs poised over the keys. “Immediately, off the top of my head: wall climbing, bouldering, or paintball.”

“...Wall climbing and paintball?”

“You wanted suggestions! I haven’t had time to think yet.”

“I don’t think I could climb any walls. I need Jester to carry books for me.”

“Hmm, good point. There’s no climbing in paintball, though.”

Caleb pulls a slight face. “Nott, I have no muscle or strength to speak of. You know this.” He pauses, and then adds, “However, Mollymauk might approve of them.”

Nott nods. “Yeah! He might! Text him, and I’ll sit here and think of some more ideas for you. I’ll see what Google has to say.”

“Good idea,” Caleb says, already growing distracted as his thumbs fly across the numberpad.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] My flatmate is suggesting paintball or bouldering, but I do not think I am physically capable enough for either.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] She is currently trying to come up with more ideas.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Please do let me know any ideas that you have. I am struggling to think of any myself.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] please tell your flatmate I say hello and that while I agree that paintball is fantastic fun it maybe isn’t a great date activity.

“Molly says hello,” Caleb says to Nott absently. “And he says that paintball is fun but not a good date activity.”

“Tell him that I disagree,” Nott hisses, and Caleb dutifully types out her message.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Nott wishes for me to tell you that she disagrees.

“Paintball is a brilliant date activity.”

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] She believes that paintball is a fantastic date activity.

“Although this is for you… can you play paintball in a library? Does that exist?”

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] She suggests paintball in a libr (unsent)

Caleb stops halfway through typing the message, turning aghast to Nott. “Nott,” he says. “I love you, and you are my dearest friend, and you know this. But please never suggest playing paintball in a library ever again to me.”

“What if we whisper while playing it?” Nott says, and Caleb physically winces. “Librarians don’t like loud talking, right?”

“Nott,” Caleb says again, sounding pained, “Bitte, Schatz… nein.”

“What?” Nott asks, grinning mischievously, “I’m just saying.”

Caleb groans, but before he can say any more his phone buzzes again.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] she and I can discuss paintball’s suitability as a date activity later

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I have two suggestions if you’d like to hear them

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Please.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] there’s a pottery place that does evening ‘paint your own item’ classes and you get the keep whatever you make!

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] and there’s also a movie theatre that’s reshowing Titanic. we could watch that and maybe go for a walk afterwards if you’d like

They are, Caleb will admit, both fantastic ideas. He likes making things with his hands. But despite that, something about the idea of making something where Molly can see, where Molly can watch every mistake and fuck-up that Caleb makes on something permanent, makes him nervous. He knows, logically, that Molly most likely won’t care at all. Molly has been nothing but sweet and understanding and nice to Caleb, helping him however he can and never once judging him. But Caleb knows his brain. In a battle between anxiety and logic, the anxiety almost always wins.

But the movie… Caleb likes the sound of that. After all, Nott keeps telling him to try new things, and he’s never seen Titanic.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Seeing a film sounds very good to me.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ve never seen Titanic.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] you’ve never seen Titanic?!?!

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I have not.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Is it a good film?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] it’s critically acclaimed so I guess you could say that
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] but really it’s an excellent movie :) I think you’d like it
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] it seems like your kind of thing
Caleb’s not sure why, but something about that one brief text makes him smile.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Well, I suppose we will see.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] When is it being shown?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] let me check
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] this friday, saturday, sunday, and next weekend

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I believe I can make any of those days except for Friday.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I can’t do saturday

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Is Sunday okay? What time is it being shown?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I can do sunday -smiling face tiefling emoji- i think it starts at 6:30 so we could meet at 6?

Caleb smiles down at his phone. Just the thought of seeing Molly again, let alone for another date, is enough to make his heart start beating a little faster in excitement and anticipation.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I would like that.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] so would I :) 
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ll see you on sunday, Caleb. I’ll text you the address of the theatre

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Thank you, Mollymauk. I will see you then. :)

“I have a date,” Caleb whispers, looking down at the phone in his hands, and Nott elbows him gently.

“You have a date,” she agrees delightedly. “Not with mystery tiefling, but you were clearly repressing your secret attraction to him, so maybe that’s for the best.”

…What?

“Was?”

“Mystery tiefling!” Nott replies, with a grin and a sparkle to her eyes that implies she already knows the truth of the situation. “You know, the one who’s been distracting you for the last few months.”

“Oh.” Caleb coughs. “They, ah, they might… Mollymauk and mystery tiefling… they may- they might be the same person…” He glances up over at Nott, doing his best not to look guilty, and Nott grins wider.

“I knew it,” she says. “I knew it, I absolutely knew it, I knew that you weren’t saying everything about ‘Lucien,’ and I knew that it was suspicious that you already knew how to contact him! I knew it!”

“Oh,” Caleb says again. He drums his fingers against his phone, looking anywhere but at Nott, and after a short while, he feels her small hand settle lightly on his arm.

“Hey,” she says, “Don’t worry about it. I can see you freaking yourself out.”

“I am not freaking myself out.”
“I’m sure you’re not,” Nott replies with a smile, “And that’s why I’m going to go sit on the other end of the couch for a bit so that you can look over your texts from Molly-Lucien-mystery-tiefling and do that happy wiggle thing that you do sometimes.”

“…I’m sorry. For not telling you.”

“Don’t be,” Nott says softly, and she squeezes Caleb’s arm beneath her hand. “You have nothing to apologise for. I know you like your privacy, and I will respect that.” She pats him on the arm once again. “Now, cheer up! Read your disgustingly cute texts and think about your date! Unless that will make you nervous, in which case don’t do that.”

Caleb smiles at her. “I will do that,” he says, and Nott grins and pats him on the arm again before shuffling over the other side of the couch. Caleb taps his phone against his leg a few times and then wakes it up again, looking down at Molly’s last few messages as per Nott’s instructions. He scrolls up a little, seeing the smiley face, and immediately smiles to himself in response. It’s sweet. It’s sweet that Molly sends him smiley faces and emoji and explains the emoji when he knows that Caleb cannot receive them. And it’s sweet that he thinks to send Caleb cats.

It’s adorable, and it’s heart-warming, and in a very unexpected way, it rather makes Caleb want to kiss him.

It also makes him want to message him to ask him something else.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Mollymauk?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] yes darling?

Caleb does his best to ignore how one single word makes his entire body feel warmer.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I have a question.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] go for it

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] There are plain-text versions of some emoji, correct?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] there are! There’s ☺ and :) and ♡ and ;) and lots of others

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] (-smiling face tiefling emoji- -winking face tiefling emoji-)

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] This is a very long shot, and please do not hesitate to correct me if I am wrong, but is there a commonly-used, plain-text equivalent to the cat emoji?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I would like to use it if there is.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Caleb.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] it is my great honour to tell you that there is

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] it is :3

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] there’s also >:3 and :3c

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :3c ? What does the ‘c’ represent?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I think it’s meant to be a paw

Oh. Well. That’s just adorable. Caleb tilts his head, looking at the emoticon from the correct orientation. It does look a bit like a cat, he supposes. He likes the little paw. It reminds him of his old family cat.
Oh! I see!

Thank you, Mollymauk.

I thought I could send you cat emojis instead for happy things, says a voice in Caleb’s head that sounds just like Molly, and Caleb smiles down at his phone. Gods above. He’s so, so, unspeakably fucked.

And somehow, he finds that he absolutely does not care.

“Are you flirting with him?” Nott asks suddenly from the other end of the couch, and Caleb freezes.

“…No?”

“That doesn’t sound like a ‘no’.”

“I said ‘no’. How else can a ‘no’ sound like a ‘no’?”

“You let me be the judge of what does or doesn’t sound like a ‘no’, Nott says, sitting up and shuffling over to Caleb to peer at his phone once more. Caleb doesn’t even try to hide the screen from her – there’s nothing incriminating on it, and he doesn’t feel any need to hide these messages from her. They are, after all, entirely innocent.

“Hmm,” Nott says, “Just as I thought. You were flirting with him.”

“I was texting with him.”

“That was flirting!” Nott insists. “I’ve seen flirting, Caleb – admittedly I have never seen you flirting, but still – and it looks like that!”

“That is just Molly being Molly,” Caleb replies weakly. “He is- he is just like this. You met him.”

“There’s a difference between flirting with someone to charm them and get something from them and flirting because you like them, Caleb.”

That’s just confusing. “Surely those are the same thing.”

Nott shakes her head so hard her ears flap a little, bouncing against the sides of her head. “They’re not,” she says, “They are very different things, Caleb. And this,” she continues, gesturing at the phone still lying innocently in Caleb’s hand, “This is the latter. And besides, you just planned a date with him. You clearly like him.”

That’s not entirely incorrect.
“…I do,” Caleb admits and knows that his smile and blush say all that needs to be said.

“I’m glad,” Nott says, “You deserve this, Caleb. You deserve to be happy.”

Caleb feels his smile grow a little wry. Nott punches him gently on the arm.

“I mean it!” she adds. “Enjoy this, Caleb. Have fun. And if he hurts you, let me know, and I’ll hunt him down and remove his kneecaps.”

That’s the Nott that Caleb knows and loves. “Thank you, Nott.”

“You’re welcome. Now, I’m going to make dinner,” Nott says, sliding off the couch. “Text Jester. Ask her for fashion advice. If you’re going to see a movie, then we need to make sure that you look absolutely dashing for it. Steal Molly’s heart.”

Caleb smiles. “I’ll do that,” he says quietly. Nott grins back at him before wandering into the kitchen area. Over the sound of clanking pots and pans, Caleb opens a different conversation on his phone.

[To: Jester] Jester, I need your help with something.

[From: Jester] of course!!!! what do you need help with?

[To: Jester] I need fashion advice.

[From: Jester] oooooooooh what for?? is this for another one of your nerd meetups?

[To: Jester] They are not ‘nerd meet-ups;’ they are academic conferences where I am occasionally invited as a speaker or panellist.

[From: Jester] i dont see you disagreeing with the nerdy

[From: Jester] :) :) :)

[To: Jester] Hm. If you will be like this, then I shall ask Nott for advice instead.

[From: Jester] nononononono theyre not nerdy theyre very cool and super sexy conferences and youre very smart and very cool for going to them

[From: Jester] now please tell me what you need fashion advice for

Caleb smiles, writes out a text, sends it, and then sends a second text. He feels Molly would be proud.

His phone buzzes twice almost immediately.

[To: Jester] I have a date.

[To: Jester] :3

[From: Jester] !!!!! OMG CALEB WHJO WITH DO I KNOW THEM WHAT ARE YOU DOING WHERE ARE YOU GOING TELL ME EVERYTHING PLEASEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

[From: Jester] caleb what is that

[To: Jester] It is a cat! :3

[To: Jester] Here he is with his paw under his chin. :3c
[From: Jester] i am going to find whoever taught you this

[To: Jester] >:3
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The collar of Caleb’s shirt feels too tight around his throat. It sits against his neck like a second skin, exerting a gentle pressure against the line of his trachea, and every time he reaches up to tug the fabric away it moves back into place the moment he lets go.

He tries it again anyway. He feels like he can’t breathe when something presses against his throat, no matter how light the pressure is. It makes him feel anxious and twitchy and like he might bolt at any second. He doesn’t need any of those feelings right now. Not now, when he’s only a block or two away from where he and Molly agreed to meet.

Caleb reaches up and fiddles with his collar again, and eventually undoes the top button. He doesn’t need or want the added discomfort from having his collar too tight. He almost wishes that he was in his worn-soft work shirts or one of his battered t-shirts, but Jester had insisted that he wear his ‘one nice shirt’ to this date. And it is a nice shirt, he’ll admit that; it’s white with a sprawling dark blue line design that somehow looks part way between paisley and feathers in its pattern, and combined with the dark jeans and brown leather boots that Jester dug out from the back of his closet it is, Caleb will agree, quite a nice outfit. Admittedly most of the shirt is hidden beneath the cardigan and coat that Caleb added over the top of it, but it’s spring and he feels that the layers are justified. He’s warm like this. He’s comfortable.

He’s hidden.

Caleb shifts his hand, brushes his fingers over the now-undone button, and drops it to his side. He’s still not sure about having the top button undone. He knows that Jester suggested that he leave it undone but he really hadn’t wanted to. He feels that even with just the top button undone Molly will be able to see the soft fuzz that coats his chest and the burn scars that curl around Caleb’s shoulders. Logically, Caleb knows that Molly can’t see them. He knows that they are, as they always are, safely hidden away beneath his shirt and his cardigan and his coat, completely out of sight and entirely protected from the faintly chilly spring evening, but he worries all the same. The scars are… they’re not pretty. They’re not pretty the way that scars in movies are sometimes pretty, all silvery and soft and almost beautiful. Caleb’s scars aren’t like that. Caleb’s scars aren’t pretty at all. Caleb’s scars are ugly and twisted and angry and Caleb hates them more than he hates anything else.

He reaches up, fidgets with the top button of his shirt again, shuts his eyes, and drops his hand.

*I am going on this date*, he tells himself, and starts walking again. *I am going on this date, and I will be early, and I will wait for Mollymauk and I will not flee and Nott will be proud of me and I will enjoy this.*

*I will enjoy this.*

Caleb thinks about Molly, and he thinks about their last date, and he keeps on walking. He can feel his heart thrumming nervously in his chest, wishes that he had some small item in his pocket that he could fiddle and fidget with, but then he rounds the corner, sees Molly leaning back against the wall next to the theatre with his phone in his hand, and suddenly the buttons and Caleb’s scars and everything just… stops mattering.
Molly got here before me, he thinks absently. Molly looks up and meets Caleb gaze and Caleb immediately feels himself starting to smile in response.

Molly grins. “Caleb!” he calls out, tucking his phone into the pocket of his loose, flowing pants. “You’re early!”

“So are you,” Caleb replies unthinkingly and he kicks himself into action, walking the short remaining distance between himself and Molly and coming to a stop just in front of him. For a moment he can’t stop his gaze from flickering over Molly, taking in the sight of the man before him. Molly’s as stunning as he always is, resplendent and sparkling and shiny with fine silver chains hanging in loops from his horns, but he also looks—

Well, Caleb can only think to describe it as soft.

He’s dressed in loudly printed harem pants and a black crop-top with a loose, floaty cardigan that looks like it’s got gold and silver thread woven through it draped around his shoulders, and he looks soft. He looks comfortable, like he’s completely in his element and utterly relaxed. His beautiful, twisting tattoos are out on full display, curling down his arms and wrapping around his exposed stomach, and Caleb feels his throat growing dry at the sight of them. Fuck. He wants to get his mouth on them. He wants to see if he can feel the ink beneath his lips, wants to trace the pattern of feathers down below the waistband of Molly’s pants with his tongue and see how far they go. He wants to know if Molly would gasp beneath him, if he’d shudder and tremble when Caleb mouthed over the trail of hair on his belly. He wants to learn the shape of Molly’s hips with his palms and his hands and the taste of his skin with his tongue.

He wants it, and he does not deserve it, and so he pulls his eyes away from Molly’s stomach and goes to look over Molly’s shoulder instead.

He doesn’t quite make it. Molly catches Caleb’s eye as he shifts his gaze, and the little smile that he gives Caleb is all that Caleb needs to meet Molly’s gaze. It’s a knowing smile, one that implies that he knows exactly what Caleb was looking at and why he’s now blushing, but there’s no meanness to
it. There’s no judgement. If anything Molly just looks happy that Caleb was looking at him, and when he speaks his tone of voice only serves to reflect that.

“Hello,” Molly says softly, and Caleb cannot help but smile back. Molly’s red eyes glow orange and amber in the sodium light of the street lamps, lit up like embers, and something in his tone of voice makes Caleb’s heart feel several sizes too large for his chest.

“Hallo” Caleb replies just as quietly.

“Did you find your way alright?”

Caleb nods. “Ja, I did. Your instructions were very clear, thank you for that.”

“I know you don’t have a maps app on your phone,” Molly says with a shrug, and the motion makes the light catch on something shimmering on his cheeks.

Caleb nods towards it. “Is that, ah- is that the highlighter you wore on Thursday?” he asks, and Molly grins delightedly.

“It is!”

“It, ah- it looks- you look very nice,” Caleb stammers out. He can feel himself blushing harder, but it seems he’s not the only one because no sooner do the words leave his lips than Molly’s grin turns into a small, happy smile, and Caleb swears that he can see Molly’s cheeks growing darker.

“Thank you,” Molly says quietly, “You look lovely too, Caleb.”

Caleb blushes harder. “I am- I am not sure about that…”

“I don’t lie about things that matter, Caleb. You look very handsome.”

Caleb thinks he can feel the tips of his ears about to catch fire. He looks away, sinking down into the comforting warmth of his coat, and mutters a string of embarrassed Zemnian under his breath.

Molly smiles at him. “I’m going to assume that was you accepting the compliment, because it’s true,” he says, starting to turn towards the doors to the theatre. “You look very handsome today, Caleb.”

“I- I’m- so do you,” Caleb stammers out, following along in Molly’s wake. Molly holds the door open for him as they walk inside, leading Caleb over to the ticket counter. The two of them lapse into silence as they collect their tickets and the journey to the relevant screen is silent save for when Molly asks Caleb if he wants any snacks before they go in, but it’s nice. It’s a comfortable silence. It feels like the silences that Caleb has with Nott, when they’re both enjoying each other’s company but don’t feel the need to speak. Molly doesn’t really speak again until they enter the screening room itself.

“Do you have any preference of seat?” Molly asks, pausing just around the corner from the stairs. “You don’t have to choose them for this cinema – you can just turn up and pick whatever seats you want.”

“I would- if it is alright, could we sit at the back?” Caleb asks haltingly, and Molly nods.

“Of course we can, Caleb,” he says, leading the way into the still mostly-empty room and up the stairs towards the back of the seating section. “I quite like sitting at the back – you get to see everyone else in the theatre.”
“And they do not get to see you,” Caleb mutters. “I do not feel like I am being watched when I am at the back of the room…”

“I get that,” Molly says quietly. He glances at Caleb and then back at the seats, and when Caleb nods towards a pair of seats away from the stairs Molly starts moving towards them. “I know I attract attention but it can be nice to be out of sight sometimes.” For a moment he pauses, looking almost concerned, and then adds, “I mean, I know I can be very gaudy and eye-catching sometimes, and some people don’t actually like being near that but-“

“No,” Caleb interrupts, “No, I- I like you being all beautiful and sparkly, Mollymauk. If people are looking at you then they are not looking at me and I trust that you will not draw me into the limelight. It is- it is very nice. I like it.” He frees a hand from his pocket, waving it at Molly’s general Molly-ness. “I like this,” he adds and Molly’s smile turns small and soft.

“I’m glad you do,” he says simply. “Not everyone does.”

Caleb frowns. “Then they are blind,” he says, sitting down with a bit more force than necessary to reinforce his point. “The way you dress is exactly right for who you are.”

Molly sits down next to Caleb. “Thank you, Caleb,” he says, his smile audible in his voice, and Caleb smiles back before they lapse into silence. The seats around them slowly fill up, but thankfully few people seem to want to move up to the back row, leaving Caleb and Molly almost entirely undisturbed.

“So,” Caleb says, trying to find something to break the silence after he feels that too much of it has passed. “I have- as you know I have never seen Titanic and I must say that I do not know too much about it.”

Molly grins. “Well,” he says, “It’s this lovely little fantasy film set in a world a lot like ours, but they don’t have magic.”

“None at all?”

“None.”

“But I thought there were tieflings in it? Jester once told me that her mother plays the lead.”

“Oh, there are,” Molly confirms, “And she does. There’s just… no magic.”

Caleb frowns. Even now he can feel his magic stirring beneath his skin, waking just from the discussion of its existence. For all that he despises having it he still cannot imagine his life without the knowledge of magic resting by his side. “That is… that is very odd.”

“It is a bit,” Molly agrees, “But it’s a good film. Very sweet, very sad.”

“Ja, Nott warned me about that.”

“Do you know how it ends?”

Caleb frowns. “I- I think I do…”

“I’ll try not to spoil anything then,” Molly says with a smile, and as he smiles at Caleb the soft background music that had been playing since they first entered the screen starts to fade. The lights darken around them, leaving Molly’s eyes glowing softly in the dim emergency lighting, and then the movie starts.
When a foghorn blares not even twenty minutes into the film Caleb jumps so hard he thinks his entire body leaves the seat. He flinches like he’s been shocked, his heart jumping in his chest, and by the time he feels it start to calm he realises that his hand is no longer safe and out of the way on his lap.

Instead, his fingers are somehow tangled with Molly’s on the armrest and Molly’s thumb is running over the back of his hand in slow, soothing strokes.

Oh, Caleb thinks to himself, and Molly looks over at him as if he heard the sudden panic in Caleb’s mind. Caleb can only barely make out Molly’s face in the light of the screen but he doesn’t seem to be annoyed by the tight hold that Caleb has on his hand. In fact, he looks like he might be smiling slightly.

“You alright?” he whispers, and Caleb nods.

“Ja,” he whispers, “just- the sound startled me.”

“It startles me too if I’m not paying attention,” Molly admits, squeezing Caleb’s hand, and he turns his attention back to the screen.

Caleb stares for a moment, still caught up in the feeling of Molly’s thumb brushing slow and steady and certain over his skin, and then he too looks back towards the movie.

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Rose, a tiefling with red-pink skin and tumbling dark red hair, walks out onto the deck of the Titanic, the wind catching her hair and sending it fluttering. Jack, a young human man, glances at her and then freezes, a somewhat awestruck expression on his face.

Caleb looks at Molly, looks back at the screen, and pulls a slight face. Oh, yeah. That’s a feeling he knows all too well.

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Rose tilts her head back, looking at Jack from over her shoulder. In the light of the sunset reflecting off the waves her skin seems to glow in tones of red and orange and gold, and when she kisses Jack the contrast between her red tiefling skin and Jack’s pale human skin is beautiful.

Caleb glances over at Molly. He’s staring at the screen, leaning forwards slightly in his seat and apparently completely engrossed with the film despite how his hand is still close and warm around Caleb’s. In the light of the screen he looks almost ethereal, strange and otherworldly and not entirely real, and Caleb wants to kiss him.

Caleb really wants to kiss him.

He looks back at the screen, watches as Rose and Jack kiss and kiss again, and thinks about the warmth of Molly’s hand on his own.

He imagines the warmth of Molly’s lips on his.

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“Did you ever find those binoculars for the lookouts?” asks a man on screen, and Caleb, now just as engrossed in the film as Molly, feels his stomach twist.
“Oh, no,” he whispers. “Oh, no, no, no, this is bad…”

“It’s alright,” he hears Molly murmur from beside him.

“It is not alright, Mollymauk.”

“…It’s not alright.”

---

Water roils through the decks of Titanic, swallowing people under it and muffling their cries and screams as their lungs fill with saltwater, and Caleb feels so anxious and nervous he almost thinks he might puke.

“Molly,” he whispers, squeezing Molly’s hand tighter. “Molly, ich mag das nicht, ich mag das nicht…”

“You’re alright,” Molly whispers back, “It’s okay. We can leave if you need to, Caleb.”

“No,” Caleb says immediately. He’s much too invested now to just stop watching. “No, I am- I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m just nervous.”

Molly doesn’t say anything in response to that. He just squeezes Caleb’s hand again as they watch Titanic start to succumb to the water.

---

When the end credits start rolling across the screen and the lights come up, Caleb is very nearly surprised. Somehow, despite sitting and watching the film draw to a close, he hadn’t expected for it to actually be over.

He also hadn’t been expecting to still be holding Molly’s hand, but as they both stand to leave he watches Molly’s gaze flitter to it. The tiefling doesn’t say anything, not at first – he just looks up at Caleb, down at their hands, and back up again. When Caleb makes no move to pull his hand away he smiles a little.

“Do you want to keep holding hands?” Molly asks, his voice calm and soft. Caleb nods before he can think otherwise, still distracted by the pleasant warmth of Molly’s fingers around his own, and Molly smiles wider at his response. “I had hoped you’d want the same as me,” he continues with a smile. “Now come on, lets go before we get stuck behind everyone else trying to leave.”

Molly leads Caleb out of the cinema hand-in-hand, and soon they’re both standing outside in the slightly chilly spring night. Caleb huddles down inside his coat a little, glad for the heavy layers between him and the slightly nippy air. It’s getting to the annoying point in spring where days in direct sunshine are too warm to wear a jacket, but the nights are frequently cool enough to warrant one. Caleb doesn’t mind, though. He rather likes the cold.

And, as he’s learning now, he likes the cold more when one hand is kept warm by Molly’s.

He glances down to where their joined hands hang between them, unable to stop himself from smiling, and looks back up when Molly squeezes his hand to get his attention.

Molly smiles at him, and for some reason Caleb could swear that he looks almost nervous.

“Do you- do you want to go on a walk?” Molly asks, worrying his lip between his teeth once the
question has been asked. Caleb glances around them, looking at the dark streets and the pools of shadows that dwell at the boundaries of the streetlamps. It’s late. It’s later than Caleb normally likes to be out and he knows that he should really be heading to bed soon.

He would love to go on a walk with Molly, though. He would love to be able to spend hours talking to Molly and listening to him and wandering through the night with Molly’s hand warm around his own, but he can’t.

It sucks.

“I can’t.” Caleb says with a sigh, and Molly’s face falls immediately. “I need to start walking home… I did not think the movie would be as long as it was.”

“It’s a long film,” Molly agrees. “…Did you say you’re walking home?”

“Ja.”

Molly nods to himself and worries his lip again. It comes out darker than it was before, spit-slicked and shining in the light of the street lamps. Caleb wants to learn the shape of it. “Could I-” Molly starts and then cuts himself off with a short sigh before trying again. “Caleb, could I walk you home?”

“Oh,” Caleb replies, a little surprised. He wasn’t expecting that. “I would… I would like that, Mollymauk. I would like that a lot.”

Molly smiles. “That’s- good!” he says, “That’s good. I’d love to walk you home, Caleb. Lead the way.” He waves his free hand in front of them, and Caleb smiles and does exactly that. He doesn’t know this area of town quite as well, but he knows roughly where he is, and it’s easy enough to figure out the quickest route home.

He then thinks of one of the slightly slower routes home, and takes that instead.

“Did you enjoy the movie?” Molly asks as they start walking, and after a short while Caleb gives a slow nod.

“It was good,” he says thoughtfully. “Though I feel I will not be able to get on a boat for a while now.”

Molly laughs. “I know that feeling. I know we have mages and everything but the fact still remains that no-one walks out of Titanic without feeling a little more nervous around boats.”

“Ja, exactly. I am surprised that Nott managed to watch the whole thing. She is- she does not enjoy drowning scenes at all. She does not even like swimming.”

“And she watched all of Titanic?”

“Mhmm.”

“Wow,” Molly says. “That’s- I struggle watching Titanic and I’m about as alright with drowning as it’s possible for an individual with a healthy respect for death to be. Scenes of people being buried alive are the ones that get to me.”

Caleb glances over at Molly. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” Molly answers, and his voice is more serious when he continues. “They make my throat
close up. They- They make me feel like I’m going to wake up underground one day and no one will be able to hear me or help me and I will die beneath the dirt and be forgotten.” Molly shivers a little, and Caleb cannot tell if it is because of the cool breeze or the thoughts flickering behind Molly’s eyes. “I’m terrified of being forgotten, Caleb,” he admits, and for a brief moment Caleb wants nothing more than to draw Molly into a hug.

He doesn’t. He doesn’t know if it’s too soon for that, doesn’t know if that would be crossing Molly’s boundaries. Instead he brushes his thumb against the back of Molly’s hand in a mirror of what Molly did for him during the movie. “I will not forget you, Mollymauk,” Caleb says, and Molly smiles a little. “I- I do not think it is possible for me to forget you. You are- you are very- you are you. You are an unforgettable individual.”

Molly smiles a little wider. “Thank you, Caleb. I know it’s a weird fear, but it’s still there and I can’t seem to get rid of it.”

“I cannot stand house fire scenes,” Caleb admits quietly. “That is my fear. They give me panic attacks. They make me feel like I can’t breathe.”

He doesn’t know why he’s saying this. Nott is the only person in his life who knows about the panic attacks and Bryce is the only person apart from Nott who knows about Caleb’s wariness around fire. Bryce doesn’t know why the same way that Nott does, has never pushed or pressed Caleb for explanations or answers about his past, but up until now Caleb had firmly believed that they would be the only two people in his life who would ever know about his fears.

And yet here he is, telling his triggers to a man who he’s only really known for a handful of weeks. Caleb thinks that’s what trust is.

He hopes it is.


“…For what?”

“For sharing that with me.”

Oh.

“Thank you for sharing your fears with me,” Caleb responds a little awkwardly. “I have- I do not-… thank you for listening.”

Molly shrugs, but there’s nothing casual about his words. “Fears are important,” he says seriously. “When we know what we are afraid of we can start taking steps to overcome it.” He shivers again, and this time Caleb doesn’t think it’s because they’re talking about their fears. Molly, he realises belatedly, isn’t nearly as prepared for the weather as Caleb is – his outfit is beautiful and it looks gorgeous on him, but Caleb can’t imagine that the loose, light cardigan offers much warmth.

“Mollymauk?” Caleb asks.

“Mm?”

“Are you cold?”

“… A bit,” Molly admits, smiling even as he shivers again. “Tieflings are- we’re not really built for
the cold, you know? We’re much more at home in the heat.’’ He shivers again, harder than before, and in that moment Caleb comes to a decision. He drops Molly’s hand, frowning a little at the wash of cold air over his hand where Molly’s fingers had once been, and starts undoing his coat as Molly watches on with a frown.

“Here,” Caleb says. He shrugs out of his coat and holds it out to Molly, and across from him Molly’s eyes grow wide.

“Caleb,” Molly protests quietly. “Caleb, you— you’re going to get cold instead now.”

Caleb shakes his head. “We are nearly there,” he says, “And I have a cardigan on too, see?”

“But—

“You are shivering,” Caleb points out, and Molly gives a rueful smile.

“Yeah,” he admits, “Yeah, I am.”

“Take my coat,” Caleb repeats. “It is very warm, I promise. It is a nice coat. Nott got it for me.”

Molly eyes it up and shivers again. “Well,” he says cautiously, “If you’re sure…”

“I am sure, Mollymauk. I do not want you freezing to death after our date.”

Molly smiles at that. “Well, we can’t be having that, can we? It wouldn’t do for me to freeze to death and leave my lovely and charming date to walk home on his own, now would it?”

Caleb doesn’t comment on the use of lovely and charming, but he feels his cheeks turn a little bit pink. Molly reaches out, taking the coat gently from Caleb’s hand, and swings it around his shoulders, tugging it close around his body. It’s a little bit too big on him and it looks slightly ridiculous with Molly’s loose, brightly patterned pants, but it’s also… nice.

It’s very nice.

Caleb looks at Molly, bundled up and comfortable and warm in his coat, and feels something spark brightly in his chest.

He really wants to kiss him.

He doesn’t.

Instead he holds out his hand, feels his heart jump when Molly takes it with a smile, and they continue walking on, starting to talk quietly again. The conversation meanders between different topics as they walk, crossing between Caleb’s hobbies (crochet when he can find the time) and Molly’s favourite TV shows (a baking show that Caleb has heard Jester recommending) and the meanings behind the small charms that dangle from the ends of Molly’s curving horns (a moon and a sun, ‘because they’re pretty’).

And then they turn a corner, Caleb spots something up ahead, and immediately drops Molly’s hand.

“Caleb?” Molly asks confusedly, but his question falls on deaf ears as Caleb crouches down to greet the cat approaching them.

“Katze,” he coos, holding out a hand towards the scruffy black and white moggie. “Hallo, Kätzchen. Du bist reizend, oder?” The cat mews quietly, butting its head against Caleb’s hand, and Caleb grins wider as he scratches it gently behind the ears. “Was für eine gute Katze. Was für eine hübsche
Eventually, as all cats do, the cat wanders off. Caleb watches it go with a soft smile, still crouching at the side of the street, and when he glances up it’s to see Molly watching him with what Caleb could only call a fond look on his face.

“You really do like cats, don’t you?” Molly asks with a soft smile, his arms crossed over his chest. Caleb stands, giving a slightly embarrassed shrug, and Molly rolls his eyes and holds out a hand for Caleb to take. “Don’t be embarrassed, Caleb. It’s very sweet.”

Caleb takes his hand and they resume walking. “I really like cats,” he says defensively. “My family used to have one. He was lovely.”

“Didn’t you say at the carnival that you’ve been wanting to get a cat?”

Caleb sighs. “Ja,” he says. “I have the space and time and money for it – I checked, I have a spreadsheet – but I- I never quite get around to looking through shelters. I would rather adopt than buy but there are always other things to do than spend far too long browsing through pages of cats only to have Nott tell me that I cannot adopt all of them.”

“I know that feeling,” Molly says. “Fjord – my flatmate – he has to remind me that we don’t have the space or money for a pet every time I get drunk and start scrolling through shelter pages.”

“They all look so sad…”

“They do!” Molly agrees emphatically. “And it’s like, well, I have a home, right? And I can probably scrimp and save enough to look after a pet in need, and I’m sure I can juggle my life and my work and my hobbies around them to make sure they’re entertained and cared for and happy. And then you have to remind yourself that you really can’t, and also you’re torn between six animals and you know that you’d just end up adopting all of them.”

“Ja!” Caleb says, “That is exactly it!” He sighs. “Gods, Molly,” he adds quietly. “I really miss having a cat.”

“Maybe you’ll get one one day.”

“I hope so,” Caleb says, “I really hope so. I’d love to have a cat again.”

“If you get one you have to promise that I’ll be allowed to come visit and play with it.”

“Of course, Molly,” Caleb says as they round the corner onto his street and start approaching his building. He looks up at it, noticing the light on in his living room window, and feels his heart sink a little.

“What’s wrong?” Molly asks, clearly picking up on the expression on Caleb’s face, and Caleb nods towards his building as he leads Molly onto the path approaching it.

“We’re here,” he says simply, and Molly’s face falls slightly. Caleb understands. He doesn’t want to leave Molly. He doesn’t want this date to end.

He knows that it has to.

“Well,” he says with a faint sigh, stepping up onto the little concrete step just before the door and turning to face Molly. “Here we are.”
“Here we are,” Molly echoes. He gives Caleb a slight smile. “I had a lot of fun tonight, Caleb. It was- this has been really nice.”

Caleb smiles to himself and glances down at their joined hands. “It has,” he agrees quietly, looking back up at Molly. “This has, it’s…”

In the gentle amber light of the streetlamps outside Molly looks stunning. He always looks beautiful of course, has never looked like anything less than a being a few prayers away from being a deity, but now, in the soft lighting and the soft drizzle Molly looks more… grounded. More real.

He looks like someone Caleb could actually kiss.

Caleb wants to kiss Molly right now.

Nott, Jester, Pumat, Bryce… they all think he deserves this. They all want him to have good things, to have nice things, to have things that he wants.

Caleb knows what he wants.

“Caleb?” Molly asks softly, and it’s then that Caleb decides.

He reaches out, curling one hand in the soft fabric of the coat around Molly’s shoulders, leans in, and kisses him.

Caleb doesn’t think. He doesn’t let himself think. He knows that if he does he’ll panic, he’ll freak out, he’ll remember every reason why he shouldn’t be doing this and he’ll move away.

He doesn’t want to.

He doesn’t want to move away from Molly in this moment. Molly’s lips are soft beneath his own and warm beneath the slight chill of the rain, and Caleb adores them. Caleb has been distracted by them for the last few weeks and to finally, finally have Molly’s lips pressed against his own is nothing short of wonderful.

There’s a brief, horrible moment where Caleb feels Molly freeze beneath him, but then the moment passes and Caleb feels Molly’s lips soften and move to meet his own.

And then everything becomes wonderfully, perfectly, right.

It feels right.

It feels right to kiss Molly like this, feels right to settle a hand on his hip and feel the curve of bone through the heavy fabric of Caleb’s own coat. It feels right to lift a hand, to brush his knuckles against Molly’s cheek, to tilt Molly’s head just so and kiss him again, kiss him softer and sweeter, barely more than a brush of lips against lips but more than Caleb ever thought he would have.

It feels right and certain and good, right up until Caleb leans back a little to catch his breath, feels the rain settling on his face, and sees Molly looking back at him.

In that moment, everything turns from good to awful.

“Caleb,” Molly says quietly, blinking the rainwater from his eyes, and Caleb’s brain shatters.

“I’m sorry,” he says immediately, dropping his hands from Molly as though burned. “I- Scheisse, Molly, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I should have asked, I should have-”
“Caleb.”

“I didn’t mean to force this on you, I am so sorry, I—“

“Caleb!” Molly says again, reaching out to brush his fingertips against the back of Caleb’s hand. The touch makes Caleb freeze, his eyes wide and brain screaming. But then he sees Molly smile softly, and his brain falls silent again.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, and Molly just smiles wider.

“It’s alright,” he says. “It’s alright, Caleb. Everything’s fine.” His fingertips are still pressed lightly to the back of Caleb’s hand and almost without thinking Caleb turns his hand, his palm facing out towards Molly. Molly glances down at it and wiggles his fingers. “Is this alright?” he asks quietly.

“May I hold your hand, Caleb?”

“… Yes.” He doesn’t look down but he can feel Molly’s fingers brushing against his palm, tracing the lines of it before they gently settle between Caleb’s fingers and give a brief squeeze. Caleb doesn’t squeeze back. He wants to. He desperately wants to. But he didn’t ask for Molly’s permission to kiss him and now he has and his awful, disgusting soot-black stain has been left on Molly and Molly’s person and it’s too much. It’s too much and his brain is loud and angry and the brambles are curling through his thoughts and around the back of his head and Molly’s fingers are between his own and Caleb doesn’t even deserve to be touching him and—

“Caleb.”

Caleb blinks, and looks down into Molly’s warm, red eyes.

Molly smiles at him.

“Hey,” he says quietly, “You alright?”

Caleb doesn’t say anything. He can’t.

“Can you take a breath for me, sweetheart?” Molly continues. He squeezes Caleb’s hand slowly, inhaling audibly as he does so. Caleb, almost unthinkingly, copies him. “That’s it, that’s good. Another one?” He repeats the action and Caleb copies him again. And again. And again.

“There,” Molly says several long breaths later. “You back with me?”

Caleb nods slowly. His head does somehow feel clearer after that – the brambles are still very much present but they feel almost softened now, as though they’ve been wrapped around with cotton and held at bay. “Ja,” he says quietly. “Ja, I am.”

“You gave me a bit of a fright there, love.”

“I am- I am sorry, Mollymuk…”

“It’s alright,” Molly says again as easily as breathing, and by some absolute wonder something in his tone actually makes Caleb believe him. “You don’t have to apologise for anything, Caleb.”

“But I- I…”

“You kissed me,” Molly says simply, and Caleb nods shamefully. Molly hums for a second, seemingly thinking about something. “Caleb?” he asks.

“Mm?”
“Can I ask you something?”

Caleb frowns. He doesn’t see why Molly would have to ask that. “Of course you can.”

“Did you want to kiss me?” Molly asks, and Caleb immediately freezes. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. I’m not going to judge you no matter what you say. Just so you know.”

Caleb takes a breath. “…Ja,” he says quietly. “I- I did.” But I shouldn’t have.

Molly squeezes Caleb’s hand again. “Thank goodness for that,” he says, his lips twitching up into a smile, “I’ve been wanting you to kiss me for a while.”

Caleb doesn’t say anything in response to that. He just stares at Molly, uncertain and anxious and more than a little confused, because who in their right mind would want to kiss Caleb? Who on earth would look at Caleb, would look at his gathered scars and his nervous habits and his jack-rabbit, bramble-spun brain and think, I want this one to kiss me?

It’s incomprehensible. It has to be a lie.

But Caleb feels like he knows Molly, even after their small handful of meetings and dates. He trusts Molly almost as much as he trusts Jester, almost as much as he trusts Nott.

He trusts that Molly would not lie to him.

“I-” he begins, and over the soft sound of the gently falling rain his voice is barely audible. “I- Molly…”

“It’s true,” Molly says simply. Caleb closes his eyes, breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth and feels his heart twist. It can’t be. “You’re really rather lovely, Caleb.” Molly sounds like he’s smiling. Caleb opens his eyes, glances down to meet Molly’s steady red gaze, and sees that he’s right. It’s a soft smile, a sweet smile. It’s not the smile that Molly wears when he’s trying to charm people. It’s not the smile that he wears on stage. It’s small and gentle and just a little bit nervous around the edges, and it’s already familiar to Caleb.

Molly smiles a little wider when he sees that Caleb is looking at him again. “It’s true,” he repeats. “Caleb, I don’t kiss back unless I want to. I don’t lead people on.”

“But-“ Caleb begins, and then trails off into a sigh. He doesn’t know where he was going with that. He doesn’t know what he wanted to say in objection. He just knows that his mind, awful and anxious and afraid as it is, had insisted that Molly was lying.

Molly wouldn’t lie to me, he tells himself quietly, and it helps.

“Do you want to kiss me again, Caleb?” Molly asks quietly. Caleb raises his head a little, looking at where Molly stands before him still wrapped up in Caleb’s own coat. “Because you can if you want to. In fact, I actively encourage you kissing me if you want to kiss me.”

Caleb wants to kiss Molly again. He really, desperately does. But not right now. He doesn’t think he could handle his brain if he kissed Molly again right now.

“I-“ he starts and immediately cuts himself off, swallowing to wet his dry throat. “I… I want to…”

Molly smiles. “Good,” he says softly, “I want you to kiss me too, Caleb.”

“But- but not right now. I am- I’m-“
“Bad brain?” Molly offers quietly, and Caleb blinks.

“Ja,” he says, a little confused. “That is, ah, that is exactly it, how did you-“

Molly shrugs. He looks down at their tangled fingers and brushes his thumb over the knuckles and tendons of Caleb’s hand, capturing the collected raindrops between their skin. “I have my own experiences with it,” he says quietly. “I know what it feels like.”

“…Oh.”

“Yeah,” Molly says. “It’s- I get it, Caleb. I don’t know exactly what your bad brain is like, but I know what a pain in the ass it can be. I know how it can make you feel.”

“I’m sorry,” Caleb says, “For- for this.”

“It’s alright,” Molly replies, and by some marvel he doesn’t even sound disappointed. There’s no judgement in his tone, no frustration or annoyance or anger – he just seems happy and entirely accepting and that confuses Caleb more than anything. “There’s no rush. We can take this at whatever pace you’re comfortable with, Caleb. Whatever that pace might be, I’m here for it and I’ll stick to it, and if you feel like I’m going too fast you just have to let me know.”

Caleb swallows. “I’m sorry,” he says again, quieter, and Molly’s smile almost looks sad.

“It’s alright,” he repeats. “Really, Caleb. I promise you it’s alright.”

I promise you. For once, Caleb doesn’t feel himself immediately start to worry about how long that promise will last. “Thank you,” he whispers. “I- thank you, Mollymauk.”

“Nothing that needs thanking for,” Molly says simply, and he gently squeezes Caleb’s hand. His fingers are warm against Caleb’s skin, soft and so, so gentle. Caleb lets himself squeeze back. “Can I kiss you goodnight?” Molly asks, and after a moment’s hesitation Caleb shakes his head.

“Nein,” he whispers quietly, “Not tonight.”

“Alright,” Molly says easily. “Can I hug you?”

That’s okay in Caleb’s mind, but only barely so. He manages a tiny nod. “Ja.”

“Okay.” There’s a brief pause and then Molly steps in closer, raising his arms and clearly telegraphing every one of his movements until he’s right up in Caleb’s space, stretching up on his tiptoes to close the gap left between them. He leans in, wrapping his arms carefully around Caleb’s hunched body, and it takes barely a second before Caleb feels himself start to relax. Molly is warm and close and so, so careful with his actions, but he’s not treating Caleb like he’s made of glass. Once it becomes apparent that Caleb is relaxing he tightens his hold a little, murmuring a soft “Is this alright?” in Caleb’s ear and squeezing him harder when Caleb nods.

It’s alright. It’s more than alright.

Standing like this, with Molly’s arms close and tight around him and his own coat collar pressing against his face, Caleb feels… safe. He feels protected. He feels like this is okay, like this is allowed, like this is good, and after a few more breaths he wraps his own arms around Molly, squeezing him against his body. Everything is pressure and warmth and the soft feeling of the drizzle falling on his face and everything is Molly, and it’s so, so good.

Caleb squeezes his eyes shut, turns his head to press his face to the curve of Molly’s neck, and
wishes that he was brave enough to kiss him again.

Eventually, as all good things do, the hug ends. Caleb’s not entirely sure which one of them broke it but it feels natural. When Molly steps back Caleb can see him smiling, and he’s almost surprised to feel a smile on his own face. It’s weak, little more than the faintest up-turn of his lips, but Molly seems to spot it all the same.

“That was nice,” he says, and Caleb smiles wider.

“It was,” he admits. “It - you are a very good hugger, Mollymauk.”

Molly shrugs, grinning. “I try my best.”

“You succeed.”

In the soft light of the streetlamps Caleb thinks he sees Molly’s cheeks grow a little darker. “Well,” he says, “Maybe next time we do something like this you can hug me again, hm?”

That sounds nice. It sounds more than nice. “I would like that,” Caleb says, and Molly grins at him.

“I’d like it too.”

“Next time-“ Caleb begins, and he pauses to breathe and remind himself of what Molly had said to him over and over again. *It’s alright*. “Next time we do this,” he continues, “I think I would like to kiss you too, if that is alright…”

“Caleb,” Molly replies, “That is- it’s more than alright, dear. And if the time comes and you find that you don’t want to, that’s alright too. Whatever you want to do I’m completely down with, and I’ll let you know if I’m not.”

Caleb smiles. Molly makes it all seem to easy. “Okay,” he says. “Next time, possibly, ja?”

“Ja,” Molly repeats, his accent butchering even that one single word, and Caleb smiles wider.

“Maybe next time I will have to teach you how to speak Zemnian,” he teases.

Molly nods enthusiastically. Over the quieting sound of the fading rain Caleb thinks he can hear the chains on Molly’s horns jingle.

“Please do,” Molly says. “Or your- what was it, Ancient Sylvan? I’d love to learn that, Caleb. You speaking it is- well, if it’s not too forwards of me, it’s *really fucking hot*. Hotter than normal, which should be impossible.”

Caleb can’t say that he was expecting Molly to say that, but he’s certainly not complaining.

*Molly thinks I’m hot, Caleb thinks. Molly thinks I’m hot!*

More than that: Molly thinks he’s hot when he speaks Ancient Sylvan, his area of expertise and his passion of many, many years. Molly think he’s hot when he’s speaking the language he has a doctorate in. Molly thinks he’s hot when he’s speaking this ancient, now-unused language that Caleb has chosen to dedicate his life to.

Caleb tries not to grin, and tries not to blush, and completely fails at both.

*Molly thinks I’m hot*, he thinks again, and only once he’s mostly pushed that thought from his mind does he focus on the task at hand. He can teach Molly something. He’ll teach him something nice
and simple and pretty.

“I can teach you something now, if you’d like.” Caleb says, and Molly nods again.

“Please.”

It only takes Caleb a second of flicking through his mental dictionary to settle on a suitable word. “$\text{țȢƺơ}$ $\text{ơƫ}$”

Molly blinks. “Gods, Caleb,” he says, and Caleb smiles, soft and happy and a little bit smug all at once. “That’s- it’s fucking- what does it mean?”

“It means the same as Gute Nacht does – it means ‘goodnight.’”

Molly wrinkles his nose a little. “I suppose I should be heading off,” he murmurs, glancing at the dark night around them. “But I want to learn that first. How did you say it?”

“$\text{țȢƺơ}$ $\text{ơƫ}$,” Caleb repeats, speaking slower this time. Molly frowns at him.

“Tir-“ he starts, “Tayr-“

“$\text{țȢƺơ}$ $\text{ơƫ}$,” Caleb says, enunciating as best he can, “$\text{ơƫ}$.”

“Tira-oth?”

“Ja!” Caleb exclaims delightedly. Molly’s accent and inflection is far from perfect and the way he’s pronouncing the word could well result in it being mistaken for any number of similar sounding words and phrases, but it’s something. It’s an attempt on Molly’s part to learn something that Caleb loves, and Caleb’s heart squeezes a little when he thinks that.

Molly wants to learn my passions.

“Ja,” he says again, and Molly beams back at him.

“Tira-oth?” he says, “Like that?”

“Almost. The ‘r’ is voiced more from the back of the throat – it is almost a ‘y’ sound. $\text{țȢƺơ}$. Like that, see?”

“Tiya?” Molly asks.

“$\text{țȢƺơ}$.”

“Ti- tir- $\text{țȢƺơ}$.”

Caleb smiles. “That was perfect.”

“$\text{țȢƺơ}$” Molly says again. He’s grinning, wide and delighted and almost childlike in his sheer joy, and Caleb finds himself swept up in Molly’s delight. “$\text{țȢƺơ}$ $\text{ơƫ}$”

“$\text{țȢƺơ}$ $\text{ơƫ}$,” Caleb repeats back at him. “Goodnight, Mollymauk.”

“$\text{țȢƺơ}$ $\text{ơƫ}$,” Molly says, still grinning. “Goodnight, Caleb Widogast.”

“Sleep well.”

“I’m sure I will,” Molly replies, and he takes a single step back before freezing. “Oh!”
Caleb frowns at him. “…What?”

“Your coat!”

“Oh!”

“I forgot,” Molly says with a grin, shrugging out of Caleb’s coat and holding it out to him. “Here. I was about to walk off with this. It’s really comfy.”

“It is,” Caleb agrees, “But you should- I do not want you to get cold, Mollymauk.”

Molly shrugs. “The rain’s mostly stopped,” he says. “I’ll be fine, Caleb. Keep your coat.” He holds his hand out, the coat hanging in the space between them like some sort of offering, and after a moment Caleb takes it.

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

“Thank you,” Molly replies, “For letting me borrow it.”

“It- you looked good in it.”

Molly beams. “I’m glad you thought so,” he says, just the faintest edge of flirtatious teasing to his voice, and Caleb feels his cheeks grow warm under the faint chill of the lingering raindrops. “But I can’t have looked as good in it as you do, darling.”

That’s- oh.

Caleb really, really likes how the word ‘darling’ sounds in Molly’s mouth.

He wants to taste it someday.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, and fiddles with the fabric between his fingers.

Molly smiles wider. “Thank you for this date,” he says. Caleb can’t fight the smile that blooms instantly on his face. “I really had a lot of fun.”

“I did too,” Caleb says softly.

“Do you want to do this again sometime? Or something similar. Just like before I’m happy for any suggestions.”

“I would- I would like that,” Caleb admits. “I would like that a lot. Maybe, ah, maybe we could do something like lunch again? I liked talking to you.”

“I’d love to get lunch with you again, Caleb,” Molly says, and Caleb smiles wider. “Text me about it?”

“I’ll do that, as long as you text me when you get home.”

“I promise,” Molly replies, and he takes a step back, slipping his hands into the pockets of his pants. “I’ll text you soon. Goodnight, Caleb. Sleep well.”

“Goodnight, Mollymauk,” Caleb replies quietly, and he waits until Molly turns the corner and disappears from view before he shuts the door.
Chapter End Notes

The absolutely wonderful art of Molly in this chapter was done by nonsycamore on tumblr!
Chapter 10

Caleb dreams.

He dreams of sparks falling from his fingertips, dripping towards the floor to join their siblings amongst the embers and flames. He dreams of magic gathering in his palm as he devours another book that his parents got for him (a gift, scraped together with all their savings, and it was not his birthday but it was close enough and the book was all that mattered). He dreams of his delight, his joy, his sheer euphoria at seeing the little flame twist and dance and live in the palm of his hand before he curled his fingers over it and snuffed it out.

He does not dream of time passing, but he knows that it does. Knows that it did. He dreams of the aftermath.

He dreams of Mollymauk, and of flames – Caleb’s flames – crawling up his arms. He dreams of the bright and beautiful clothing that Molly wears turning gold and amber and living, dreams of his lavender skin turning ashy and blackened, dreams of the glistening gold that adorns Molly’s face and ears and horns being coated in smoke-black soot as the fire coils around his body and holds him close and tight and immobile.

He dreams of Molly turning his head to look at Caleb, and his eyes are Jester’s eyes, Nott’s eyes, his parents eyes, illuminated by flame and burning. Burning to ashes and cinders and dust as the building creaks and groans and the flames consume everything.

Caleb wakes, his heart pounding in his chest, and waits only long enough to feel like he can breathe again before he gets up, changes his pyjamas for a less sweat-soaked set, and goes back to bed. He knows he will have this dream again.

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The first thing Caleb wants to do when he wakes up the following morning is text Molly. It’s a strange response, and not one he’s ever had before. Normally, in the mornings following his nightmares, Caleb only wants to curl up and hide away and make sure that no one, not even Nott, knows what plagued him through the night. His nightmares are a sign of weakness, a sign of guilt; he dreams of the fire because he knows that it was his fault. He does not need other people reminding him of how terrible he is. He always wants to be unseen and unnoticed and safe from any awful, prying questions.

But not today. Not this morning. Somehow, for some reason, Caleb doesn’t want to hide away. He wants to text Molly.

He doesn’t want to text Molly about the nightmare; he knows that much. What he has with Molly feels too new and too delicate and too good to risk destroying with this horrible, disgusting admission of guilt and fault and blame, and Caleb doesn’t know if he’ll ever tell Molly why he’s afraid of fire. It took him years to tell Nott. He still hasn’t told Bryce or Jester. He hopes that one day he might be brave enough to tell Molly the truth, but he doubts it. He doesn’t want to tell Molly about the fire quite yet.

Thankfully, at the moment, Caleb wants something much simpler than that.

He wants to text Molly ‘good morning,’ and see if he’ll reply.
And so he does. He’s not awake yet, still caught on the boundary of wakefulness and sleep. In this state there’s less doubt in his mind, less fear and anxiety about if Molly will appreciate such a text. Caleb wants to text Molly, and so he will. He reaches out for his phone with his eyes still shut. When they actually blink open, his phone is already in his hand, the little screen completely unreadable in the darkness of his room. He fumbles for the switch on his bedside lamp in the dark, and soon the immediate area is flooded with light, letting Caleb scroll through his phone’s limited pages until he finds the one he’s looking for.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Good morning, Mollymauk. :3

He hopes Molly understands the reasoning behind the ‘:3’. Their shared cat emoji is to be used for things that make Caleb happy, and texting Molly definitely makes Caleb happy.

He doesn’t get a reply as he starts getting ready for the day, but he’s not surprised. He starts his days early, and Molly doesn’t strike him as the kind of person to be up and about at 6:45 in the morning. It takes until Caleb is just about preparing to leave for him to get a reply.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] good morning Caleb! :3
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] did you sleep well?

Caleb pulls a face. He doesn’t want to lie to Molly but he really, really doesn’t want to tell him about the nightmare.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I slept. [To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Did you sleep well?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] that doesn’t sound good
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] no pressure if you don’t want to talk about, I completely get it
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] yeah I slept really well! -smiling face tiefling emoji- had some lovely dreams

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] That is good to hear. :3

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :3

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :3c

“What’s got you smiling like an idiot?” asks a voice, and Caleb very nearly flings his mug of tea across the room as he flinches. He looks up to see Nott perching on the counter in front of him, still dressed in her work clothes as she scrubs a hand across her eyes.

Caleb waves his phone. “I am- I’m- Mollymauk,” he says coherently, and Nott nods again, shuffling closer to the edge of the counter.

“I thought so,” she says, reaching out to take Caleb’s mug directly out of his hands. She downs what liquid remains and wipes a hand across her mouth as she finishes, passing the empty mug back to Caleb. “You seem to like him. You smile a lot when you’re texting him.”

“Do I?”

“Mhmm. That’s why I said you seem to like him. You don’t smile that much… ever. For anyone.” There’s a quiet, contemplative pause before Nott adds quietly, “Do you like him?”

Caleb can’t help his soft smile. He knows his answers. He doesn’t have to think about it. “I do. I do
like him.” He pauses and then adds quietly, “I like him a lot...”

Nott smiles. “I’m glad to hear that,” she says. “So, when do I get to meet him?”

Caleb freezes. “…Was?”

“When do I get to meet him?” Nott repeats. “I know you’re and adult and can make your own decisions about who you date, but you are also my boy and my best friend, so I need to check that whoever you date is worthy of you.”

“Nott…”

“No arguments!” Nott says firmly. “It’s a best friend privilege kind of thing. I get to see if he’s good enough, and if I get any indication that he’s even thinking about messing with you or hurting you or being a dick or anything then I’ll gnaw his kneecaps off.”

Caleb blinks. “…Why are you so obsessed with his kneecaps?”

“I’m at perfect kneecap-gnawing height. It’s very useful.”

“I’d rather you didn’t gnaw his kneecaps off, Schatz. His legs are very nice.” There’s a long pause. Nott gives Caleb a look, and Caleb feels his ears start to turn red. “…Also, I have to go to work now.”

Nott gives Caleb another look. “You’re lucky that I’m very tired,” she says. “You know that normally I would not be letting you get away with that.”

“I know,” Caleb says hurriedly. “I know, Nott. You can interrogate me as much as you wish later.”

“…I have a better suggestion.”

That doesn’t sound good. “What is it?”

Nott smiles. “You promise to go to girl’s night-“

“I always go to girl’s night.”

“-and you let Jester ask you questions. While I’m there. So that she’ll stop pestering me.”

Caleb frowns. “She’s been pestering you?”

“Well… no, but she’s been giving me those looks at the carnival. You know the ones? The ones that are all ‘I know you know something that you’re not telling me, and I really want to know it.’ Those ones.”

Caleb knows those looks. Caleb knows those looks very well. “Oh.”

“Exactly. So I figure, being the wise and cunning detective that I am, that I’ll trap you in a room with Jester that you’re too polite to escape from so that Jester can ask you all the questions, but I’ll also be there to jump in if she asks you anything that you really don’t want to answer.”

“Okay,” Caleb says slowly. “Okay, okay… I will agree to that.”

“Yes!”

“On one condition.”
“Oh.”

“I do not want Jester to know that I am- that I am dating Molly,” Caleb says. “Not yet. She is his friend, and I- I know that she will plague me with uncomfortable questions, and I am not ready for that. Not yet. I will tell her, but not right now.”

“Oh,” Nott says again, but it’s understanding. “Oh, Caleb. That’s alright. I’m very good at keeping my mouth shut when I need to.”

“I know.”

“So is that a deal? You come to girl’s night, and in exchange I’ll stop Jester from asking anything really awkward, and I also will do everything in my power to stop her from finding out that you’re dating Molly?”

“It’s a deal,” Caleb says, and he shakes Nott’s proffered hand.

“Good. Now go,” Nott says, freeing his hand and reaching out to push him away from the counter. “Go on, go to work. Go see Molly and have lunch with him and be all smitten and disgustingly adorable, or whatever it is that you do.”

“I am- I am not smitten,” Caleb complains, even as he can feel his ears start burning at the truth of it.

“You’re smitten,” Nott says, and she pushes his shoulder again. “Now go, shoo! Get out of here! Go see Molly and have lunch with him!”

“There is no guarantee that-“

“Have lunch with him.”

Caleb leaves. He ends up having lunch with Molly that day, and it’s wonderful. He has his lunch in his bag, but all it takes is one pointed look from Bryce at lunchtime to have Caleb digging his phone out of his bag and texting Molly to ask if he can come down and join him in the yard.

The response he gets is near instantaneous. Not even five minutes later, Caleb finds himself sitting on the sun-soaked grass next to Molly, smiling helplessly as Molly tells him all about the latest carnival shenanigans and the cat that he’d seen hanging around the site a few times.

It’s lovely. It’s brilliant.

Caleb watches Molly shining and sparkling in the sun, relaxed and comfortable in his work-out gear, and thinks about kissing him again. He thinks about reaching out, about placing a hand on the nape of Molly’s neck and tangling his fingers in Molly’s rich purple curls and tugging him closer and pressing a kiss to his lips mid-sentence. He thinks about resting a hand on Molly’s waist and pulling him in, pulling him nearer until they’re pressed together chest-to-chest, basking in the gathering warmth of the spring sun and kissing and kissing and kissing, learning the shape of each other’s mouths and the feeling of their breath, of their laughter. He thinks about brushing his tongue across the seam of Molly’s lips and feeling Molly’s mouth open beneath his own with a sigh, thinks about slipping a hand beneath Molly’s shirt and pressing it close to the small of his back and feeling the ridges of his vertebrae through the warmth of his ink-adorned skin.

Caleb thinks about many things over lunch.

He does none of them.
He has lunch with Molly the next day, and the day after that, too. By the time Girl’s Night rolls around, it already feels like routine, standard and comfortable. Every day, at around 1pm, Bryce arrives at Caleb’s office door with a knock, startling Caleb out of his studies or his research. Or, on a few occasions, from staring out of the window to watch Molly practising. Caleb jumps a little, looks at Bryce, checks if he has his lunch with him or not, and then goes to meet Molly in the yard regardless.

He keeps thinking about kissing Molly. He keeps thinking about Molly kissing him. He keeps thinking about the warmth of Molly’s hand in his own and, on more than one occasion, actually catches himself reaching for Molly’s hand mid-conversation.

On more than one occasion, Molly spots the movement, smiles at him, and offers his hand to Caleb.

On more than one occasion, Caleb takes it.

Somehow, lunch with Molly has become Caleb’s new normal, and he loves it.

And then it’s Girl’s Night, and Caleb abruptly realises why Jester has been so suspiciously quiet about his date.

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“Caleb!”

Caleb doesn’t even get a chance to say ‘hi’ when the door flies open – the second that Jester sees him, she sweeps him up into a hug, lifting him bodily off the ground despite the solid foot or so in height between them. She squeezes him tightly around the middle, making him gasp out what air was in his lungs, and when she finally sets him back down on the ground, the first thing that Caleb does is wheeze.

“Hi, Jester,” he says once he’s finally gotten his breath back. He rubs a hand over his ribs, absently checking for any breaks or bruising, and Jester beams back at him.

“Hi!” she says. “How are you? How is everything?”

“Things are good,” Caleb says vaguely, and it’s then that Nott pushes her way past him with an elbow to the knee.

“My turn!” she announces, and Jester beams.

“Nott!” she squeals. “My favourite little goblin! It’s been so long!”

“It’s been two weeks!” Nott replies, but she’s grinning just as widely as Jester is when she runs up to her, jumping up into her hug and squeezing her back before clambering up her body to sit on her shoulder. She swings her feet a little, already starting to unlace her boots, and when Jester catches the motion she tuts.

“Nott,” she says reproachfully, “Do you still have your shoes on?”

“Yeah, of course I do. I just got here.”

“I said you can’t sit on me with your boots on! I look super cute, and you’re going to get mud all over me.”

“My boots are off now,” Nott says, holding the aforementioned shoes up by the laces and waving
them in front of Jester’s face. Jester’s frown immediately turns into a smile, and she takes the boots from Nott, stepping back into the apartment and setting them down beside the door.

“Good,” she says cheerily. “Now you may sit on my shoulder for as long as you like.”

“I do like it up here. I’m finally at the same height as all you tall people.”

“I am not that tall, Nott.”

“No, but Caleb is!”

“I do not think I am strong enough to carry you, Schatz,” Caleb says, and Nott just smiles at him as Jester flexes.

“No,” says Jester, “But I totally am. Check out these guns!”

“You’re even beefier than last time we saw you,” Nott muses, squeezing Jester’s bicep, and Jester, somehow, grins even wider.

“I know,” she says, beckoning Caleb into her apartment and hip-checking the door shut behind her. “Yasha’s been giving me all these lifting tips, and now we’re proper gym buddies who do weights and stuff together, and I’m getting so strong, and it’s great. I’m so buff and cute and sexy.”

“I bet you’re stronger than Fjord.”

“I am totally stronger than Fjord,” Jester agrees, “You saw him at the carnival, right? He looks all big and strong, but he’s actually as weedy as Caleb. No offence, Caleb.”

“None taken,” Caleb replies absently, hanging his coat up next to the door. “You have always been stronger than me, Jester. That is why I get you to carry my books.”

“And I get to look super buff while doing it.”

“Ja, you do.” Caleb leans down, tugging his shoes off, and catches a glimpse of Beau, standing at the other side of the little hallway and looking decidedly grumpy.

Well, grumpier than normal.

Caleb frowns a little, straightening up. “Why does Beau look so grumpy?” he whispers to Jester, and Jester leans in. Nott, still sitting on her shoulder, leans in too.

“Because she was hoping you were Yasha,” Jester whispers back. Her voice, even at a whispering volume, is still much louder than Caleb’s, and Caleb’s more than a little bit certain that Beau can hear every word.

“Why was she hoping that I was Yasha?” he asks. “I am not Yasha.”

“I know,” Jester continues, “But Beau really likes Yasha.”

“…Okay.”

“She really likes Yasha.”

“…Okay?”

“She wants to hur-hur-hur Yasha, you know?”
Caleb knows that he looks absolutely baffled. He feels absolutely baffled. “Jester, I have no idea what you are talking about. What is hur-hur-hur?”

On Jester’s shoulder, Nott sighs and lifts a hand to cover her face.

Jester wiggles her eyebrows. “Sex,” she whispers loudly. From the other side of the hallway, Beau groans audibly.

“Dude,” she says, “I am standing right here. I can hear everything you motherfuckers are saying!”

Jester doesn’t look at her. “Am I wrong?” she asks.


“…Beau, you have a lesbian flag on the back of your door.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“You’re gay, Beau.”

“…Alright,” Beau admits after a pause. Caleb straightens up, turning to look at her, and sees her leaning against the doorway to her room, her arms crossed over her chest and a scowl on her face. “Maybe I am. What does that have to do with- with Yasha?”

“Beau,” Jester sighs.

“What?” Beau asks defensively. “I’m just saying! Yeah, I might be gay, but I’m- you don’t know if I- if I like Yasha. That’s- you don’t know that.”

“One time, she flexed in front of you, and you nearly passed out.”

“I was dizzy. I’d been standing for ages.”

“You were sitting down.”

Caleb understands now what Jester means when she calls Beau a ‘useless lesbian.’ “Wow,” he murmurs quietly, and Jester catches his eye and grins. “That’s- wow.”

“Right?”

“Yeah.”

“Want to see something super funny?”

Caleb blinks. “Uh… sure?”

Jester grins and starts lowering Nott to the floor. “Great. Nott, I need you to jump down for a second.”

“What are you going to do?” Nott asks, her feet hitting the floor.

“Just watch,” Jester stage whispers to them. She pulls her phone out of her pocket, swiping through a few pictures until she settles on one of Yasha in the middle of lifting some very, very large weights, and then walks over to Beau. “Beau,” she calls out sweetly, holding her phone out. “Could you look at this for a second, please?”
“…Alright,” Beau says suspiciously. She takes the phone and looks. And looks some more. And some more. Jester glances back over her shoulder at Caleb and gives a thumbs-up. Eventually, finally, Beau speaks.

“Hng,” she says. “She- strong. Yep.” “She was lifting as much as you weigh,” Jester says innocently. “Isn’t that cool?” Beau squeezes her eyes shut for a second. “Fuck,” she whispers, with great feeling, and then she opens her eyes and goes back to looking at the picture. “Fuck me, she could snap me like a twig,” she breathes. “She could,” Jester agrees.

“Fuck,” Beau says again. “I- fuck. Fuck.” She peers closer at the screen. “Are those her abs?” “Yeah.” Beau makes what could only be described as a whimper. “Jester.” “I know,” Jester says sympathetically, patting her on the back. “You’re very gay, Beau.” “I’m so fucking gay, Jester.” “I know.” “Girls are so hot.” “I know, I understand.” “…Did you say Yasha’s definitely going to be here?” “She should be- oh! I think that’s her!” Jester says as the flat buzzer rings out through the corridor, and Beau’s head snaps up so fast Caleb briefly worries about whiplash. “Jester,” Beau says as Jester practically skips over to the buzzer to let Yasha into the building. “I’m- do I look alright? Do I look hot? But, like, not like I’m trying too hard hot? Like effortless hot? Do I look hot, Jester?” “You look fine, Beau,” Jester says, not looking at her. “I know, I understand.” “Thank fuck,” Beau murmurs, and she leans back against the wall again, tapping her foot against the floor as she glances back and forth between Jester and the front door. Even to Caleb, who’s only met Beau on a couple of occasions, she actually seems nervous, and it’s somehow more amusing than Caleb thought it would be. Beau had always struck him as the sort of person who was so chill that it was impossible to for her to lose her cool; the kind of person who’s smooth and suave no matter
what.

The kind of person that Mollymauk is.

But then Caleb remembers Molly’s soft, shy smiles, his stammering voice the first time Caleb had accepted his offer of a date, and how very careful he always is, and changes his mind. Molly might give the appearance of being effortlessly flirtatious and charming, but Caleb knows better now. Molly is, on occasion, just as nervous as Caleb.

Molly gets as nervous as Caleb, has experience with bad brain times like Caleb, and had been so proud of his pronunciation of ƾȢƺơơƫ that he’d greeted Caleb with it when Caleb first joined him for lunch on Monday. Molly has more in common with Caleb than Caleb had ever expected, and it’s so unspeakably wonderful.

Caleb does his best to subdue his definitely not-smitten smile, leans back against the wall, and watches Beau’s expression turn to something between delight and incredible nerves as a knock sounds at the door and Jester skips over to answer it.

The door swings open to reveal Yasha, clad in a short leather jacket and a tank top, a pack of beers held under one arm. Nott, standing beside Caleb, lets out a whoop that’s loud enough for Yasha to hear at the sight of the alcohol. She turns to glance at them, and the moment that she catches sight of Caleb she nods, gives a disconcertingly knowing smile, and lifts a hand in a small wave.

Caleb waves back. “Hallo,” he says automatically.

“Hi,” Yasha says.

“Hey!” Beau says, and she nearly trips over her own feet as she pushes off the wall, moving over to stand before Yasha. “I’m- hey, I didn’t know you’d be here, are you- do you want a hand? With the beers? I mean, you’re totally jacked, I know you can carry them, you could probably bench-press me, hah, but I- you want to- kitchen?”

Oh, Gods.

Caleb’s bad at talking to people that he’s attracted to. He knows that.

He doesn’t think he could possibly be as bad as Beau.

“Um,” Yasha says, seemingly a little overwhelmed. “I am- is there somewhere that I could put my jacket?”

“Oh!” Beau exclaims. “Oh, yeah! Sure! We have a coat rack, but you could, uh, y’know, if you wanted to, you could leave it in my room? That’d be- that’d be cool.”

“Um,” Yasha replies. “I could- I suppose I could do that. Um. Could I- can I drop these off in the kitchen first?” she asks, hefting the pack of beers, and Beau nods enthusiastically.

“Sure! Of course! That’s- yeah!”

Yasha smiles again, making Beau flush slightly, and turns towards the kitchen.

It’s at that moment that Caleb feels his phone buzz from inside his pocket.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] hey Caleb is Yasha at girls night?
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Ja, she just got here. Why?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I just realised that I think Yasha knows that we’re dating

Oh. Oh, Gods.

Caleb feels his stomach twist.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] How would she know that? Did you tell her?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] no!

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I don’t know what you’re comfortable with and I didn’t want to make anything about this public in case it made you uncomfortable

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I was going to ask when I saw you tomorrow if you’d be alright with me telling Yasha about us

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ve known her for as long as I can remember though and she’s seen you and knows that you’re my type

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] she knows what I’m like basically

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] she’s very intuitive when it comes to me and people that I like a lot

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] so I haven’t told her but she might just… know

Oh, Caleb thinks to himself absently. Oh. I’m his type.

It’s strangely reassuring. Despite the two definitely-dates they’ve been on and their lunchtime meetings and the number of smiles and almost fond looks that Caleb has spotted Molly casting his way, it’s still nice to know that Molly likes him. That Molly is attracted to him.

Caleb wants Molly to be attracted to him. He doesn’t deserve it and has absolutely no right to even be thinking that, but he wants Molly to be attracted to him. He wants to make Molly feel the same way that Molly makes Caleb feel: like things are good and okay and beautiful for once. He wants to make Molly happy.

Gods, he really wants to make Molly happy.

He wants to kiss him again.

But Molly is not here, and Caleb is not brave, and so he can’t. Instead, he looks down at his phone, thinks about Molly and Yasha and trust, and texts Molly back.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] That’s alright, Mollymauk. I do not mind Yasha knowing.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Nott, my flatmate, already knows.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I know, she suggested we go on a paintballing date -laughing face tiefling emoji-

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Oh. Yes. So she did.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I am sorry, I did not ask you before I told her.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] no no it’s alright! I don’t mind

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] really

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] you trust Nott and that’s good enough for me

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I trust your decisions, Caleb
“Gods,” Jester says, and Caleb looks up from his phone to see Jester looking pointedly back and forth between him and Beau, Yasha disappearing into the kitchen behind her. “You two are so useless!”

“Hey,” Caleb complains quietly, feeling somewhat put out.

“Hey!” Beau complains, at a much louder volume. “I know what I’m doing! I can talk to girls!”

“Prove it!” Jester challenges. “Offer Yasha a drink when she gets back in a normal way and then give it to her without spilling any of it on yourself.”

“I can do that,” Beau replies immediately. “I used to work at a bar; I can totally do that, sure, no problem.”

“Great!” Jester replies, and she reaches out to grab Beau by the shoulders, spinning her around and pointing her towards the kitchen. “Aaaand… go!”

She releases Beau's shoulders and immediately walks over to the door to the living room, giving every impression of being sweet and innocent and not a mischievous, conniving mastermind. Caleb presses himself against the wall, feeling Nott leaning against his legs, and does his best to look small and invisible as Yasha steps out of the kitchen.

He looks over at Beau. Beau stares in silence for a few moments, and it’s only when Nott leans over to whack her gently on the shin that she takes a breath, swallows, and finally speaks.

“Well, no, on second thought, he really does want to see it, if only for the reassurance that he’s not as useless a gay as Beau is a lesbian. He’s heard enough stories from Jester to know what Beau is like. And if his suspicions are correct, then he rather feels that this will end up being something of a car crash; it’ll be horrific and terrible, with numerous casualties, and it’ll be absolutely impossible to look away from.

Caleb opens his eyes.

“Hey,” Beau says again. Caleb respects her dedication. He’s very certain that if he nearly fell through a door in front of Molly then he’d spend the next few weeks hiding away from the world and hoping that no one remembered it. “Could I- you- thirsty? You thirsty? You want, uh, you want-liquid? Water? You want a drink?”
Yasha smiles slightly and gestures back into the kitchen, where Caleb can see the pack of beers left on the counter. “Thank you for the offer,” she says softly, “but I already brought some.”

“Oh,” Beau says, sounding crestfallen. “Oh, that’s- that’s cool. That’s cool. I’ll just, uh-“ She sniffs and looks over towards the kitchen. “I’ll just- y’know, I’ll get a drink. For myself. Not for you. You already have drinks. Unless you want a different drink?”

“No, thank you. But,” Yasha says, “I could- if you wanted, I could get you a drink? If you want a drink. I don’t want to assume anything-”

“No!” Beau butts in, and she pushes herself off the wall, moving forwards a bit. “No, no, that’d be great!”

This is disastrous. This is amazing. Caleb looks over at Jester, who grins and nods. I know, her expression seems to say, as both Beau and Yasha move into the kitchen. They’re both awful at flirting. Her expression shifts. You’re also awful at flirting.

Caleb frowns. How would you know? You have never seen me flirting.

Jester looks down at Caleb’s phone, back at his face, down at his phone, and back at his face again. She raises an eyebrow. I know for a fact that I just watched you flirt over text like a teenager.

Nott, standing next to Caleb, nods. It’s true. He really does flirt like a giggly teenager.

Caleb glares at her. How dare you.

Nott doesn’t even look at him, but she shrugs anyway. I’ve seen it happen.


“Kneecap height,” she murmurs, and there’s a splash and a yelp from the kitchen. It seems that Beau didn’t quite manage to meet Jester’s challenge. “…Do we want to move into the living room now?” Nott asks after a pause. “Start Girl’s Night properly?”

Jester casts a longing look at the kitchen but nods anyway. “I guess,” she sighs, “I really wanted to see Beau spill a drink on herself. I wanted to see her go full disaster-lesbian.”

“There’s always time for Beau to go more disaster lesbian,” Nott says comfortingly, and she reaches out to pat Jester on the knee. “Don’t worry. Give it a few hours and then push her towards Yasha and see what happens.”

“Okay, okay, that’s a good plan, Nott.”

“I know.”

“This is why you’re my co-detective.”

“I know,” Nott repeats smugly. She nods towards the living room door. “Shall we?”

“We shall,” Jester replies regally. “Everything is already set up, and I have so many questions to ask.” She turns, grins widely at Caleb, and then disappears into the living room.

Oh, Scheisse.

Caleb feels his stomach grow cold. He knows that he agreed to this, that he agreed to Jester’s questions, but he still feels nerves starting to curl around his stomach and lungs, making his breath
come shorter and his guts feel uncomfortably knotted. He glances down at Nott, eyes wide and afraid, and she looks up when she feels his hand settle on her shoulder to give a quick, insistent shake.

“You remember what you promised, ja?” Caleb asks hurriedly, and Nott nods and pats his hand.

“I know,” she says. “I remember.” Nott takes his hand and starts tugging him through to the living room, where Jester is already sitting on a large, fluffy cushion on the floor, a bottle of nail polish sitting in front of her. Nott pats his hand again, steers him to the cushion across from Jester, and wanders off to bring over the nail polish collection.

It doesn’t take long for Caleb to settle back down into the usual routine of Girl’s Night – within a handful of minutes, he’s sitting down on the cushion in a loose circle with Jester and Nott, Nott holding one of his hands as she rummages through Jester’s seemingly bottomless box of nail polishes. Caleb swears that Jester manages to fit in more tiny bottles than physics would normally allow, but Jester has promised him time and time again that it is not a nail polish box of holding but is just a regular box and that she happens to have incredible ‘nail polish tetris’ skills.

And it seems that Nott knows exactly what she’s looking for, too, because, after just a few seconds of rummaging, she makes a small, satisfied sound and withdraws a bottle of dark blue polish.

“Ooh,” Jester says, already part way through painting her own nails a soft, sparkly pink. “Is that for Caleb?”

“Yeah,” Nott confirms, holding the bottle up against Caleb’s face. Caleb doesn’t move, sitting perfectly still as Nott glances between him and the bottle, and soon she gives another small nod. “I think I’ll go for this one tonight,” she announces.

“Do you want any sparkles? Or sequins?”

“No,” Jester and Nott reply simultaneously. Caleb rolls his eyes and leans back against the couch, watching as Nott briefly drops his hand to open the bottle. “Trust me,” Nott continues, “This will look great on you. Your… date will love it.”

It’s awkward, and it’s an obvious attempt at avoiding saying Molly’s name, but Caleb appreciates it all the same. Nott might be terrible at lying and terrible at hiding when she’s lying, but she tries all the same. Caleb knows that she won’t tell Jester anything that he hasn’t said she can. He knows that she’ll step in if he starts to look too panicked.

He also knows the smile that’s starting to slowly spread across Jester’s face. When Nott reaches out to take Caleb’s unresisting hand to start applying the nail polish, Jester sets her own bottle of polish down, shuffles closer, and rests her chin on her hands.

“Ca-leb?” she singsongs.

Caleb sighs. “Yes, Jester?”

“Can I ask you some questions?”

“…What will happen if I say no?”
“I won’t ask you any questions,” Jester replies promptly. “But, I will keep giving you my looks. The evil ones.” She narrows her eyes in a glare. “One of these looks. But worse.”

Caleb’s been on the receiving end of Jester’s evil looks before. With the proper intent behind them, they’re downright terrifying. He’s not sure how a single look from the short, blue tiefling can remind him so immediately of her very, very large muscles and how easily she could break him like a twig or make his life hell in a number of ways, but they do. Jester’s looks are like stiletto heels – often beautiful, enticing to the right person, and absolutely capable of stabbing right through your foot.

“…You can ask me your questions,” Caleb says after a moment’s thought, and Jester’s face immediately breaks into a wide smile.

“Great!” she chirps. She immediately starts shuffling around on the cushion, moving in closer towards Caleb. Caleb leans back on instinct and gets a small snarl from Nott for his troubles.

“Don’t yank your hand,” she mutters, and Caleb whispers back a quick ‘Sorry.’

“Okay, so,” Jester starts. She leans in a little closer, shuffling around on the cushion to get comfortable, and smiles at Caleb again. He feels it’s meant to be reassuring. It’s not. “I just have a few questions for you. Who was the date with, where did you go, what did you do, who were you with, how did it go, who was the date with, did you actually take my advice for once, who were you on a date with, and did you kiss them?”

Caleb blinks. That was more than a few questions. “…Could you ask those again?” he asks weakly, and Jester beams at him.

“Sure!” she says. “First of all: who was the date with?”

Caleb swallows. “Can I- can we come back to that question?”

Jester narrows her eyes at him. “…Do you promise that you’ll answer it later?”

“…Ja.” He’ll answer it. He just doesn’t need to let Jester know who ‘mystery tiefling’ is.

“Then we can move on,” Jester replies, but she still looks somewhat suspicious. “So, question two: What did you do? You said it was, like, casual, but that could still mean a lot of things, Caleb.”

“We, ah, we saw Titanic.”

Jester, somehow, perks up even more. “My mom is in that!” she says delightedly, and Caleb nods. “I know,” he says, “I am- I know, Jester.”

“Wasn’t she really good?”

“She was very good. It was a very good film.”

“Did you see her boobs?”

Caleb nearly chokes. “I- what?”

“Did you see her boobs?” Jester asks matter-of-factly. “In the ‘draw me like one of your Marquesian girls’ scene? Lots of people talk about her boobs in that scene. It’s super memorable.”

Caleb definitely remembers that scene. Caleb remembers watching the robe drop, feeling his face
turn red, and doing his best to look resolutely at the corner of the screen instead. He remembers thinking that the scene was somehow sweeter than he thought it would be based on what he had heard, but he also remembers absolutely, definitely, very certainly seeing Jester’s mom’s boobs.

“…I saw them,” Caleb admits awkwardly. Jester beams.

“Did you know that I was in that scene too?” she asks, and Caleb frowns.

“…No, I did not know that. Where were you?”

“I was in her belly! Mom was pregnant with me when they filmed it!” Jester tells Caleb proudly. “So, like, I wasn’t really on-screen, but I was still there. I was still in the movie.”

“Caleb?” Nott interrupts quietly from next to him, patting his hand. “I need your other hand to keep painting your nails.”

Caleb moves his hand over to her without looking, still caught up in this new revelation. “So you were- huh.”

“I know.”

“Does this make you a movie star?” he asks and Jester gasps.

“Yes!” she exclaims. “I’m adding that to my business card right now. ‘Jester Lavore: Tiefling Trapeze Artist and Unsung Star of Titanic.’”

“I’m not sure I would go that far…”

“I’m a star,” Jester says firmly. “In personality, and looks, and charm, and everything.”

“You are very charming.”

“I know. But, more importantly, were you charming, Caleb? Did the date go well? Did you make out?”

“Your nails are done,” Nott says quietly, and Caleb barely hears her for the very simple reason that his brain is quite abruptly filled with thoughts of making out with Molly. It’s- he’s- it’s very distracting, frankly. Caleb only feels his brain pull back to the present when he feels Nott let go his hand and stand up to move towards the door to the kitchen.

“Um,” he croaks, “It went- it- it went well.”

“Did you take my advice?”

“…Was?” Caleb asks absently, his gaze still focused somewhere in the vicinity of the door as Nott returns with a bottle and moves to sit on the wide windowsill.

“My fashion advice!” Jester repeats. “When you asked me what to wear!”

“Oh!” Caleb looks back at her. “Oh, ja, I took it. I trust your fashion sense, Jester.”

“As you should,” she replies, sounding just a little bit smug. “I have excellent taste. You must have looked excellent.”

Caleb smiles a little. “Mol- my date, ah, seemed to think so…”
Jester grins. “Do you know what that sounds like?”

“No?”

“That sounds like time to go back to my first question!” Jester says, and she leans forwards on her cushion. Caleb leans back, looks around for somewhere to put his hands, remembers his freshly-painted nails, and holds his hands awkwardly in front of him. He’s not going to ruin Nott’s hard work. “As I said earlier,” Jester continues, “Who did you go on the date with?”

Caleb glances over at the door. Beau’s been standing by it for the last few minutes, talking quietly with Yasha about something that Caleb can’t make out. He glances at the window. Nott catches his eye from where she’s sitting beside it and shakes her head almost imperceptibly.

There’s no escape.

He’ll have to answer.

Thankfully, there are other ways to answer that question.

Caleb swallows, wets his lips, and speaks. “It was with mystery tiefling,” he says quietly, and Jester practically squeaks.

“Caleb!” she shrieks, “You- I’m so proud of you, Caleb!” She leans forward, gathering Caleb into a tight hug, and Caleb tries desperately not to smudge his nails against Jester’s very nice top. “You’ve come so far,” she says, and Caleb frowns at the sudden thickness in her voice.

“…Are you crying?”

There’s a quiet sniff. “…No.”

“Jester…”

“I’m just really, really, really proud of you, Caleb!” Jester leans back and quickly brushes the back of one hand against her eyes. “Remember when I first met you and it took me, like, four seconds to tell you that I’m super pan and two years for you to tell me that you’re gay? And I’m not judging – everyone comes out at their own pace – but you could barely even say it, and now you’re going on dates with super hot tieflings, and I’m really, really proud of you!”

Caleb smiles a little. “Thank you…”

“And you should be proud of you too!”

If only. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“Caleb,” Jester says seriously. “I mean it. You can be proud of yourself for this. You did really well.”

“I went on a date with someone,” Caleb says. “People do that all the time. It is hardly a- a mighty feat.”

“You went on a date with someone,” Jester replies, and her voice is softer now. “I know what you’re like. That’s a big thing for you.”

“I’m-”

“Caleb,” Jester says again. “Be nice to yourself about this? Please? For me?”
Caleb sighs. “Alright,” he says quietly, and Jester smiles at him. “I will- alright.”

“Let yourself be proud.”

“Alright.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

“Good. So long as we’re on the same page.” Caleb offers her a weak smile, and Jester smiles back in full force. “See! I knew you could still smile.” Caleb smiles wider. “That’s the happy Caleb I want to see,” Jester says, and Caleb actually laughs a little at that. It’s hard not to laugh around Jester, even when he starts thinking about uncomfortable things like the mere concept of being proud of himself.

“Thank you,” he says quietly, and Jester blows a kiss towards him in lieu of hugging him. Caleb likes that. He appreciates it.

“Of course! Now that you’re all happy again, can I keep asking my questions?”

As if a brief detour into Caleb’s quiet self-loathing would be enough to keep Jester off-track. Caleb smiles a little and nods. “Ja,” he says, “If you must.”

“I absolutely must,” Jester confirms. “Now, Caleb, I just have one itty-bitty question left for you,” She looks up at him imploringly, damn near fluttering her eyelashes. “It’s super tiny, very minor, totally unimportant.”

“…What is-”

“Did you kiss?” Jester asks before Caleb even finishes speaking. “Did you kiss mystery tiefling?”

Caleb doesn’t say anything. How is he meant to answer that? ‘Yes’ feels too short, too simple for the event that actually transpired. It hadn’t been anything world-shattering – quite the opposite, even. It had simply felt right. It had felt natural. It had felt like Caleb’s magic beneath his skin, electric and alive but his and right and perfect. ‘Yes’ is too small an answer. ‘Yes’ doesn’t give the answer that Caleb wants to give.

Thankfully, he knows Jester. He knows that he doesn’t actually have to answer at all.

“…Caleb,” Jester says slowly, her eyes tracing over his face. Caleb lifts his bottle, takes another sip, and does his best to hide his stupid, besotted smile. “Caleb, did you- oh my Gods. Oh my Gods!”

Caleb continues to say nothing. He knows that his smile gives him away – is sure of it – but he can’t keep it off his face. He presses the rim of the beer bottle against his lips, thinks of how the smooth, cool glass contrasts against the warmth of Molly’s lips, and smiles wider. Fuck. He had kissed Molly. He had actually done that. He’d done that, and his brain had hated him for it, but it had happened, and it was good, and he- he’d kissed Molly.

He’d kissed Molly.

_Gods above._

“Caleb,” Jester says again. She shuffles even closer forwards, getting as close into Caleb’s space as she can without making Caleb uncomfortable. “Please, please, I just need to hear you say it, that’s it. Please just let me know if you kissed mystery tiefling or not, please-“
“We kissed,” Caleb admits quietly, unable to keep it to himself any longer, and Jester’s resulting delighted squeal feels like it could shatter the windows.

“I’m so going to draw this for the Traveller!”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Tuesday, it rains.

That’s an understatement. On Tuesday, it absolutely pours. Caleb wakes up before his alarm goes off to the sound of rain lashing against his bedroom window, the storm clouds that had been hanging heavy overhead since Girls’ Night having evidently decided to finally break. The storm doesn’t let up as he gets ready for the day, instead continuing to rumble and periodically break the sky with thunder and flashes of lightning. When Caleb steps outside his building to walk to the bus stop, his coat done up as far as it will go, he finds himself really, really wishing that he had a car.

He gets soaked on the way to the bus stop, dries off slightly on the bus, and then steps off it again at the other end into rain that, impossibly, feels even heavier than when he left. Caleb half-jogs the distance between his bus stop and his building, feeling the chilly water seeping through his shoes and socks and turning his toes slightly numb. It’s a spring storm and not as freezing as it could be, but it’s a fact that’s of little consolation to Caleb as he splashes past the overflowing gutters, lifting his satchel above his head in a paltry attempt to keep some small part of himself dry.

It doesn’t work. When Caleb pushes open the door to his office and squelches inside, he feels soaked down to the skin, wet and cold and utterly miserable. He does his best to tell himself that he’s not feeling miserable partly because he didn’t see Molly that morning. He tells himself that as he shrugs out of his coat and his soaked jumper and leaves them to dry on his radiator. To feel marginally disappointed over something as small as that would be- well, it would be ridiculous. It makes perfect sense that Caleb didn’t see Molly that morning. He wants there to be a chance that he simply didn’t see Molly because he sprinted into his building without looking around for him, hurrying into the warmth and shelter his office provides, but he knows that’s just wishful thinking. The storm is horrific. Caleb wouldn’t want to be outside in it, and he can’t imagine that Molly would either. There’s no reason for Caleb to see Molly at all that day. He knows that. It makes perfect sense.

It doesn’t stop him from glancing out of his window every ten minutes, hoping to catch a glimpse of purple through the sleeting rain. He’s been seeing Molly every weekday for lunch for almost two weeks now, and it feels odd not to see him today – his absence makes Caleb feel twitchy, nervous and unsure like some fundamental part of the world is missing. He doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like not seeing Molly. He doesn’t really see him on weekends, but he knows to expect that. That’s normal.

This sudden rain-caused absence is not, and Caleb hates it.

He lasts until lunchtime before he caves and messages Molly. Bryce drops by the office as they always do to remind Caleb to eat lunch, and they politely don’t say anything about the rain or Molly. Caleb appreciates that. Bryce is smart, and Caleb has no doubts that they know exactly why he was looking somewhat grumpy when they opened the door. He digs his lunch out of his bag, waits for Bryce to leave, and then looks towards the window again.

He wants to see Molly for lunch. He knows that he can’t.

But he’s going to try anyway.

This is stupid, Caleb tells himself as he picks up his phone, clicking through to the messages page. Molly is clearly not here. There is no point in asking him to lunch. There is no point in texting him.
His thumbs hover over the number pad. On-screen, Molly’s name stares at him in small black letters. *You do not have to see Mollymauk all the time. You do not need to text him.*

*You are not his boyfriend. You are barely even dating him.*

*This is stupid.*

Caleb texts Molly all the same.

[**To: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] I do not suppose that you would be available for lunch today?

He hits ‘send’ and immediately puts his phone to one side. Fuck. *Fuck.* Gods above, what is he, twelve? Is it really necessary to text his crush to ask him to join him for lunch in the middle of a storm simply because he hasn’t heard his voice in twenty-four hours?

Apparently so. Apparently, Caleb *is* as pathetic as he thinks he is.

About fifteen long, tense minutes go by before Caleb’s phone buzzes. And when it finally does, he doesn’t think he’s ever moved faster.

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] darling if I was on campus I would love to have lunch with you

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] I’m stuck practising at the carnival because of the weather and it’s miserable :(

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] I’m sorry I didn’t get to say good morning to you today

[**To: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] I am sorry that I didn’t get to say ‘good morning’ to you too, Mollymauk.

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] well we can do it over text?

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] good morning, professor

Caleb smiles. It’s not the same, not by a long shot, but it’s still nice. It’s sweet. He can hear the words in Molly’s voice. But lovely as that is, it only makes him miss Molly more.

[**To: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] Good morning, Mollymauk.

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] hmm. not as good as the real thing

[**To: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] No. It is not as good as the real thing.

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] well if you wanted we could maybe call? I’m taking a break from practising so I’m not doing anything for a while

That’s… that’s certainly an idea. Caleb can’t remember the last time that he actually used his phone for a phone call – mostly he uses it to text Nott or Jester or Bryce or, more recently, Molly. He’s not sure he can even remember *how* to call someone on it.

But he wants to. He *really* wants to. He knows that he last saw Molly on Monday, and on Friday before that, and that the degree of how off-balance he feels is probably beginning to cross over from ‘smitten’ to ‘pathetic,’ but he really wants to hear Molly’s voice again.

In his hand, his phone buzzes twice.

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] Caleb?

[**From: Mollymauk Tealeaf**] we don’t have to call if you’re busy, that’s fine ^^
Caleb closes his eyes, wracks his memory for the right buttons to press, and calls.

Molly picks up almost immediately.

“Hey!” comes Molly’s voice, slightly crackly and distorted over the phone, and Caleb feels the knot that had been sitting in his chest since he got to the office loosen immediately.

“Hi,” he replies quietly. “I- ah- good morning, Mollymauk.”

Molly laughs. Even warped by the poor signal, it sounds beautiful. “Good morning, Caleb,” he replies, his voice light and faintly teasing. “I’ll tell you what, this is much better than text.”

Caleb smiles. “It is,” he agrees. “It is, um, it is very nice to hear your voice.”

“It’s nice to hear yours too, Caleb.

“Has- have you had a good day?”

Molly sighs in a rush of static. “I mean, it’s been alright. I didn’t get to see you this morning, which was a little bit of a downer, and Jester and I have been struggling to work out this bit of the performance that we’re planning.”

“Is that, um… could I help with that?” Caleb asks. He knows that he almost certainly can’t, having absolutely no knowledge about trapeze skills other than that Mollymauk looks far, far too attractive in a skin-tight leotard, but he wants to help. He wants to make Molly sound less sad.

And, somehow, it seems that he’s already succeeded – over the phone Molly laughs again, bright and sparkling. “Caleb, darling,” he says, and Caleb feels himself smile helplessly at ‘darling’. “You already have.”

“…How?”

“With your delightful presence,” Molly teases.

“But I am not there.”

“No, but I get to hear your voice. That’s definitely enough to remove the downer.”

Oh. “That is- I’m- I’m glad to hear that, Mollymauk.”

“Mm, you’re welcome. You have a very nice voice.”

Gods. Caleb’s almost glad that Molly’s not there, just so that he can’t see how much that one compliment has made him blush. “I- you-“ he stammers. “You have- you have a very nice voice too. It is- your accent is very interesting.”

Molly laughs again, and the sound sends a shiver down Caleb’s spine. “Well,” he says, “I’m glad to know that a respected doctor of linguistics thinks that I have an interesting accent. I hope that’s a compliment.”

“It is- I- yes.”

“It’s a very good compliment, dear. It means a lot, especially coming from you, the infinitely wise professor who knows so much about language.”

Caleb can feel himself blushing harder. “I- I am hardly an expert on accents, Molly.”
“Mm, maybe not, but you’re certainly an expert in something. I'm sure they don’t give away doctorates in Ancient Sylvan for nothing.”

Caleb doesn’t know what to say in response to that, and so he says nothing. They lapse into silence, but somehow it doesn’t feel uncomfortable or awkward – it just feels like a pause, like a resting place before the conversation continues. Caleb has no worries about speaking too much or not speaking enough. It’s just a conversation. It’s a conversation with Molly.

It’s easy. The only person Caleb normally has conversations this easy with is Nott, and even then it took him a good year or so to reach the same level of comfort that he’s achieved with Molly in a few short months. It would almost be concerning if it wasn’t so nice.

They sit in comfortable silence for a few more moments, and then Molly asks something that Caleb never, never would have expected.

“Caleb?”

“Mm?”

“I don’t suppose you’d know how to catch a cat, would you?”

Caleb frowns. “Why are you trying to catch a cat?”

“Remember that cat I told you about a few days ago? The one who’s been hanging around at the carnival?”

“Ja.”

“Well, we all assumed he was owned by someone,” Molly continues, “But he was just wandering through because- well, because cats are like that. So we figured that we wouldn’t see him in the rain because he would go back home to where it’s dry and warm, even if Yasha has been feeding him little treats whenever she sees him.”

Caleb laughs a little at the mental image of Yasha, the six-foot-something woman with more muscle than two Calebs combined, carefully offering tiny treats to a cat.

On the other end of the line Molly laughs softly too.

“I know, I know, people don’t expect it from Yasha, but she’s really a very lovely person. She’s very sweet.”

“I know, I met her at Girl’s Night. She let Nott paint her nails.”

“That would explain the purple and blue. Yasha normally only paints her nails black.”

Caleb shrugs, even though he knows Molly can’t see out. Outside his window the rain continues to lash down. “Nott thought it would match her eyes.”

“Nott was right,” Molly agrees. “Anyway, this cat. Do you know how to catch a cat? It’s still hanging around looking all sad and scrawny and we think Gustav was right when he said it was a stray, but it keeps running away whenever we get close.”

Caleb thinks for a moment. He hasn’t had a cat in a long time, not since he lived with his parents, but he still remembers all the tricks and techniques they would use to catch the tabby when he was feeling skittish. “You could, ah, you could walk after it?”
There’s a pause. “…Walk after it?” Molly asks disbelievingly.

“Ja, walk after it. Humans are by nature pursuit predators – I am not so sure about tieflings but I assume it would be similar for you - and cats are not. They are sprinters. They are not made for long chases. If you simply follow the cat and walk after it when it runs then eventually it will grow tired and lie down and you will simply be able to pick it up.”

“And that works?”

“It worked for my cat. He was very skittish about storms.”

“This one just seems skittish in general. He’s cute, though.”

“Cats normally are. I do not understand why so many people do not like them.”

“Because they try to read cat body language like they would a dog!” Molly bursts out. “A lot of people – and no offence to you, Caleb, but it’s normally humans and elves and the like – seem to think that any species with a tail, tabaxi and tieflings included, have the same body language as dogs!” Molly gives an annoyed huff and the connection turns it into a grumble of static. “And we don’t! Tiefling tail language is very different to dogs, and it’s an important part of how we read and present emotions. People don’t seem to get that. They also don’t get it with cats.”

Caleb blinks. “They don’t,” he agrees, slightly stunned at the indignant annoyance in Molly’s voice. “They- I suppose that would explain it. Anyone who tried to read cat body language as if they were a dog would get clawed very quickly.”

“Exactly! And then they say that cats are grumpy when they’re not! They communicate perfectly clearly – you just have to be able to understand them.”

“Ja, precisely. Like knowing that when they show you their belly it is not an invitation to pet it.”

“…They do look really cute when they do that, though,” Molly says, and Caleb laughs quietly.

“They do,” he agrees. “And when they have their little paws up – that is very cute.”

“It’s fucking adorable.”

“It is,” Caleb says. “It really, really is.”

Molly laughs softly. “Anyway,” he says, “That’s enough about me and the cat situation! Tell me all about your day!”

Caleb smiles, and does. They talk until Caleb can hear Jester starting to pester Molly from his end of the line, bugging him about who he’s talking to and reminding him that they really have to get back to practising, and when they hang up Caleb feels so, so much lighter than he did when he arrived at the office. He no longer cares that his shoes are still damp. He no longer cares that the moisture from his drying clothes is steaming up the inside of his windows. He puts his phone to one side, smiles helplessly to himself for a while, and then throws himself back into his work.

He doesn’t hear from Molly again until he’s back home.

Caleb is curled up on the couch in his empty apartment, watching a video on his laptop, when his phone buzzes, interrupting the man on-screen who’s explaining the history of emoji. It’s an interesting video and not one that Caleb ever thought he would find as engaging as he does. He blames Molly for it. Molly, with his new excitement and interest in emoji and their naming and
history and convention, has made Caleb curious, prompting Caleb to seek out more information about this strange, niche area of knowledge that’s got Molly so fascinated.

And it is very interesting, he admits. The man in the video is enthusiastic and engaging, knowledgeable and good at public speaking in a way that Caleb could never hope to be. And when Caleb’s phone buzzes on the coffee table, he very nearly ignores it.

But he doesn’t, because it could be Molly.

Caleb pauses the video, grabs his phone, reads the message, and replies.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Caleb are you at home right now?
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’m really sorry if this is a bad time or a weird question but I need your help

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I am. What’s happening?
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Is everything alright?

There’s no response. Seconds pass, ticking past each other one by one until the phone screen turns dark once again, and Caleb feels his heart rate start to pick up with every single one. This isn’t like Molly. This isn’t at all like Molly. Molly doesn’t always reply quickly during the day, kept busy by his own work and life in general, but their evening conversations are normally quite swift once they start. The silence is awful, and terrifying, and Caleb doesn’t know what to do.

A few more seconds pass, and then suddenly the door buzzer for the flat rings out, breaking the silence of the room. Caleb jumps at the sound of it, jolting off the couch and quickly walking over to grab the phone receiver. “Hallo?”

“Hey,” comes a voice on the other end of the line. It’s crackly and a bit distorted but undeniably Molly’s, and he sounds nervous. “Can I- can I come in?”

“I- um- ja, of course.” Caleb reaches out and presses the button to let Molly into the building, frowning the whole time. Why is Molly here? Why would Molly be here now, when they had no plans on seeing each other until their normal lunch tomorrow? Why would Molly come all the way out to Caleb’s flat in the middle of a day-long storm?

Is Molly alright?

Caleb has many questions and absolutely no answers. He paces back and forth in front of the door as he waits for Molly to climb the stairs to his flat, sure that he must be slowly wearing a track in the carpet as he does so. When a knock finally comes at the door, he almost falls over himself in his rush to answer it. He flings the door open to reveal Molly, soaked to the skin and carrying what appears to be a bundle of equally soaked blankets.
“Hey,” Molly says quietly. In his arms, the bundle twitches.

“Hi,” Caleb replies.

“Do you- I- do you have any dry blankets?” Molly asks, and Caleb looks at him, looks down at the shifting, moving bundle in his arms, and then looks back at Molly. Molly shifts from foot to foot, his tail twitching agitatedly behind him – he looks the most nervous and uncertain that Caleb’s ever seen him, his fingers tapping anxiously against the bundle as he chews on his lower lip. “I, um- I’m sorry,” Molly says, as Caleb continues to stare at him. “I’m really sorry. For not messaging you about this. For not explaining. It’s just- I- we- I caught the cat,” he finishes lamely. As he hefts the soaking bundle, Caleb watches a small, furred head emerge from an opening and give a tiny sneeze. “I- I was going to keep him at my flat, but my flatmate is really allergic to cats and so that wouldn’t work out, and no one else at the carnival wanted to or was able to keep him. But I know that you really like cats, so I thought that, if nothing else, surely you would know a good shelter, and I didn’t know what else to do, and.“

“Mollymauk,” Caleb says, and Molly shuts up immediately. “Come inside.” Caleb steps aside, still transfixed by the sight of the small, dark ginger cat – who’s only now starting to look around with visible curiosity – and beckons for Molly to step inside. Molly does after a moment’s hesitation, leaving a visible trail of drip marks on the floor.

“I’m really sorry,” he murmurs again as he walks past Caleb. Caleb can see the curls of his hair
clinging to his neck; he can see how the rain has pressed his thin shirt and cardigan almost flat against his body. He can practically see Molly’s tattoos through the soaked fabric. “I- I didn’t know what else to do, and you were the first person I thought of. I can go if this- if this is too much or if you were doing something, I completely get it.”

“Mollymauk,” Caleb says again, his voice a little firmer before it softens with his next words. “It’s alright.” He turns to face Molly as he shuts the door, giving him a small, soft smile. “It’s alright.”

And, somehow, it really is. It’s unexpected and strange, and it’s absolutely thrown off any and all evening plans that Caleb had – namely, watching more videos about emoji and planning a mock exam paper for his students – but it’s still alright. It’s alright because it’s Molly, and Caleb trusts him, and he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Molly would not have done this if he didn’t absolutely have to. Molly respects Caleb too much for that. He respects Caleb’s boundaries too much for that.

Molly smiles back at him. It’s small and still uncertain but definitely there. “Okay,” he replies quietly. “Thank you, Caleb. Should, um- Should I take him to a shelter?”

Caleb shakes his head. “He can stay here,” he says quietly, looking back down at the small cat. The cat sneezes, shaking its head and sending droplets flying from its whiskers, and Caleb feels himself become even more certain. He’s going to look after this cat. He’s going to get this cat dry and comfortable and fed and happy. And then, once he knows that it’s ok, he’ll take it to the vets to see if it’s microchipped or not.

He hopes not. He hopes no one comes forward to claim it. He’s only seen the cat for all of two minutes, but he can already feel himself falling in love with it.

“He can stay here tonight,” he repeats quietly. “I have- I have some tinned fish that I can feed him. He will be alright for tonight.”

“That’s good,” he hears Molly say quietly. “I was- Yasha was worried about him. I was worried about him. He’s kind of small…”

“Some cats are,” Caleb assures him. “But I will look at him once he’s dried off. Now, take off your shoes and come through to the living room. I will find some towels for him.” Molly nods and takes a moment to awkwardly remove his shoes one-handed, still keeping a firm grasp on the cat, and Caleb quickly tucks his shoes under the radiator once they’re off.

“Should I- should I just hold him while you get the towels?” Molly asks, following Caleb through to the main living room area, and Caleb shakes his head as he starts tidying up the space.

“No,” he replies. “Let him out of the blankets and try and keep him away from the kitchen until he settles down enough to start grooming himself. He will probably want to get dry as soon as possible, so he should start grooming himself after you let him out of the blankets. It will be good to towel-dry him too, though. We can towel-dry him to remove most of the water and then let him groom himself until he is comfortable.”

 “…You know a lot about cats,” Molly says quietly. Caleb shrugs.

“I grew up with one,” he explains, putting away the last few items before stepping back, moving over to the bathroom door. “And I am very fond of them.”

Molly smiles. “I know you are,” he says. “That’s why I brought him to you.”

Caleb smiles back despite himself. “Thank you,” he says sincerely, “I will do my best to look after
“I know you will.” Molly replies. Caleb smiles a little wider, feeling himself blush, and ducks into the bathroom with a small, half-Zennian mumble. He doesn’t take long in the bathroom, quickly opening the storage cupboard to dig out a few of his older towels, and he’s about to leave and return to the living room when he hesitates, inches away from the door.

Molly had been soaked to the bone when he arrived, dripping all over the floor, with his hair and clothes plastered to his body. His clothes had seemed thin, but they would still take a while to dry, and Caleb knows from experience just how hard it can be to get warm when your clothes are soaked. Molly had seemed particularly susceptible to the cold on their last date. He had practically told Caleb as much.

The quickest way to get warm is to change out of wet clothes and into dry ones.

_This is fine_, Caleb reasons to himself, stepping out of the bathroom and into his bedroom without glancing over at Molly. _This is- this is fine. This is just polite. I am simply stopping Molly from catching a cold._

He tries not to think too hard about Molly in his clothes. He tries not to imagine how his loose, comfortable clothes will look on Molly’s smaller frame.

Being Caleb, he absolutely fails.

He rummages quickly through his drawers, digging out an old university-branded t-shirt, a loose cardigan, and a pair of tatty sweatpants that he was barely even aware that he owned. He’s about to turn and leave when he remembers their phone call from earlier that day.

Caleb pauses, finds a pair of scissors, spends a quick moment doing some mental calculations, and then cuts a very careful hole at the back of the sweatpants so that there’s something for Molly’s tail to come through.

Tiefling tails are as important to their body language and expressing of emotions as hand gestures and actions are to humans. Caleb isn’t going to limit Molly’s tail.

He stands up, looks over his work, and returns to the living room, placing the clothes on the kitchen island. He’d been able to hear Molly talking quietly through the bathroom door - when he gets closer, he sees Molly kneeling in front of the cat with a towel in hand, talking to it softly.

“Hey there,” Molly is saying quietly as the cat twists and squirms in front of him. It’s unclear if the cat is trying to escape or push closer towards the dry towel, but Molly seems to be handling it fine no matter what the situation. “Hey,” he says again, his voice half a laugh. The cat headbutts his knee and purrs loudly, and Molly pauses in his towelling to hold out a hand to it, letting the cat sniff cautiously at his fingers. “Hey, darling. Oh, you’re just lovely, aren’t you? So pretty, so handsome, what a lovely, gorgeous cat you are, little one.” The cat presses its head to Molly’s hand, and Molly gently scratches it under the chin, making it purr before it meows loudly. Molly laughs and quickly gets back to towelling it dry. “Yes, yes, I know. You’re sad and wet,” he continues, “but you’re doing so well, and you’ll be all lovely and dry soon, and you’ll have something to eat and something to drink, and I know that Caleb will look after you until we can take you to the vet’s to see if you’re microchipped. Caleb’s a really good guy. He’s going to take great care of you. He’s going to take the _best_ care of you, my darling Mr… I don’t know. You don’t have a name. We need to give you a name-“

“Frumpkin,” Caleb interrupts, unable to stop himself. Molly jumps a little, so engrossed in talking to
the cat that he apparently hadn’t heard Caleb’s approach, and turns to look at him, giving him a
confused but curious look.

“…Frumpkin?” he asks softly.

Caleb shrugs. “My old family cat was called Frumpkin,” he mutters quietly. “And this- this cat looks
a lot like him.”

“How,” Molly hums thoughtfully, and he looks back at the cat in front of him. The cat meows once,
loudly, and headbutts his knee again. “Frumpkin,” Molly repeats. He reaches down, letting the cat
sniff at his fingers, and then scratches him behind the ear once it’s clear he has permission. “I like
that. You look like a Frumpkin.” He turns his head and flashes Caleb a grin so bright and cheerful
it’s almost blinding. “Frumpkin it is!”

Caleb smiles back, crossing to kneel down next to Molly. He lets Frumpkin sniff at his fingers before
he picks up a towel, joining Molly in continuing to dry Frumpkin off. It doesn’t take long for them to
finish drying Frumpkin to his satisfaction – after ten minutes or so of rubbing at his fur with the
towels, the cat starts squirming away, ducking out from under the towels to pad across the room and
start grooming himself instead.

“Well,” Molly says with a slight laugh, “I suppose that’s us done.”

“It would seem so,” Caleb agrees. He stands, crossing to the radiator to hang the now-soaked towels
on it alongside the blankets that Molly had brought Frumpkin to the apartment in, and returns to
Molly’s side, sitting down on the floor next to him and absentmindedly brushing the strands of hair that had
escaped from his short ponytail back behind his ear. Molly shivers a little next to him, wrapping his
arms around his torso. But when Caleb glances at him, it’s to see Molly looking over at Caleb’s
hands with a confused look on his face.

“Are your nails painted?” he asks suddenly, and Caleb blinks.

“Oh!” he says, “Yes, they are. I forgot about that. Nott painted them for me at Girl’s Night.”

“Girl’s Night?” Molly asks, raising an eyebrow. Caleb shrugs.

“Girl’s Night with Caleb,” he elaborates. “Jester says that I am very good at braiding hair, so I get
invited along a lot. It is very good fun. Nott thought that this colour would suit me.”

Molly glances down at Caleb’s nails. “Hmm,” he says thoughtfully and looks back at Caleb. “It
does. It looks good on you. The colour suits you.” He shivers again, hugging himself tighter. This
close to him, Caleb can see the water still beaded against his lavender skin, sticking his clothes and
hair to his body.

“Molly?” Caleb asks.

“Mm?”

“It is,” Caleb begins, feeling himself starting to scarlet just at the thought of what he says next. “It is,
um, it is easier to get warm if you change out of your wet clothes…”

Molly laughs a little and shivers again. “Well,” he replies, “I would love to, but I was a bit of an idiot
and didn’t bring any spare clothes with me.”

“Um,” Caleb begins. “I have, uh, I may have- there is- there are dry clothes. On the kitchen counter.
If you- if you would like to borrow them.”
“Oh,” Molly says. He shivers again and glances over towards the kitchen, where the small stack of clothes sits innocuously on the counter. “I- I mean, if it’s alright with you, I’d love to borrow them. I’m fucking freezing…”

“I brought them through for you,” Caleb admits quietly. “I remembered how quickly you got cold on our last date. I thought you might need them.”

“…Caleb?”

“Ja?”

“That’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

Caleb’s sure that can’t be right, and he hovers in silence for a few moments, torn between not believing that Molly would lie to him but still being completely certain that this one single, tiny act cannot be the most kindness Molly has ever received. Molly is too good for that. Molly deserves all the kindness in the world.

“Well,” he says, shifting a little in place, “It is- it is just polite, Mollymauk.”

Molly shrugs. “Maybe,” he says, “But you still thought to do it.” He stands from the floor, running a hand through his soaked hair, and tilts his head towards the bathroom. “I’m going to go get changed,” he says quietly. “Would it be alright if I borrowed a towel to dry off? My hair’s absolutely soaking.”

“Of course,” Caleb replies. “The navy towel on the back of the door is clean. You’re welcome to use that one.”

“Thanks,” Molly says, and he smiles at Caleb one more time before crossing to the kitchen area, taking the clothes from the counter, and disappearing into the bathroom.

While Molly is gone, Caleb busies himself with laying out food and water for Frumpkin. He finds an old, shallow plastic tub in a cupboard and shreds some newspaper to make a makeshift litter tray, hoping that Frumpkin had learned how to use them at his old house. He tucks it away in a corner, aware of Frumpkin watching him from beside the food bowl as he does so, and has just returned to the couch when he hears the bathroom door click open. He glances over, mind still full of thoughts of all the things he’ll need to get Frumpkin, and immediately freezes when he sees Molly.

Because he’s-

Caleb is-

Caleb hates to admit that he’s smitten, but he really thinks that he might be. Because Molly is standing by the bathroom door in Caleb’s t-shirt and Caleb’s ratty sweatpants, his hair a towel-dried mess around his head and his face make-up free, and he looks nothing like his usual put-together, fashionable and beautiful self, but all Caleb can think is that Molly looks stunning. His tail is swaying slowly behind him, poking through the hole Caleb had cut in the sweatpants before bringing them through. The t-shirt is hanging loose off his smaller frame, and the ends of the sweatpants are pooling around his feet so that only his toes are sticking out from under them, and he looks stunning.

He looks so good, and Caleb wants to kiss him.

“Hey,” Molly says softly, and Caleb blinks, suddenly aware that he’s been caught staring. Molly only smiles softly, turning his head to gesture back into the bathroom. “I hung my clothes up on the towel rack in there because I know the radiator out here is kind of full of cat-blankets. I hope that’s
“Oh, ja, of course,” Caleb says immediately, and Molly smiles wider and walks further into the room. He shuffles a little, clearly trying not to trip over the longer legs of the sweatpants, but he doesn’t seem to mind at all – he flops down on the couch next to Caleb with a soft smile on his face, their knees brushing together, and Caleb cannot help but smile back. “Hallo,” he says quietly. Molly smiles wider.

“Hello,” he says back. “Thank you for the clothes, Caleb.”

“Of course,” Caleb replies. “You- I- I did not want you catching a cold, Mollymauk.”

Molly doesn’t say anything in response to that, but Caleb can see him smiling softly out of the corner of his eye. Molly’s tail swishes slowly back and forth, brushing against Caleb’s ankle, and they both lapse into silence as they watch Frumpkin climb up into the armchair on the far side of the coffee table, give himself a few more licks, curl up, and very quickly fall asleep.

“You brought me a cat,” Caleb murmurs absently, watching Frumpkin’s sides rise and fall with his tiny cat-snores. “You brought me a cat, Mollymauk.”

Molly shrugs, and the action is enough to draw Caleb’s eye back to him. “I knew you would look after him,” Molly says simply. “I know that you like cats and that you want one and that you’re really, really smart, and so I figured that even if you weren’t able to look after him then you would at least know what to do—“

And then he falls silent with a small gasp, because Caleb is kissing him.

Caleb kisses Molly because he doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know if he can say anything, doesn’t know if there are any words in Common or in Zemnian or in any other language that could possibly hope to encapsulate what he’s feeling. He doesn’t feel like it’s possible for language as a whole to hold within its morphemes and phonemes the way that Molly’s words and actions and presence and everything have settled around Caleb’s heart and mind, warming him from the inside out and casting his doubts and fears and anxieties away for one beautiful, wonderful second.

There are no words that Caleb can think of to convey that, and so he kisses Molly instead.

He doesn’t feel afraid, not while the kiss lasts. He just feels calm – he doesn’t feel confident, not by a long shot, but he feels calm. He feels settled. He feels as though, for a single second, the only thing that he has to think about is Molly, and Molly’s lips beneath his own. He doesn’t have to think about his past or about his job or about what little, half-formed shreds of worth he has. They don’t matter in this moment.

They don’t matter at all.

All that matters now is Molly’s lips against Caleb’s, and Molly’s warmth against Caleb’s front, and absolutely nothing else.

But then the moment ends, and everything matters all over again.

Caleb manages to catch himself before he apologises when the kiss breaks, but it’s a close thing. The moment their lips separates and there’s a tiny amount of space between them, he can practically feel his brain kick back into overdrive, every fear and worry that the kiss had dispelled returning stronger than they had been before. They settle back into his mind like they never left, reaching down to his heart and lungs to make his breath come shorter and his heart pick up, hammering against his ribs until Caleb almost feels dizzy with it.
He looks up at Molly, aghast, and Molly only smiles softly, a flush dusting his cheeks and turning them a darker shade of purple, and reaches out to gently take Caleb’s hand.

“Mollymauk,” Caleb whispers. Molly squeezes his hand.

“Caleb,” he replies.

“I’m- I just- I—”

“You kissed me,” Molly supplies softly, still smiling. Caleb nods guiltily, shifting his gaze away from Molly.

“I did,” he admits.

“Did you want to kiss me?” Molly asks, his hand still warm and gentle around Caleb’s, and Caleb swallows and nods again.

“Yes,” he whispers.

“Do you want to kiss me again?”

He does. Gods above, he does.

Molly smiles at Caleb’s silence. “Would it make answering easier if you knew that I really, really want you to kiss me again?”

That does make answering easier, actually. Caleb blinks, and he can’t stop his gaze from dropping back down to Molly’s lips, soft and dusted in gold by the dim light of the lamp. He does want to kiss Molly again. He wants to kiss Molly so much, wants to kiss Molly more than he thinks he’s ever wanted to do anything, and Molly is right there in front of him, and he’s dressed in Caleb’s clothes, and he brought Caleb a cat, and he wants Caleb to kiss him too, and Caleb has been thinking about kissing Molly since their last date and-

And why shouldn’t he?

He’s allowed to want Molly. He’s allowed to kiss Molly.

He’s allowed to have this.

Caleb gathers every shred of courage in his body, holds them close and tight about his heart, and kisses Molly again.

And it is wonderful.

He fits his lips to the curves of Molly’s mouth, doing his very best to commit the shape of Molly’s lips to memory. Caleb knows how good his memory is, knows that he cannot, will not forget this for at least the next month, but he wants to remember this moment beyond that. He wants to remember the way that Molly shifts besides him, tensing for a fleeting moment before relaxing entirely into Caleb’s kiss and turning soft and careful and pliant against him. He wants to remember the sensation of Molly’s lips against his own, wants to remember the quiet of his apartment and how it’s broken only by their soft, mingling breaths. He wants to remember the cautious, careful touch of Molly’s tongue to his lips, wants to remember the way that Molly’s still-drying hair had brushed against his face when he’d leaned in to kiss him more.

He wants to remember everything.
“Caleb,” Molly murmurs against his lips, and Caleb makes a small sound partway to a groan. He doesn’t want to move away. He doesn’t want Molly to be leaning back slightly the way that he is, creating a sliver of space between them so that he can fill it with words. “Caleb, love. Can I touch you?”

Yes. Of course, yes. “Please.”

Molly nods and he ducks back in to press another fleeting kiss to Caleb’s lips, taking the sound of Caleb’s quiet whine with him when he sits back again. “Caleb,” he says seriously, and Caleb forces himself to stop staring at Molly’s lips and Molly’s tattoos and look him in the eye instead. “I’m going to put my hand on your hip, alright?”

Caleb nods. “Alright,” he echoes. “Can I- may I touch you too, Mollymauk?”

Molly grins. “Caleb, darling, you don’t have to ask.”

“But you did.”

“I didn’t want to startle you, love. I don’t want to rush anything.”

“I always want you to touch me, Caleb thinks but does not say. It is the truth, and he knows it is, but he is also so grateful for Molly’s careful questions. He wants to be touched by Molly, but he knows what his own brain is like. He knows how prone it is to taking things that Caleb loves and adores and wants and throwing them back in his face, reminding him that he is not worthy of this kindness. Reminding him that he is a broken, ugly thing who does not deserve any of this.

The questions help. The questions let Caleb check what he feels ready for and avoid incurring the brain-brambles’ wrath.

Caleb smiles. “Thank you, Molly,” he says quietly, and Molly smiles.

“I never want to make you uncomfortable, Caleb,” he says. “If I ever do something that you don’t like, if I ever do something that makes you uncomfortable, just let me know, and I’ll stop immediately. Alright?”

“Ja,” Caleb says, still reeling slightly at how understanding Molly is. “I- ja, alright.”

Molly’s smile widens. “I’m going to touch your hip,” he says again and Caleb nods. When Molly’s hand finally settles on his hip, though, it doesn’t feel like anything new: it just feels right. It feels natural. It feels as if Molly’s hand has rested on Caleb’s hip a hundred, a thousand times before. And for the first time that he can remember, Caleb doesn’t feel his normal, instinctive flinch-response to a new touch. It’s just Molly. And Molly is safe.

“Is this good?” Molly asks. Caleb nods, turning his hand to tangle Molly’s fingers with his own.

“It is,” he says quietly. “I- I like your hands a lot, Molly…”

Caleb knows how that sounds. He knows how it sounds because he’s thinking it the moment the words leave his lips, leaving him blushing scarlet under Molly’s equally red gaze, but Molly doesn’t seem to mind. Molly doesn’t comment. He just smiles, soft and sweet, and rubs his thumb against the jut of Caleb’s hip.

“I’m glad to hear that,” he says. “I like your hands too.”

Caleb smiles despite himself. “Good,” he hears himself, glancing up to meet Molly’s gaze again.
“That’s- good.”

“You want to get back to kissing me senseless now?” Molly asks with a teasing grin, and Caleb, in lieu of any spoken response, does exactly that and kisses Molly again.

And again.

He breaks away, takes a breath, and leans back in, tilting his head slightly and feeling Molly mirroring his actions beneath his lips, angling them until everything feels better. He moves in a little closer, feeling his confidence grow, and carefully moves one hand to brush against Molly’s waist.

When he finally presses his hand to Molly’s side, Molly gasps.

“Is this alright?” Caleb murmurs softly, his lips a mere hair’s breadth from Molly’s. Molly nods and kisses him quickly.

“Yes,” he says, “Yes, very.” He leans up, his lips meeting Caleb’s, and Caleb melts into the contact all over again.

Caleb loses time in a blur of slow, lazy kisses. At some point they reposition themselves on the couch, moving gradually until Caleb is practically lying over Molly on the cushions, both of Molly’s hands warm and certain on Caleb’s waist and one of Caleb’s hands curled loosely around Molly’s horn. Molly is warm beneath him, the fabric of his t-shirt soft where it brushes against the skin exposed by Caleb’s own hiked-up shirt, and he keeps making small, contented sounds into Caleb’s mouth. He sighs and gasps against Caleb’s lips, and when Caleb feels boldness start to rise in his chest and bites gently at Molly’s lower lip the tiefling actually moans, so softly and quietly that Caleb only barely hears it, close as he is. Molly’s hands stay exactly where he said they would, for all that Caleb finds his roaming, brushing against Molly’s sides and hips and against the perfect, fabric-clad curve of his waist. Molly seems receptive to those touches, wonderfully so: he hums against Caleb’s lips, twisting to press into Caleb’s hands as best he can, until all that Caleb can think about is the feeling of Molly’s skin against his own.

Gradually, slowly, the kisses draw to an end. There’s no rush to it, no abruptness – they simply end as naturally as they began, until Caleb and Molly are trading little more than fleeting brushes of lips. Eventually, those end too. Caleb finds himself propping himself up above Molly on one arm, his hand still curled loosely around Molly’s horn.

"That was nice," Molly whispers, and Caleb nods and smiles a little, aware of the blush staining his cheeks. He doesn’t mind it, though. Not when he can see a matching blush on Molly.

"It was very nice," he agrees quietly.

"Think you’d be up for doing it again at some point in the future?"

A pause. A breath. "I think so."

“Good,” Molly says, “That’s- good. I’d really like to do this again.”

“I would too.”

“Yes,” Molly says, just a hint of teasing in his voice. He grins at Caleb, his thumb rubbing lazily against the jut of Caleb’s hip. “Yes, I rather got that impression.”

Caleb feels himself flush harder. In a moment of strange, near-unrecognisable courage, he ducks his head, leans in, and hides his face against Molly’s neck. He was right with what he thought at
Pumat’s shop, he learns: up close, right up against Molly’s neck, the smell of lavender and incense is even stronger. Caleb inhales deeply, feeling the scent settling in his lungs like smoke. But for the first time in many, many years, he doesn’t mind the feeling. This smoke doesn’t make him panic. It’s just Molly, and there is nothing about Molly that makes him afraid.

They lie like that for a while, Caleb pressing Molly flat into the sofa and Molly gently running his thumbs over Caleb’s hips. At some point, he asks quietly if he can start playing with Caleb’s hair, and Caleb agrees almost instantaneously, giving a soft sigh into the curve of Molly’s shoulder when he feels Molly’s hand start carding gently through his hair. It’s nice. It’s so nice. It’s nice and calm and easy, no stress or fear or anxiety twisting through Caleb’s thoughts for the first time in a very long time. Everything is Molly and warmth and Molly, Molly’s hands and Molly’s skin and the lavender-incense smell of him, and Caleb feels like he never, ever wants to leave this moment.

“Caleb?” Molly asks quietly, what could be minutes or hours later. Caleb, lulled into half a doze by Molly’s fingers running repeatedly through his hair, shakes himself awake and lifts himself up just enough to blink sleepily at Molly.

“Mm?”

“I should- this has been absolutely lovely, darling, but I- I need to go home at some point.”

“...Oh.” Caleb frowns. He doesn’t want Molly to leave, not yet. He wants Molly to stay here, and he wants to go back to resting against him, enjoying Molly’s hands in his hair and Molly’s presence in general. But he knows that he can’t. He knows that he’s not ready yet for Molly to actually spend the night. “I- oh. Okay.”

“Sorry,” Molly whispers quietly, and Caleb shakes his head, shuffling around to sit up and finally free Molly from being crushed beneath him.

“Nein,” he mumbles, “Nein, I- I understand.” He yawns a little, stifling it behind his hand. He doesn’t know exactly what time it is, but he knows that it’s been several hours since sunset – when he glances over towards where Frumpkin was sitting, he sees that the cat is still asleep, whiskers twitching in his dreams. “I am sorry for- for using you like a mattress, Mollymauk.”


“I, um- I enjoyed it too.”

Molly laughs again as he stands, stretching his arms over his head. Caleb can’t stop his gaze from darting over Molly’s body, following the twisting snake and inked flowers that curl down his arm, lit up by the soft lighting of the apartment until they look almost alive. Molly is beautiful, even dressed as he is in Caleb’s oversized clothes. As Caleb watches, Molly bends down, rolling up the ends of the sweatpants until he’s no longer at risk of stumbling over them.

“Where are my shoes?” he asks, straightening up, and Caleb nods towards the radiator.

“I put them on the radiator to dry off,” he says, “But if they are still wet, you can borrow some of mine. We look to be about the same shoe size.”

“Caleb.”

“I don’t want you catching a chill, Mollymauk.”

Molly shakes his head with a smile, crossing to the radiator and putting his shoes on. “You’re much too nice for me, dear.” He finishes putting his shoes on and stands as Caleb crosses the room to join
him. “Would you mind if I- would it be alright if I kept wearing this home?” he asks, tugging at the cardigan still draped around his shoulders. “Just- it’s very warm, and I don’t know if my clothes are dry yet…”

Caleb shakes his head slightly. “Keep the clothes,” he murmurs. “Yours- they are likely nearly dry now, but it is better to be completely dry when it is still cold outside. No chance of catching a chill then, you know?”

“I know,” Molly echoes. He reaches out slightly, leaving his hand hanging in the space between them like a promise. Caleb takes it without hesitation, and Molly’s fingers curl gently around his own. “Thank you, Caleb.”

“You should, um- I suppose you should be going now?”

Molly sighs. “Yeah,” he says, glancing over towards a window. The rain outside seems to have mostly stopped, and the night beyond the glass is dark and inky, lit up in patches by the streetlamps. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“I will- can I walk you to the door, Mollymauk?”

“Caleb,” Molly replies. “Of course you can.”

Caleb smiles. He walks down to the door of his building with Molly, holding his hand the entire way. He’s loathe to let go when he opens the door and Molly steps out, and so he doesn’t. He’s feeling strangely brave tonight. He doesn’t know why, and he doesn’t know how long it’s going to last, but he’s going to cling to this bravery for as long as he can.

“Goodnight, Caleb,” Molly says, the streetlamps shining gold and amber off his smile. Caleb smiles back.

“Goodnight, Mollymauk,” he replies. There’s a moment’s pause, no longer than a breath, and then Caleb leans in to kiss Molly swiftly once more, little more than a lingering brush of lips on lips. “Goodnight,” he murmurs again. When he leans back, it’s to see Molly blinking, looking pleasantly shocked.

“Definitely a good night,” Molly mumbles. “I- yeah.”

“I will- if the weather improves, will I see you at the yard tomorrow?”

“Caleb,” Molly says seriously, “Trust me when I say that it would take another storm to keep me away.”

Caleb smiles. “Gut,” he says, and he kisses Molly again. “Goodnight, Molly.”

“Goodnight, Caleb. See you soon.” Molly smiles, squeezes Caleb’s hand, and then turns and leaves, his tail swaying gently behind him.

Caleb prepares for the night quickly once he steps back inside, spending less time on himself and more time making sure that Frumpkin is settled and comfortable with enough food and water should he wake up during the night. His phone buzzes as he’s getting changed, but he doesn’t feel any particular need to respond immediately for once – everything still feels simple and calm and comfortable, and Caleb doesn’t check the message until after he checks the window latches, turns off his main light, and climbs into bed.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] thank you for the dry clothes. they’re very comfy -smiling face tiefling
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] You are welcome, Mollymauk.

Caleb looks at his phone screen, eyes scanning over the low-res letters. He’s sleepy, and he still feels like there’s sunlight in his bones in the wake of kissing Molly (and then kissing him again, and again). After a moment’s contemplation, he sends a second text.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] They looked good on you.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] 💖
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -blushing face tiefling emoji-
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ll give them back next time I see you
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] (hopefully soon)

Caleb nearly tells Molly that he wouldn’t mind Molly keeping his clothes. He nearly tells Molly that he’d very much like to see him in them again. He nearly tells Molly how much he’d loved the sight of Molly all loose and comfortable in Caleb’s clothes in Caleb’s flat, sitting in Caleb’s space like he belonged there and kissing him over and over again. He nearly tells Molly how a small thrill had run down his spine when he’d felt Molly’s skin beneath his own t-shirt.

He nearly tells him all of that.

He doesn’t.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I will be taking lunch tomorrow at 1pm as always. You are welcome to join me.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] We could go somewhere nice.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -surprised face tiefling emoji- Caleb are you asking me on a date???

Caleb thinks that he might be. Nevermind that this would be their third official date – it would still be the first that Caleb has initiated.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I think perhaps I am.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’d be delighted to join you ^^

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I will see you tomorrow, then.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Would you like to meet in my office before we get lunch?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] ooooh I’d love to
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ll finally get to see the mysterious lair of caleb widogast phd
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] …will I be allowed in though? I’m not a student…

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ll talk to Bryce.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] alright then :)
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ll see you tomorrow Caleb

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Goodnight, Mollymauk.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] goodnight Caleb. Sleep well x
Caleb stares at the little ‘x’ in the dim light of his lamp until his phone screen quietly turns itself off. He knows what the ‘x’ symbolises – he studies language after all, and he’s not stupid – but to see it and know that there is almost certainly intent behind is… different. Mollymauk sent him a kiss. Mollymauk wished him goodnight and then sent him a kiss.

Caleb looks at his blank phone screen, deliberates for a moment, and then wakes his phone back up.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] x

Chapter End Notes

The art of Molly and Frumpkin in this chapter was done by the lovely ajhebard on tumblr!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Caleb wakes to Nott standing on his chest.

“Caleb,” she says seriously, her yellow eyes wide and practically luminescent in the weak daylight filtering past his curtain. “There’s a cat in our apartment.”

It’s not the worst wake-up that Caleb’s ever had, frankly. It’s not even the worst wake-up he’s had while living in the apartment. If anything, by Nott standards, this is a relatively tame, gentle way of waking Caleb up – there’re no claws in sight, and she actually seems to have taken her boots off before climbing up onto his bed.

Despite all that, though, Caleb rather feels that if he hadn’t lived with Nott for as long as he had that he would likely be swearing or screaming by now. Waking to a snaggle-toothed goblin face looming above you, however friendly the expression, is typically far from the best way to start the day.

It’s a good thing, Caleb thinks absently, that he’s rather accustomed to it.

“Oh, ja,” he mumbles sleepily, reaching up to rub at his eyes as he yawns. “That is Frumpkin.”

“It’s who?”

“Frumpkin,” he repeats, pushing himself upright into a sitting position. Nott slides off his chest, moving to sit down cross-legged on the other side of the bed, and frowns at him, her ears twitching slightly.

“That’s a weird name for a cat,” she says.

Caleb frowns. “It is an excellent name for a cat,” he rebuts. “My old cat was called Frumpkin.”

“It can be a good name and a weird name at the same time, Caleb, but that’s not the point.”

Caleb frowns some more. He’s vaguely aware that there must be a point, but he’s really not sure what it is. Nott being Nott, the point could well be just about anything. “Then what is the point?”

“Why is there a cat,” Nott says slowly, clearly giving Caleb’s half-asleep brain a chance to wake up, “In our apartment? Eating my tuna?”

“I thought that was my tuna.”

“Look, it’s the flat’s tuna!” Nott bursts out, waving her arms a little. “It is not the cat’s tuna! Why is the cat here, Caleb? Did you adopt him? Did you find him? Can I eat him?”

“Nott,” Caleb says, aghast. “No. You are not allowed to eat Frumpkin.”

“Why not?”

“Because he is-“ My cat, Caleb wants to say, but he cuts himself short. Frumpkin is not his cat. Frumpkin is just a stray that Molly found and brought to him to look after. Frumpkin is just a stray that Molly saw, and made Molly think of Caleb, and made Molly bring Frumpkin to Caleb, and resulted in Caleb kissing Molly again, and again, and again.
Caleb thinks he can feel the corners of his lips twitching up in a small smile. “You cannot eat Frumpkin, because we are looking after him,” he says instead. “At least until I can take him to a vet to see if he is microchipped.”

“And what if he isn’t microchipped? Can I eat him then?”

“You cannot eat Frumpkin at any point, Nott.” Caleb sighs, reaching up to brush the lingering sleep from his eyes. He’s not entirely sure what time it is, but judging by the angle of the weak, barely-there light slanting through his bedroom curtains it can’t be much later than 6:30. He supposes that explains why his alarm hasn’t gone off yet. He yawns, stifling it behind his hand, and runs a hand through his hair, mussing it further. It’s not like Nott will mind, he reasons. She’s seen him in far worse states than this. “If there are any domestic animals in the flat, then work on the assumption that you are not allowed to eat them.”

Nott’s ears droop. “Alright,” she mutters. “But what if the cat-“

“-Frumpkin-“

“-what if Frumpkin isn’t microchipped? What then?”

Caleb says nothing, and Nott narrows her eyes at him, making him shift uncomfortably. He knows that look. He knows that she knows exactly what he isn’t saying.

“Caleb,” Nott says, sounding exasperated already. “If this cat isn’t microchipped, you’re just going to adopt him on the spot, aren’t you? I know what you’re like. You’ve been wanting to get a cat for ages.”

“No,” Caleb says defensively. Nott raises an eyebrow at him, and Caleb sighs. “I’m not,” he says quietly. “He- Frumpkin used to belong to someone. I will put out posters and see if anyone comes to claim him as their own cat. I know how sad it is to lose a pet. I would not wish to put anyone else through that if I can help it.”

Nevermind that Caleb lost his own cat in circumstances significantly worse than them simply going missing. Nevermind that he lost much else besides Frumpkin. He can imagine that the grief, while lesser, would still be the same.

“Oh,” Nott says quietly from beside him, and Caleb raises his head to look at her. “That’s- that’s very good of you, Caleb.”

He shrugs. “Like I said, I do not want anyone to experience the same grief.”

“But what if no one comes to get him?” Nott asks. “What then? Can I eat him then?”

“No!” Caleb says firmly. “Nott, you are not allowed to eat Frumpkin, now or ever!”

“Aww.”

“If no one comes to collect him, then we will have a talk. About potentially adopting him and keeping him at the flat,” Caleb forces himself to say in the place of what he actually wants to say, which is ‘I will adopt him on the spot because he is 1) a cat, 2) a cat, and 3) a cat that Molly gave me.’

Nott seems amenable to this suggestion. She nods slowly, still looking at Caleb somewhat suspiciously, and eventually holds out a hand that Caleb takes without hesitation. “Alright,” she says. “We have a deal. If no one comes for the cat-“
“-His name is Frumpkin, Nott-“

“-If no one comes for the cat who is called Frumpkin, then we will discuss maybe, maybe, keeping him.”

Caleb gives Nott’s hand a brief shake. “I was unaware that we were making a deal.”

“I’m all about the deals, Caleb.”

“Ah, ja, I suppose you are.”

Nott smiles, and lets go of Caleb’s hand. Caleb smiles back, reclining back against the headboard of his bed, and the two lapse into silence for a short moment.

“You never actually told me what Frumpkin is doing here,” Nott says after a while, picking absently at the blanket thrown over Caleb’s age-softened bedspread. “Did you find him?”


“Mollymauk gave you a cat?” Nott exclaims disbelievingly, her voice half a shriek, and Caleb winces at the volume.

“Not exactly,” he says. “He- Frumpkin was-“ He sighs. “Frumpkin was a stray at the carnival,” Caleb begins, and when he looks up and catches sight of Nott’s expectant look he sighs again, resigns himself to telling the entire story, and explains the events of last night as quickly as he can.

He doesn’t explain everything. He doesn’t tell Nott about the kiss, or about the countless others that followed it. He doesn’t tell Nott about how Molly had so, so gently asked permission to touch Caleb; he doesn’t tell Nott about how Molly’s skin had felt beneath Caleb’s fingers, or about how Caleb doesn’t think he could ever forget the soft, sweet sounds that Molly made when he was pinned beneath Caleb. He doesn’t tell Nott about the kiss at the door or about the ‘x’ in Molly’s text. He doesn’t tell her about any of that.

He just tells her about Frumpkin, and about why Frumpkin is now in their flat, and leaves it at that.

After he’s finished explaining, Nott stares at him for what feels like almost an entire minute. And accustomed to her yellow gaze as he is, Caleb still finds himself squirming a little under the intensity of her look.

“Can you at least stop him from eating my tuna?” Nott asks eventually, and Caleb, caught somewhat off-balance by the unexpected question, merely shrugs.

“It is Frumpkin’s tuna now,” he says simply. Nott groans.

“Fine,” she says, rising from the bed, “It can be Frumpkin’s tuna, but will you at least get him some food, though? Soon? I only have so much tuna, and it’s a very good midnight snack. Especially when I’m working.”

Caleb nods. He can do that. He’ll need to get a litter tray for Frumpkin as well, and a cat carrier if he’s to have any hope of getting Frumpkin to the vets. He remembers trying to get his old family cat to the vets and the scratches that resulted. “I’ll try to buy some food today,” he promises. “And anything else that he will need.”

“You could get some stuff online,” Nott suggest. “Maybe ask Bryce to help you. Or Jester.”
“I know how to shop online, Nott. I might have an old phone, but my laptop works just fine.”

“Your laptop is also old,” Nott points out. “It’s running Windows XP.”

“I do not know what that means, Nott.”

“You still have the default wallpaper.”

“Nott.”

“All I’m saying,” she says, raising her hands defensively, “Is that you’re not exactly the most tech-savvy person, Caleb.”

“I’m sure I will be able to figure out how to purchase cat food online,” Caleb says with a frown. “I buy books online all the time.”


“They are important for my research.”

“I know,” Nott replies, and she steps down off the bed, crossing to the bedroom door. She reaches up, grabbing for the door handle, but the moment her hand touches it she freezes. “Oh!” she exclaims. “I forgot!”

“Forgot what?” Caleb asks, watching bemusedly as Nott spins around and starts frantically patting at her pockets.

“I was going to- I got you- a-ha!” Nott exclaims, pulling a small, dark shape out of her pocket and holding it up triumphantly. “I got you this!”

It would much more impressive, Caleb thinks, if he could actually see it.

“Nott,” he reminds her gently, “You know I don’t have darkvision.”

“Oh,” Nott replies. She lowers her hand with a sigh, and starts to cross back over to Caleb’s bed. “You and your human eyes…”

“I cannot help having human eyes, Nott,” Caleb replies, reaching out to turn on his bedside lamp and flooding the immediate area with a soft, golden light.

Nott shrugs, scrambling back up onto the bed. “I know,” she says, “I know it’s not your fault you’re human, Caleb.”

“…Thank you?”

“You’re welcome.” She sits down again with a soft huff and holds the item out towards Caleb. Now, in the gentle light of his bedside lamp, Caleb can see what it actually is – resting in her green-skinned, black-clawed hand is a slightly battered smartphone. “I got you this,” she says quietly, as Caleb continues to stare. “I know you love your current phone, and you are completely welcome to keep on using it and getting further and further behind the times, but I also saw how many emojis Mollymauk likes to send you. With this, you’ll actually be able to see them!”

Caleb blinks. Somehow, the idea of getting a phone that would actually let him see what Molly was sending him – and finally stopping Jester’s pointed comments on the age of Caleb’s phone – had never crossed his mind. But he’d always known, somewhere at the back of his head, that if he were to upgrade then he would be the one to pay for it.
Caleb doesn’t know exactly how much smartphones cost, but he knows that they cost a fair amount — certainly they cost more than Nott, more than anyone, should be willing to spend on Caleb. He doesn’t need gifts like this. He doesn’t deserve gifts like this. He uses his current phone because it works, and because it does everything that he needs it to do. Even if he did want to upgrade, he would only do it himself. He would never ask anyone to help him.

He would never expect them to.

He can’t accept this.

“Nott,” Caleb says weakly, “I can’t- I can’t let you spend this much money on me, Schatz.”


“But—”

“I can afford it,” she repeats, holding the phone out to him. Caleb doesn’t quite lean away from it, but it’s a close thing. “Look, it’s not even a fancy one! It’s second-hand, and it’s really not that impressive. And if you really don’t want it, then I have the receipt so I can return it, so you don’t have to worry about that. It’s a gift, Caleb,” she adds softly, when Caleb only continues to stare. “It’s a gift from me to you. You’re my boy, and you’re allowed to have nice things. It’s alright to have nice things, Caleb.”

“I know.”

“I know you know, but do you believe it?”

Caleb says nothing. In the dark screen of the smartphone, Nott’s eyes glow in a thousand shades of yellow and gold.

“Caleb,” she says again, soft and quiet in the stillness of his bedroom. Caleb looks up at her, and she does nothing more than hold the phone out to him again in a silent offering.

After a few long, soundless moments, Caleb takes it.

“Thank you,” he whispers, his voice barely audible.

“If you change your mind about it, you can always give it back to me,” Nott says, reaching out to pat Caleb’s blanket-clad knee. “Or, well, maybe not forever. The receipt will only last for thirty days. But if you decide in the next thirty days that you don’t want it and would rather go back to your old phone, then let me know!”

She looks up at him, smiling brightly, and Caleb leans over to press a kiss to her forehead. “Thank you, Schatz,” he says again before leaning back and turning the smooth, uncomfortably button-less phone over in his hands a few times. “I don’t- how do I set it up?” he asks, still holding the phone a bit like it might explode, and Nott smiles and pats his knee again.

“Why don’t you ask Mollymauk?” she suggests, with absolutely no hint of subtlety. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to help you.”

“Nott…”

“I’m just saying! He has a smartphone, and he clearly knows how to use it. Maybe you can meet up with him, ask him to help you…”
“You are a meddling little matchmaker,” Caleb grumbles, but he can feel himself smiling just at the thought of seeing Molly again. Of potentially kissing Molly again. Of spending time with Molly and hanging out with Molly and generally being around Molly, listening to his soft accent and watching the way his tail sways and twitches as he speaks, and possibly, just maybe, reaching out to take Molly’s hand in his own, running his thumb over Molly’s knuckles and tracing the lines of coloured ink on his skin.

When he thinks about it like that, Caleb finds it very hard to even be mock-annoyed at Nott.

And it’s clear that Nott, who’s been living with Caleb long enough to recognise and predict his emotions almost better than Caleb can himself, knows that. “I am a meddling little matchmaker,” she agrees with a wide smile. “But I am also a meddling little matchmaker who is very tired, so I’m going to go to bed now. For real this time.”

Caleb smiles. “Goodnight, Nott,” he says as she climbs off the bed and crosses back over to the door. “Sleep well.”

“Have fun at work,” she replies cheerfully, and the door clicks shut behind her.

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The previous day’s rain is on its last legs when Caleb approaches his department building, the clouds above barely spitting to add any additional depth to the already ankle-deep puddles that chase along the edge of the road. The world looks a little more bleak and dreary in the overcast daylight, but Molly, standing by Caleb’s building like he’s waiting for him, looks anything but dreary to Caleb. They make eye contact as Caleb approaches the building, and as soon as he’s close enough, Molly straightens up and saunters towards him, sparkling and resplendent and as beautiful as always.

“Good morning, Professor Widogast,” Molly says with his normal bright smile, and Caleb cannot help but smile back.
“Good morning, Mollymauk,” he replies. Molly’s smile widens further, drawing Caleb’s gaze down to Molly’s lips, and the moment Caleb’s eyes land on Molly’s mouth, he feels all the blood in his body start flowing north and south simultaneously.

Molly is wearing lipstick.

Molly is wearing lipstick, and now that Caleb has spotted it, he can’t make himself look away. The lipstick is a rich, deep wine-red, standing in contrast to Molly’s soft lavender skin, and it looks beautiful. Molly looks beautiful. Molly looks beautiful and gorgeous and almost unbearably sexy. His trousers are the same colour as his lipstick, and the mesh shirt and jacket he’s got thrown on over his crop top are doing very little to hide the shimmer on his skin. When he turns his head slightly, the lipstick catches in the sunlight, and Caleb swears he can see it shimmering too.

He thinks about what that shimmer would look like smudged and blurred by kisses. He thinks about how the dark, beautiful wine-red would look blotted across his own skin. He thinks about how similar it might look to hickeys and marks and bruises left there by wanting, needy hands.

He thinks about how it might look smeared around his cock.

He thinks about how Molly’s cock might feel in his mouth, resting heavy on his tongue.

Caleb swallows and feels his face turn red.

“Caleb?” Molly asks, snapping Caleb back to the present, and Caleb physically shakes himself before looking over Molly’s shoulder, sure that his face must be nearly the same colour as Molly’s lips.

“Ja?” he manages to say, his voice practically a wheeze.

Molly smiles. “I was asking how you were,” he replies, his smile audible in his voice, “But you seem a little bit distracted…”

Caleb feels like it shouldn’t be medically possible for his blood to be inhabiting a perfect 50/50 split between his face and his dick. He’s only grateful that his coat is long enough to hide any… indicators of his current state.

“I’m fine,” he chokes out. He pauses, clearing his throat, and does his very best to clear his mind of any remaining images of Molly on his knees under Caleb’s desk, his lips wrapped around the head of Caleb’s cock and his pretty lipstick smeared all along the shaft. From the corner of his eye, he can see Molly smile knowingly, and that only makes it harder for Caleb to convince the images to leave.

He takes a breath and forces himself to look back at Molly, making sure that his eyes stay on Molly’s eyes and not on Molly’s lips. “I’m fine,” he says again, and it almost sounds like the truth. “I am just- ja, I was a little distracted.”

Molly’s smile starts turning into a smirk. “Were you now?” he asks knowingly, raising an eyebrow. “What by?”

“You are not in your, ah, usual attire,” Caleb mutters, gesturing vaguely to Molly’s body. Molly shrugs.

“No,” he says breezily, “I’m taking a day off from training. I need to give my muscles some time off every once in a while to rest up. Plus, it’s always nice to take a break.” He smiles winningly at Caleb, and Caleb just frowns back, more than a little confused.
“So why- why are you here?” Caleb asks.

Molly shrugs again, and when he looks back at Caleb his expression is a little more open. A little more vulnerable. “I wanted to see you,” Molly says softly, his cheeks colouring a little. “We- we didn’t get to say good morning in person yesterday, and I didn’t want either of us to have to wait until this afternoon to see each other. So, I figured I’d swing by here this morning before heading into town. That way we wouldn’t miss out again.”

Oh.

It’s sweet. It’s almost painfully sweet. Caleb can feel himself starting to smile and knows that his own slight blush must be matching Molly’s, but he can’t stop it. Molly is- Molly is sweet. He’s sweet, and he’s lovely, and he’s kind, and he cares, and he actually seems to honestly, genuinely like Caleb as much as Caleb likes him, and Caleb is so pathetically smitten that he doesn’t know what to do.

He smiles back. That, at least, is something he is capable of. “I- I like seeing you in person in the morning, Mollymauk.” he stammers, sure that he must sound more than a little bit ridiculous and awkward stating the obvious, but Molly just smiles wider.

“I like seeing you too,” he replies, his voice slipping back into its more regular teasing, semi-flirtatious tone. “It’s a very nice start to my day, getting to see your lovely face.”

“I- your face is- you have a very good face, too.” Gods above, he sounds like Beau. “I like the, uh, the lipstick. It’s- it’s a good colour.”

“Thank you, dear,” Molly replies, sounding partway between surprised and delighted. “It suits me, doesn’t it?”

“Ja, it does.” It really does. Caleb wants to see the marks of it pressed into his own skin. He wants to learn what it tastes like on the curves of Molly’s mouth. He wants so much, and he doesn’t know where it came from, and he doesn’t know what to do.

Because he wants Molly. He really, really wants Molly. He wants to hold Molly’s hand, and he wants to kiss him, and he wants to bite Molly’s lower lip between his teeth and feel him gasp into his mouth, and he wants to work a hand into the front of his red trousers that leave very little to the imagination and touch Molly, and he just wants.

He wants so much.

But he knows he does not deserve any of it, and so he shuts his eyes, just for a moment, and forces his brain back to where it should be.

You do not deserve this, he tells himself quietly, and he opens his eyes. Across from him, Molly smiles again, the sunlight catching in his curls and turning them a thousand shades of purple. Those imaginings are not for you.

“Caleb?” Molly asks, with a tone to his voice that suggests that this is not the first time he’s called Caleb’s name. “Are we still on for lunch today?”


“I’ll see you at one?” Molly asks, and Caleb nods.

“Ja,” he says, remembering his texts to Molly last night. “At one. I will tell Bryce to let you in.”
“Alright,” Molly replies, smiling, and Caleb only barely stops himself from leaning forwards and kissing the smile and the lipstick right off his mouth. “Good morning, Caleb.”

Caleb smiles back a little. He likes this little tradition of theirs. “Good morning, Mollymauk.”

“Have a good day. I’ll see you later.”

“You- you also have a good day.” Caleb replies, and he thinks about kissing Molly again before smiling politely, wishing him farewell until the afternoon, and entering his building. The moment he’s inside, he speed-walks up to his office, shutting and locking his door behind him with a quiet click. He crosses to his desk, sits down in front of it, drops his head to the smooth wooden surface, and starts desperately willing for the blood in his dick to return to his brain.

It works.

Eventually.

Caleb is quite certain that the image of Molly’s ass in his sinfully tight trousers as he’d walked away is going to be seared into his brain for all eternity.

“Gods,” he mutters to himself, gently thudding his forehead against the desk when he finally feels like all his blood is back where it’s meant to be. “Fuck.”

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One pm comes far sooner than Caleb would have liked.

He spends the morning doing some marking and further planning the sample paper he’ll soon be giving to his, admittedly very small, group of students, but the whole time he’s working his brain is whirring away. He realises not too soon after he gets his own blood flow back under control that he doesn’t actually know any other nearby establishments besides Pumat’s. He’s always eaten at Pumat’s. His entire lunchtime variety for the last several years has been the food that he himself has brought in, sandwiches from Pumat’s, god-awful professor’s lounge coffee, or one of Bryce’s seemingly endless supply of cereal bars. He doesn’t know any other places.

He certainly doesn’t know anywhere that would be good for a date and is completely unprepared when Molly texts him shortly before one.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Caleb a very tall very blond elf saw me loitering outside and is now leading me inside the building

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] is this Bryce?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] we’re outside your office so I’m assuming this is Bryce

Caleb’s phone buzzes to mark the arrival of the final text at the exact same time that a knock sounds at the door. He glances at his phone, quickly skimming the text, and then looks up at the door, unable to prevent a small smile from crossing over his face.

“Come in!”

The door swings open part-way, enough to reveal Bryce standing behind it. By their feet, Caleb can just about see a very lovely pair of shoes and the shifting, swaying tip of a lavender tail.

“Mr Widogast?” Bryce asks, with a faint tone to their voice that suggests that know exactly who the
purple tiefling they escorted upstairs is and why Caleb had texted them two hours after arriving at his office to ask them to let Molly in. “I have a Mr Tealeaf here to see you.”

“Oh,” Caleb replies, making a small gesture to his office. “Ah, let him in, please.”

Bryce inclines their head and steps aside to reveal Molly, who steps into the office before Bryce quietly shuts the door behind him.

“I take it that was Bryce,” Molly says, smiling softly, and Caleb feels himself start to smile back almost immediately. It’s odd to see Molly here, in a place that has been so quintessentially Caleb’s for so long, but it doesn’t feel strange. It just feels normal. It feels right. It feels like Molly belongs here the same way it felt like he belonged at Caleb’s flat the previous night – it feels like he fits in here, amongst Caleb’s time-worn, department-issued furniture and treacherously overburdened shelves. It feels like he was always meant to be here.

Caleb feels like he rather wants to stand up, reach out, and take Molly’s hand in his own. He doesn’t.

“That was Bryce,” he confirms instead, and he feels his own smile grow a little wider when Molly’s tail gives a quick, happy swish. He stands up hurriedly, beckoning Molly into his small, somewhat cluttered office. “Please, ah, please come in. I have- there is another chair in the corner, ah, under a stack of books. I can move them if you’d like to sit down.”

Molly waves a hand. “I’m good,” he says cheerfully, his eyes already darting across the shelves of knick-knacks and stacked tomes that adorn Caleb’s office. “I finally get to see the fabled lair of Professor Widogast. I’ve got to admit it – you were right. It’s not as stuffy as I thought it would be.”

The soft edge of teasing in Molly’s voice prevents the comment from sounding like any kind of insult, but Caleb finds himself replying on instinct all the same as he sits back down at his desk.

“I aired the room out for half an hour before you arrived so that it would not smell like old books,” he says in a rush.

Molly laughs gently. On his horns, his jewellery sings out a quiet accompaniment to the sound. “Don’t worry,” he says, “I quite like the smell of books these days. You smell like them.”

“Oh,” Caleb says, feeling himself flushing. “I, um- thank you. I- I like the smell of books, too. And, um, and you. You smell very nice as well…”

More than that, in fact: Molly smells almost distractingly nice, especially now that Caleb knows how good he smells up close and personal. He smells wonderful, the perfect blend of lavender and incense that skirts the border between relaxing and what Caleb can only call alluring. Molly definitely smells alluring. Molly looks alluring.

Part of Caleb wonders absently how Molly would smell in his bed. He wonders how Molly would smell all sleep-soft and comfortable; how he would smell after hours and hours and hours of kissing and touching and… more. Caleb catches himself staring at the curve of Molly’s neck, where the peacock feathers lay in a dappled turquoise pattern. He wonders if he could suck a mark there, in amongst the feathers, where he knows Molly to smell particularly good. He wants to learn the smell and taste of all of Molly – he wants to know how to make Molly gasp and writhe and moan beneath him.

He wants to learn so much.
He wants to learn everything.

For now, he settles with committing the sound of Molly’s slightly startled, definitely delighted laugh to memory.

“I’m glad to know that you think I smell nice,” Molly says, and Caleb just smiles awkwardly and shrugs, looking away.

“I- ah- it was hard to avoid finding out yesterday…” he mumbles.

“Caleb, darling, there’s no judgement here,” Molly replies, and Caleb looks back at him. “I found out how much I liked your smell just a little while before then.”

Caleb frowns. “A little while…”?

“You clothes,” Molly says by way of an explanation. “They, um, they smelled- nice. Really nice.” He pauses, his cheeks darkening. “I washed them yesterday, though. I said I was going to bring them back today – and I have, by the way, they’re in my bag – so I washed them. They were a bit rained-on.”

“You didn’t have to wash them, Mollymauk.”

“It’s the polite thing to do,” Molly says with a shrug, before gesturing at the surrounding shelves. “By the way, do you mind if I…?” His voice trails off, the question hanging in the air, and Caleb quickly shakes his head.

“Please,” he replies, “Go ahead.”

Molly grins at him. “Thank you, Caleb,” he says and immediately turns to his left, starting to inspect the bookshelf closest to him. It is, as the nature of the object would suggest, mostly full of books; they fill almost every shelf, stacked horizontally and vertically in a desperate attempt to fit as many of them onto the slightly bowing shelves as possible, but the topmost row is book-free. Instead, it holds a small collection of knick-knacks gifted to Caleb over the years by Nott and Jester and Bryce. There are small shiny buttons, little doodles of Caleb with cat ears, and a whole assortment of bizarre, interesting things that Bryce found that they thought Caleb would like. Caleb watches as Molly raises up slightly on tip-toe, peering at the little items. He more than half expects Molly to do what most people do when they notice them – normally people inspect the items for all of a few seconds and then move on, skimming the titles of the countless tomes before realising that they are equally as dull and dreary.

Molly doesn’t do that.

Molly takes his time looking over the knick-knacks, with an intensity and focus to his gaze that almost startles Caleb. He doesn’t go to touch them, but he does reach out on more than one occasion, stopping himself part way and glancing over at Caleb as if seeking permission. It’s only when Caleb nods that Molly rests a single purple finger against a small drawing.

“Jester?” he asks.

“Yes,” Caleb says, slightly surprised. “She- she drew that for me two years ago after we went shopping together.” The picture, Caleb knows, depicts himself in a fortress made of a thousand books, sitting on the battlements to read one of the tomes that makes up the parapet. It’s a simple pencil sketch, but it’s been kept safe behind glass, and it looks almost as good as the day that Jester gave it to him. “She said that if she did not drag me out of the bookshop, she was sure to come back and find me in a book-kingdom of my own creation.”
Molly laughs. “That’s Jester,” he says fondly. “I’m going to assume she drew the kitty-Caleb too?”

“Ja.”

“It’s cute.”

“It is.”

“Mm. It’s like a combination of you and Frumpkin. It’s almost cuter than you are.”

Caleb doesn’t know what to say in response to that, so he says nothing, instead watching as Molly continues to inspect the items. He pauses occasionally, calling out a name that Caleb will confirm as being the gift-giver, and it’s only once Molly has inspected the top shelf to his liking that he turns his attention to the books that fill the rest of the shelves.

“You have a lot of books,” Molly remarks absently. “How many of them have you read?”

“All of them.”

“All of them?” Molly replies, sounding surprised. He straightens up a little, turning to look at Caleb over his shoulder. “That must have taken ages.”

Caleb shrugs, feeling a little awkward. “I am a very fast reader,” he mutters, and Molly laughs softly. In the small, cluttered confines of the office, it somehow sounds almost intimate.

“I can see that,” Molly replies. “I don’t think I could read all of these books in my entire life!”

Caleb shrugs again. “Well… I mean, I do not know if I have actually read all of them. I wrote a few of them, but I do not know if that counts as reading them as well.”

“You wrote some of these?”

“Ja.”

Caleb watches as, across the room from him, Molly shuts his eyes, inhales deeply, and breathes out in one long, slow exhale. “Caleb,” he says quietly, when the entire bizarre procedure is done. “You’re going to be the death of me some day.”

“Um,” Caleb says uncertainly, “That… that doesn’t sound good, Mollymauk.”

Molly waves a hand, but his cheeks still look a little darker than usual when he opens his eyes. “It’s a figure of speech.”

“Oh. I miss those sometimes.”

“That’s alright. Don’t worry about it,” Molly says. “I can be more literal if you need.”

Caleb shakes his head. “No, no, it is alright. I need to learn figures of speech. I- Nott says that sometimes I miss, uh, nuance in speech and in phrases.”

“Well, if you do ever feel like you’re not quite sure what I mean, don’t hesitate to ask, alright?” Molly says, smiling softly, and Caleb smiles back. Somehow, everything with Molly feels so easy.

“Alright,” he agrees, and Molly smiles wider and claps his hands together, tail swishing happily.

“Marvellous,” he says. “So now, Caleb, I’ve gotta ask – of all the books here, which ones did you
write?"

“The, ah, the ones on the lowest shelf,” Caleb says, pointing to them. “No, the ones a little- the ones on the left- ja, those ones,” he says, when Molly’s fingers ghost over the spines.

“These ones?” Molly asks.

“Ja.”

“The ones that are about two inches thick and look extremely impressive?”

“…Ja?” Caleb’s not sure he would call them ‘impressive,’ but Molly’s certainly touching the correct books.

Molly groans quietly. “Fuck me, Caleb,” he says, and Caleb feels himself turn scarlet. He doesn’t know if that’s meant to be a figure of speech or not. He thinks it probably is. He hopes that it isn’t. He really, really hopes that it isn’t. Molly’s still bending over to look at the books, his impossible trousers somehow managing to become even more skin-tight, and Caleb swears that he can see a sliver of lace poking out above the waistband, and oh, Gods, but he really doesn’t want that to just be a figure of speech.

He’s also very glad that he’s still sitting at his desk.

“Um,” he manages to say, and Molly meets his eyes with a smirk before turning his attention back to Caleb’s books. He continues to peruse them, slowly making his way around the room and asking the occasional question. By the time Molly’s standing before Caleb, his tail swaying slow and lazy behind him, Caleb thinks his heart-rate is actually back under control.

“So,” Molly says, stretching up a little to perch on the lone clean corner of Caleb’s desk, “Where are you taking me for lunch?”

Oh.

Oh, Scheisse.

“Um,” Caleb says. He drums his fingers against his leg, feeling anxiety start to swarm his lungs. He’s not sure if he prefers this to his previous shortness of breath. “I may have, ah, I realised that I- I only know Pumat’s as an establishment near here,” he mumbles, pointedly looking out of the window so that he can’t see the look on Molly’s face. “And I- I did not want to take you somewhere we had already been before.” He pauses, swallows, and then continues. “I wanted to give you an interesting date but in doing so I- I didn’t plan any date at all. I’m sorry…”

He can feel the brambles rising already, coiling sinuous-sharp around his brain. This was his job, was his one, single task, and he completely failed to do it. He failed to do this simple, basic thing – Molly was able to ask Caleb to lunch, and then take him to see a film, and Caleb can’t even think of a new, exciting, interesting place to take Molly for a meal. He doesn’t want to do the same thing again. He doesn’t want to be boring. He knows that he is boring, as an individual, but Molly is- Molly’s- Molly isn’t. Molly is fascinating, and charming, and bright and colourful and interesting, and he deserves interesting dates.

He deserves better than Caleb.

“Hey,” Molly says gently, and Caleb nearly jumps when he feels a light touch on the back of his hand. He looks up, seeing Molly standing just in front of him, and then glances down to where Molly’s fingers are ghosting against the back of his hand, the touch light and cautious enough that
Caleb could pull away at any moment if he wanted to.

He doesn’t. Instead, he turns his hand and gently laces their fingers together.

Molly squeezes his hand. “Hey,” he says again, “Caleb. It’s alright.”

“It is not alright, Mollymauk,” Caleb mumbles. “I was- I was supposed to be the one planning this date, and I- I messed it up.” *Just like I mess everything up.*

“Caleb, you didn’t mess up anything. We don’t have to do anything fancy or new for lunch.”

“But I-“

“All you said,” Molly says softly, squeezing Caleb’s hand again, “Is that we could get lunch together. That was it.” He pauses, giving a short, quiet laugh. “Honestly, Caleb, I wouldn’t mind if we just got sandwiches from Pumat’s, came back, and ate them here. I wouldn’t mind if we just had that shitty department tea that you hate so much for lunch and didn’t eat anything at all.”

“You would mind,” Caleb mutters. “That tea is *vile.*”

Molly laughs again. “Alright,” he admits, “Maybe I’d mind a bit. But that’s not the point, Caleb.”

“Then what is the point?”

“The point,” Molly says, “Is that I don’t care where we get lunch. As long as I get to have lunch with you, Caleb, I’m really not bothered where we eat.”


They end up getting lunch from Pumat’s.

They walk there together in the gentle, patchy drizzle, and they’re barely twenty steps from the office when Caleb catches himself reaching out subconsciously for Molly’s hand. He glances down, his steps faltering a little. But when he looks back up, Molly just smiles and wiggles his fingers enough to brush them against the back of Caleb’s hand. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t need to - Caleb may not be well-versed in interpreting facial expressions and body language, but Molly is an open book before him.

Caleb looks down again and takes Molly’s hand in his own. He doesn’t let go until they arrive at Pumat’s, where letting go becomes a necessity so that Caleb can actually carry his lunch back to the office. They eat lunch on the floor of Caleb’s office, surrounded by bookshelves and knick-knacks of all kinds, and it’s only once they’ve finished eating that Caleb even remembers Nott’s gift, still sitting nestled in his satchel.

It is, he justifies to himself as he digs it out, not *entirely* his fault that he forgot about it. If anything, it’s Molly’s fault. Or, to be more specific, it’s the fault of Molly’s lacy underwear. Caleb is just one man, and a weak-willed, greedy, human man at that. He can’t help how his brain (and his other parts) have decided to quietly fixate on the image of soft, white lace bordered by lavender skin and wine-red fabric. He can’t help how he keeps wondering what it would feel like under his fingertips, against his skin, against his *mouth.*

He can’t help those thoughts, but he’s also not going to be chasing them up any time soon. He pauses, takes a breath, and pushes them from his mind as best he can.

“Nott gave me a gift this morning,” Caleb says, relieved to hear that his voice sounds almost entirely
normal. “She thought it might help me understand your emojis…” He rummages through his bag for a moment, and soon his fingers close around the smooth shape of the phone. He turns, presenting it to Molly. “I was, ah, I was wondering if you might help me set it up?” he asks. “I have, um… well, you have seen my current phone.”

Molly beams. “Caleb,” he says, reaching out towards the phone and brushing his fingers against Caleb’s in the process, “I would be delighted to help.”

They spend the rest of lunch like that, with Caleb leaning slightly against Molly’s side as Molly presses buttons, swipes at the screen, and does all manner of things to get Caleb’s new-ish phone up and running. It’s nice. It’s unspeakably nice. It’s light and simple and easy, so very different to the brain-brambles. And when Molly holds the phone out at arm’s length to take a selfie to use as his contact picture, Caleb turns his head without a second thought and presses a kiss to his cheek.

Chapter End Notes

The wonderful Molly art in this chapter was done by nonsycamore on tumblr!
Chapter 13

The days pass.

Caleb, annoyingly, finds himself becoming much busier as the week progresses. The university year is approaching deadline and exam season, and Caleb knows logically that he’ll start to be extremely busy again, but he still finds himself unprepared for it this year. He has research to do, assessments to grade, a mock paper to finish, and an actual exam paper to continue, and his lunch breaks with Molly start growing shorter and shorter.

He has to take Frumpkin to the vets, too. And put up posters, make posts online, and generally do all he can to give Frumpkin’s owners a chance to step forwards. They never do, though – the vet trip reveals that Frumpkin is in decent health and isn’t microchipped, and no one reaches out to Caleb. He’s well aware that it’s still early days and that there’s still plenty of time for Frumpkin’s owners to see one of his hastily-made (and Jester re-made) ‘cat found’ posters, but he can’t stop himself from getting attached. Frumpkin is a cat, after all. Caleb really feels that he can’t be blamed for how quickly he started thinking of Frumpkin as ‘his’ cat.

Molly becomes busier too – he tells Caleb about how he’s going to start spending more time at the carnival to work on another performance with Jester and a few other people that Caleb hasn’t heard of before. They still manage to keep seeing each other in the mornings for a week or so, and they have lunch together a couple of times. But after a while, Caleb realises that the gaps between seeing Molly are growing longer and longer.

He doesn’t blame Molly, no more than he blames himself. They’re both just busy, the way that adults tend to be, and it’s not like they’re not in contact. Molly, now that he’s finally able to with the advent of Caleb’s new phone, sends him endless pictures and videos from his practises, chatting with him whenever he gets his breaks. In return, Caleb sends Molly pictures of Frumpkin. It’s nice. It’s good.

And then it’s Saturday again, and Caleb realises that he hasn’t seen Molly in person for almost a week and a half.

He misses Molly. He misses him a lot.

It’s almost pathetic, he thinks to himself on Saturday afternoon, as he’s sitting on the couch tapping away at his laptop with one hand as he scratches Frumpkin with the other, just how much he misses Molly. They’ve been talking over text every single day, and they’ve called more than once since the last time they saw each other face to face. Molly had even introduced him to video calling, which had been quick to replace their normal in-person morning greetings, and pretty much every evening these days ends with them trading goodnight texts until one of them (normally Caleb) falls asleep before they’re able to reply again. They talk all the time.

Caleb misses Molly anyway.

He misses Molly, and he’s not quite sure what to do about it, so he does the first sensible thing that comes to mind. He pushes his laptop away, takes a moment to contemplate his life choices, and turns to Frumpkin.

“Frumpkin?” Caleb asks. Frumpkin looks up at him and makes a small ‘mrrp’ sound, which Caleb takes it as an indication of the cat’s undivided attention. “What do I do?”

Frumpkin ‘mrrp’s again.
“What do I do about Mollymauk?”

The cat meows softly. Caleb takes it as an indication to keep talking.

“It is just,” he starts, turning slightly to better see Frumpkin, “It is just that- I have not seen him in a while. Is that- is it pathetic? That I miss him so much? We have- we have only been dating. We are not even-“ Caleb pauses and takes a breath. “We are not even boyfriends.” Though I would very much like us to be.

Frumpkin blinks at him slowly. It is pathetic, the cat’s expression seems to say, But keep talking.

“I want to invite him over,” Caleb whispers quietly, watching as Frumpkin’s ears swivel to catch the sound. “I would- I would very much like to invite him over. I am not sure what we could do, but it-“ He huffs out a sigh. “It would be very nice to see him again, Frumpkin. I miss seeing him.”

Frumpkin gives a single soft meow.

“Should I… do I invite him over? Is that too much?”

Another meow, and Frumpkin gives Caleb a look. It is a look that Caleb recognises well – despite the slight difference in fur colouration, Frumpkin looks uncannily like Caleb’s old cat when he makes that particular face.

Text Molly, the face seems to say, and Caleb can’t help but smile slightly.

“You are a clever cat,” he says, gently scratching Frumpkin behind the ears. “I am very glad that Molly brought you to me, Schatz.” Frumpkin’s eyes slide half-closed as he starts to purr, and Caleb scratches him for a few moments longer before reaching for his phone.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Mollymauk?

It takes a few minutes for Molly to reply, but Caleb’s hand is on his phone almost before it’s finished buzzing.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] yes darling?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Are you free this evening?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I can be
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] why?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I have not seen you in a while. It would be nice to see you again.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Caleb, are you asking me to come over?

Caleb smiles to himself.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Perhaps.

Molly’s reply is practically instantaneous. Had it not been for the little typing bubble, Caleb would have thought that Molly had projected his thoughts directly onto Caleb’s phone.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] when do you want me to come round?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Whenever you like. I am only going to be grading assessments for the
rest of the evening.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] It can be rather dull, honestly.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I feel that your presence could make it less dull :) [unsent]

Is that too much? Caleb pauses, skimming back over the text. For a brief moment he’s worried that it might come off as too flirtatious, but then he reminds himself that this is Molly. This is Molly, who Caleb has kissed more than once now. This is Molly, who brought Caleb a cat, and made out with him on the couch, and seems delighted every single time Caleb does anything remotely flirty or affectionate.

The text can be flirty, Caleb reasons, and he hits ‘send’.

Molly won’t mind.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] darling, I’d be more than delighted to make your evening less dull - smiling tiefling emoji-
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] how about seven? Is that good for you?

That’s about four hours from now, giving Caleb plenty of time to finish the grading he was hoping to get done.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Ja, seven is excellent for me.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ll see you then, Caleb :3
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :3

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -grinning tiefling emoji- -sparkles emoji-

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Why do you keep on sending me emoji descriptions? You know that I can receive emoji now.

There’s a long pause. Caleb looks down at his phone, watching as the little bubble that indicates that Molly is typing appears and disappears and reappears again, over and over until the screen grows dark. He’s not sure why it’s taking Molly so long to reply – he assumed the answer would be ‘because I forgot that you have a smartphone now,’ but that doesn’t seem to be the case.

Eventually, Caleb’s phone buzzes and lights up with a series of new texts.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] because they’re our thing
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I can send emoji to anyone but emoji descriptions are our thing
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I don’t send emoji descriptions to anyone else
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] idk it’s silly
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] but it feels special

Well that’s… it’s…

It’s adorable. More than adorable: it’s sweet, and even over text Caleb can feel how earnest and honest Molly is being. He understands it, too – their silly emoji descriptions do feel special, somehow. They’re strange, and completely unnecessary now that Caleb can not only receive emoji, but send them too, but it’s their silly thing.

Caleb replies in the only way that he can think how.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -blushing face human emoji-

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :D
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -smiling face tiefling emoji- -blushing face tiefling emoji- -cat emoji-

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -cat emoji-
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :3

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :3

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I will not lie – I quite like your emoji descriptions.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] They do feel special.

There’s a pause.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -purple heart emoji-
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’m glad you think so, Caleb :) 

Caleb has a thought, and takes a few moments to figure out how to access the emoji keyboard on his phone. He wasn’t aware that purple was a colour option for heart emojis, but now that he is he can’t help but wonder what other colours there are.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -blue heart emoji-
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I look forward to seeing you later, Mollymauk :) 

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I look forward to seeing you too!
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ll leave you to your marking now darling ^-^

Caleb smiles down at his phone, smiles down at Frumpkin – who appears to be asleep – and returns to his grading.

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Molly arrives at seven on the dot. Caleb barely sees the clock on his laptop screen tick over to 19:00 before the flat door buzzer rings out, making him jump slightly before his brain processes what the sound means. He lets Molly into the building as quickly as he can and waits impatiently by the door as Molly climbs the stairs up to Caleb’s floor.

And then a knock comes at the door, and Caleb flings it open almost before the sound has finished echoing through the living room.

“Hi,” Molly says, grinning widely.

“Hi,” Caleb replies, smiling just as much. He steps aside, letting Molly into the flat, and Molly’s quick to kick off his shoes and hang up his star-bedecked jacket.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much,” Molly says apologetically, looking up at Caleb with a somewhat glum expression. Caleb shakes his head.

“Do not worry about it,” he says quickly, “I have been busy too. It is just life, Mollymauk.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“But what?”
Molly shrugs, making the jewellery on his horns jingle softly. “But we’re dating,” he says, sounding unusually soft and uncertain. “We’re- we should be seeing each other often…”

Caleb steps forwards, reaching out to take Molly’s hands without even thinking about it. Molly doesn’t resist, squeezing Caleb’s hands gently as Caleb steps in a little closer.

“Mollymauk,” Caleb says, “Do not worry about this. We are- we are dating, yes, but that does not mean that we have to see each other every day.” Even if I would like to. “We are both adults with jobs and lives and commitments. I have also been very busy this week. It is not your fault.”

Molly smiles a little, and squeezes Caleb’s hands again. “Alright,” he says quietly. “If you say so.”

“I do say so.”

“Well, I’m not going to argue with the learned professor,” Molly replies, a little more of his normal teasing tone returning to his voice, and Caleb smiles and lets Molly’s hands slide out of his own as Molly turns into the main living space. “Is Nott around?” Molly asks, moving out of the small entrance area and glancing quickly around the room. “Or is she in her room?”

“Nein, she is at the gym with Yasha and Beau.” Caleb pauses, frowning slightly. “Or she was at the gym with Yasha and Beau. I think they might be out drinking now. It was unclear in her texts.”

“Carnival bouncer party?” Molly guesses, and Caleb feels his eyes widen slightly.

“Yes!” he exclaims. “That was exactly it! How did you know that?”

Molly gestures to himself. “Carnie,” he says, grinning. “We all know everything that’s going on.”

Caleb smiles back. “I dread the day that Nott gets to that point,” he replies. “She knows far too much already.”

“This is why I was wondering when I’d be able to meet her – I want to learn all her secrets. All of them. From what Jester and Yasha have said about her, she must have some really good titbits.”

“Ja, she knows about as much as Bryce does,” Caleb says. “But about myself, and Jester, and Beauregard, and Yasha, and people at the carnival, as opposed to about myself and the other professors and lecturers.”

“That’s a lot of knowledge to have.”

“She is a very dangerous woman,” Caleb agrees, leaning back against the wall and watching with a slight smile as Molly moves further into his home. It’s nice to see him here again – Caleb can’t help but feel, much as he did last time Molly was here, that Molly simply seems to fit. Despite his vibrant, beautiful clothes and purple skin and gorgeous tattoos, he nevertheless looks entirely at home in Caleb’s mostly neutral-toned living room. His jewellery does match the scattered gold decorations that Nott occasionally brings home, but beyond that there really shouldn’t be anything to make Molly look like he belongs here just as much as Caleb’s stacks of ancient, leather-bound books.

But he does.

“Where’s Frumpkin?” Molly asks, looking around the room for the cat, and Caleb raises a hand to point to a door in the corner.

“Nott’s room,” he says simply. “He has become rather fond of her blanket-nest.”
“Damn,” Molly replies, “I was hoping to see him.”

“Well, you are always welcome to visit again. Perhaps you will be able to see him next time you are here.”

Molly grins. “That’s definitely not the worst reason to visit – hoping to see a cat.”

Caleb smiles. “I cannot believe you are only dating me to see my cat, even though said cat was, in a way, previously your cat.”

“He was the carnival’s cat, which I think makes me his aunt. Or his uncle.” Molly shrugs. “I’m definitely some kind of relative, even if you and Nott have taken the role of cat-parents. Has Nott stopped wanting to eat Frumpkin?”

“…More or less,” Caleb replies with a shrug, walking over to the couch and sitting down. Molly joins him immediately, and Caleb finds himself leaning into Molly’s side without a second thought, not hesitating for even a moment. The question of if he deserves it or not doesn’t even cross his mind. He knows Molly. He knows that Molly likes, and even encourages, stuff like this. Molly clearly thinks that Caleb is allowed to have comfort and affection like this, and Caleb believes him. This is alright. This is allowed.

It’s also allowed for him to press in closer when Molly loosely wraps an arm around his shoulder, making him tighten it a little and start playing lazily with the hairs that have come free of Caleb’s small ponytail. Caleb turns his head slightly, giving Molly better access to the soft strands, and catches the soft warmth of Molly’s red eyes.

He’s missed this. He’s missed the comfort of Molly’s presence, the sound of his voice, and the gentleness of his hands in his hair. He’s missed seeing Molly in his office and in his apartment, has missed seeing him in the grassy yard or sitting across the table from him at Pumat’s.

He’s missed everything about Molly, and it has only been a fortnight.

Caleb watches as Molly shifts his head, the lamp on the coffee table casting gentle shadows across his face, and cannot stop himself from speaking.

“I have missed you,” he says simply. Molly’s mouth tilts into a soft smile.

“I’ve missed you too,” he says. Caleb glances down at Molly’s lips and looks back up again. He’s missed Molly a lot. He misses kissing Molly as well.

“Can I-“ he begins, and Molly answers before he even finishes asking his question.

“Go ahead.”

Caleb doesn’t hesitate. He leans in, tilts his head a little, and presses his lips to Molly’s in a chaste kiss. And another. And another. Gradually, they grow less chaste, heat rising through them until Caleb feels his heart start to pick up in his chest. Molly’s hands skims down Caleb’s side, hovering over his hips.

“Is this alright?” he asks, his voice little more than a murmur, and Caleb makes a small sound of assent. He knows to expect it but he still finds himself gasping softly when Molly’s hands actually settle on his hips, his thumbs rubbing lightly against Caleb’s waist.

“This feel good?” Molly asks, his lips barely separated from Caleb’s. Caleb nods before closing the hair’s-breadth of distance between them.
“Mhmm.” He doesn’t want to speak. He doesn’t want to speak when he could be kissing Molly instead.

Molly laughs a little against Caleb’s lips. He kisses Caleb back for a while, swiping his tongue lazily along Caleb’s bottom lip, and he laughs again at Caleb’s objecting whine when he pulls away. “Caleb,” he says, his voice still half a laugh, “I can’t be patient, love, there’s plenty more kisses left-I can’t talk if you keep on kissing me.”

“Why do you need to talk?” Caleb asks, before quickly correcting himself. “I- I mean-“ He pauses, clearing his throat, and tries to focus on the moment at hand and not on how swollen and spit-slicked Molly’s lips are. “What do you need to say, Mollymauk?”

“Nothing bad, love,” Molly assures him quickly, clearly recognising the faintly worried look on Caleb’s face. “I just wanted to know how far you wanted to take this.”

“Oh,” Caleb says, feeling surprise and relief wash over him simultaneously. “I, um… I don’t know.”

“That’s alright,” Molly replies easily. He brushes his thumbs against Caleb’s waist, and Caleb shivers when they ruck up his shirt and skim against his skin. He wants that touch. He wants that touch lower. “What do you want to do?”

“I-” Caleb begins and immediately cuts himself off. “I- I don’t know that either.”

“Mm, you’ve got to have some idea, darling. Even if it’s just ‘more kissing’ or ‘more cuddling’ or something along those lines.”

“I- I would like to- I want to-“ I want to keep kissing you, Caleb thinks. I want to keep kissing you, and I want you to keep kissing me, and I want-

“I want to touch you,” he blurts out, and Molly just smiles at him.

“Well, you’re more than welcome to do that, Caleb,” he says. “You don’t have to ask to touch me. Remember what I said last time?”

“Ja, of course. You said that I do not have to ask.”

“It still holds true now.”

Oh. “I- I assumed that that only applied to that day.”

Molly shakes his head a little, setting the fine gold and silver jewellery adorning his horns jingling. “Nope,” he says simply. “I mean, that’s absolutely a good attitude to have in general – consent being given once is no indication of consent being given in future and all that – but I meant it when I said that you didn’t have to ask, Caleb.”

“Oh,” Caleb says, feeling a little off-balance. “Oh. Okay.”

Molly sits up a little straighter. “How about this,” he says. “A new assumption for you: assume that you are always welcome to touch me. Always. You don’t have to ask, you can just go for it. And if it’s not a good time or a good place for touching, then I will let you know, alright? I will let you know, and that’ll be it. Nice and simple. Sound good?”

It does sound good. It sounds wonderful. Straightforward, uncomplicated, and clear. Caleb nods. “I- ja, that sounds good.”
“You still want to touch me, Caleb?”

“I do,” Caleb says quietly, twisting his hands together in his lap. “But I… I think I would like to do some more kissing first… if that is alright.”

Molly smiles widely. “That’s more than alright, Caleb,” he says and doesn’t move until Caleb slowly, slowly gathers his courage back together, leans in, and kisses Molly again.

And, just like that, everything becomes easy again.

Molly tilts his head, swiping his tongue deeper into Caleb’s mouth, and Caleb groans from somewhere in the back of his throat. He feels hot, like there’s flames licking just below his skin, lighting up his nerves in a manner not dissimilar to that of his magic, and it’s so, so easy to reach out and press one hand to Molly’s waist.

Molly sighs into Caleb’s mouth. “Yeah,” he murmurs as Caleb reaches out, tentatively settling his other hand on Molly’s fabric-clad waist. “Yeah, there you go.”

Caleb whimpers. He can feel the heat of Molly’s skin through the fabric of his shirt, can feel the heat of Molly’s skin against his lips, and he wants it. He wants to know what it feels like against his fingertips, against his palms. He kisses Molly some more, feeling his courage grow slowly in his chest. Only when he feels ready does his shift his hand, slip it beneath Molly’s shirt, and finally feel skin beneath his fingertips.

Molly gasps. “Caleb,” he says, and Caleb groans softly. “That’s- mm, good boy…”

Caleb groans again. Good boy. Gods. Fuck. Caleb wants to hear that again. He wants to hear Molly call him ‘good boy’ again, and he wants to kiss Molly, and he wants to see if there’s some way that he can combine those two desires. Because somehow those two words alone make Caleb feel, for the first time in his life, like he could be forgiven for everything he has done.

Caleb shivers and tries to press closer to Molly. “Say that again?” he asks, his voice little more than a murmur, and he feels Molly’s surprised exhale.

“Say what again?” Molly asks. “‘Good boy?’”

“Mm.”

Molly laughs softly. “I can do that,” he says quietly. He tucks a finger beneath Caleb’s chin, tilting his head just so, and presses a fleeting kiss to his lips. “Good boy,” he whispers, and Caleb shivers again. “Good boy.”

“Molly…” It feels like the words are sinking into his skin and bones, warming him from the inside out until every part of him is burning hot and wanting. Caleb feels his fingers twitch on Molly’s waist; they brush against Molly’s skin, picking up on the warmth and heat of his body for just a moment, and Caleb hears himself whine.

Molly grins. “Good boy,” he whispers, and he kisses Caleb again. Caleb leans into it, his eyes fluttering shut, and when Molly’s tongue brushes gently against his lip he doesn’t hesitate to open his mouth for it. “Good boy, mm- Caleb.”

Good boy.

The words seem to echo in Caleb’s mind as he continues to kiss Molly, slow and lax and lazy like they have all the time in the world. There’s heat to the kisses, but no urgency, not yet – Molly seems
entirely willing to let Caleb set the pace, and so he does. He shuffles closer on the couch, feeling Molly’s hands tighten a little on his waist, and he feels more than he hears himself groan quietly into Molly’s mouth. The flames under his skin have only increased in temperature, prompting Caleb to press closer, closer, closer. Before he knows it, he’s slipping both hands up under Molly’s shirt, running them over acres of warm lavender skin.

Molly makes a small, appreciative sound, and Caleb leans in closer still, pressing their chests almost flush together as he does his best to learn the expanse of Molly’s body with his fingertips alone. Molly sighs again, twisting his body to press more fully into Caleb’s touch. “Mm, Caleb…”

“Is this- is this alright?” Caleb asks haltingly, even as his hands continue to roam. Molly sighs and nods, leaning back against the arm of the couch with a smile.

“How- how much can I touch?”

Molly’s smile turns into a grin. “As much as you want.”

Caleb feels his mouth grow dry. “What if I touch somewhere you don’t want me to?”

“Caleb, right now I’m fine with you touching me anywhere.”

That’s- well. That’s just opened up a lot of possibilities. Caleb shuffles closer to Molly on the couch, shifting his hands to run them slowly along the curves of Molly’s ribs. Beneath his fingers, he can feel a thousand faintly raised silver scars. “Is here okay?” he asks, and Molly nods, stretching slightly and arching his back into Caleb’s touch.

“Yeah. That’s more than okay, love.”

Another shift. Caleb moves his hands lower, brushing them over the skin at the small of Molly’s back. “Here?”

“That’s good too, darling.”

_Darling_, again. Caleb wants to kiss the sound of it right off Molly’s lips. He swallows, wetting his dry throat, and slowly moves his fingers lower, until he can feel the trail of hair beneath Molly’s belly-button pressing at his fingertips. “And- here?”

Molly smiles. “I said anywhere, Caleb. Anywhere at all. Wherever you want to touch.”

Caleb squeezes his eyes shut. He- he can’t- he shouldn’t have this. He shouldn’t be allowed to have this.

He shouldn’t be allowed to have it, but he does. He does because Molly wants him to have it – because Molly wants _him_. Because Molly wants him, and Molly trusts him, and Molly is actively encouraging him to push the brambles in his head to one side and take what he wants.

Caleb wants to kiss him.

“Caleb,” Molly says softly, and it’s all the remaining encouragement that Caleb needs to surge forwards and press his lips to Molly’s in a sudden, burning kiss. “Mm, Caleb.”

Caleb tastes the sound of his own name on Molly’s lips and groans. “Mollymauk.”

“Good boy- mm-“
Caleb forgets himself as they continue to trade kisses, losing himself to the sensation of Molly’s lips on his own and the feeling of Molly’s skin beneath his palms. He runs his hands anywhere he can get them, feeling out the curve of Molly’s spine and the dips of his collarbones and the smooth metal pierced through his nipples, eliciting some truly wonderful noises the first time he brushes his thumbs over them. He does it again, making Molly groan into his mouth, and he can’t stop himself from shuffling closer, feeling his already half-hard cock stir more just from the noises that Molly is making. Gods, but he wants to see Molly – he wants to see the ink on his skin and the metal running through his nipples, and he wants to touch everything.

“Can I- I want- I want this off,” Caleb mutters between kisses, tugging at Molly’s shirt, and Molly laughs softly against his lips, leaning his torso away while still managing to kiss Caleb absolutely senseless.

“Alright,” he says softly, and he kisses Caleb again. “Alright, love, let me just- there.” There’s a soft thwump of fabric hitting the floor, but Caleb pays it no heed. How can he, now that he’s got Molly sitting in front of him, a little bit sweaty and more than a little bit beautiful and so, so gorgeous that Caleb very nearly doesn’t know what to do? How is he meant to focus on anything but Molly when the man himself is goddamn shirtless in Caleb’s apartment, his chest heaving and flushed beneath the ink and scars and his lips slick and swollen from endless, countless kisses?

The answer, clearly, is that Caleb isn’t meant to focus on anything else, so he doesn’t try. He just stares at Molly, swallows around his dry throat, and groans quietly. “Mollymauk…”

Molly smiles. But despite his confident tone, the growing flush on his cheeks makes him look almost nervous. “Like what you see?”

“Ja.” Gods above, of course he does. Molly is- he’s- Caleb knows that he thinks it a lot, but Molly is beautiful. He’s stunning. He’s beautiful, and he’s stunning, and he’s gorgeous, and he’s quite devastatingly sexy, and in the soft light of Caleb’s living room he looks almost ethereal, like he’s not entirely real. Like he’s the best possible kind of wet dream. “You’re- ja, Mollymauk. You’re stunning.”

Off the side of the couch, Molly’s tail gives a small, happy little twitch. “You’re not half bad yourself, Mr Caleb.”

“Don’t tease me.”

“I’m not teasing,” Molly says, open and honest. “You’re really quite attractive, Caleb.”

Caleb feels himself flush. “Mollymauk…”

“I wouldn’t lie about this, Caleb. You’re gorgeous.”

Caleb shuts his eyes. He doesn’t know what to do with this. He doesn’t know what to do with the compliments that Molly is laying on him. He hasn’t had a place in his brain to put compliments for many, many years, and now here Molly is, more beautiful and attractive than anyone Caleb has ever seen, telling Caleb that he’s beautiful too.

I am not, Caleb hears his mind say, and he opens his eyes again.

Molly smiles at him. “Are you going to accept my compliments now?” he asks, his voice lilting slightly, and Caleb gives a small shrug.

“I can… I can try,” he offers. Molly smiles wider.
“Good boy,” he replies gently, and Caleb feels his cock twitch a little. He loves those two words. He really, really loves those two words. He wants to taste them on Molly’s lips. “Caleb,” Molly continues simply, holding out his hands to him. “Come here.”

Caleb does.

He leans forwards, meeting Molly in another searing kiss as he feels Molly’s hands settle around his hips. It’s the work of a moment to reposition himself on the couch, slotting in between Molly’s legs as if he’s meant to be there, and it’s everything Caleb can do to resist how his hips try instinctively to roll down, seeking out any friction to relieve the pressure on his cock. He whines into Molly’s mouth, hands skating across Molly’s torso before they settle on his chest. Molly is warm beneath him, burning hot and beautiful, and every soft sound that he makes only drives the fire in Caleb’s gut to burn hotter. Caleb kisses Molly, kisses him again, and then tilts his head to press kisses to the line of Molly’s jaw, thumbing lazily at Molly’s nipples until Molly starts making beautiful, hitching gasps against Caleb’s neck. He rolls the small barbells between his fingers again, enjoying how the action makes Molly gasp and groan, and when Molly’s fingers dig into Caleb’s ass, just for a moment, Caleb groans and rolls his hips down to meet Molly’s.

“Oh,” Molly gasps, sounding a little surprised, and Caleb freezes immediately. Fuck. “Oh, hello there…”

“I’m-“ Caleb begins, the apology already lining up on his tongue, but Molly cuts him off before he can even really begin it.

“Don’t apologise,” Molly says, and he looks at Caleb for a second before leaning in to press a swift kiss to his lips. “Don’t apologise for this, Caleb. It’s alright.”

“But I am-“

“Hard?” Molly finishes for him, and Caleb flushes scarlet and ducks his head, hearing Molly laugh softly. “Yeah, well, so am I.”

“…Was?”

Molly shifts a little, and Caleb feels something nudge against his leg. “It’s not just you, darling.”

Now that Caleb’s less terrified of how Molly will react to his… situation, he can actually realise that Molly’s not lying – he can feel the hard line of Molly’s cock pressing against his thigh, and when Caleb shifts a little he hears Molly gasp beneath him.

“You’re hard,” Caleb murmurs softly.

“Yeah,” Molly admits. “Have been for a while – you’re really quite talented with those hands of yours. Did you know that? – but I didn’t want to, y’know, scare you off or anything.”

Caleb laughs weakly. “I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“Darling, you could never.”

Caleb doesn’t comment on that. He doesn’t mention how he’s still amazed that his past hasn’t scared away Nott. Instead, he turns his thoughts towards Molly – and the warmth of Molly’s skin – and returns Molly’s smile with a soft one of his own. “I do not think you could ever scare me off,” he says instead, and Molly’s smile loses its flirtatious, teasing edge, becoming softer and more open. “You are- you have been very lovely so far, Mollymauk. You have been, um, patient. With me. It’s nice…”
“Caleb,” Molly says gently. He leans up, kissing Caleb quickly. “You’re very lovely too, and very nice. And I don’t want to rush you, darling. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

Caleb doesn’t know how to reply to that, so he kisses Molly again. And again, and again, each kiss becoming longer and hotter until Caleb can feel himself starting to shift against Molly’s front, his hips making little aborted motions as he tries to hold himself back. He doesn’t know what’s okay yet. He doesn’t know what’s allowed. He knows he’s allowed to touch Molly, though, and he’s certainly not holding back from that – he runs his hands all over Molly’s torso, playing with his nipple piercings until Molly is groaning, bucking up slightly against Caleb. Caleb can’t get enough of those sounds, and he can’t get enough of Molly’s soft moans either. Every single little noise that Molly makes, Caleb dedicates himself to remembering. And, very quickly, his mind starts to wander. He wants to know what Molly sounds like when Caleb is doing more than just kissing him. He wants to know what Molly sounds like when Caleb has his hands on his cock, has his mouth on his cock, when Caleb is pulling pleasure out of him until he’s wrecked and ruined by it.

Caleb knows he has a very good imagination, but he wants to hear this for himself. He moans into Molly’s mouth, skims his hands down Molly’s sides, and remembers what he said earlier.

“Molly-” Caleb says, hearing his own voice break off into a groan when Molly shifts against him. “I- I need to- slow down, please-“

Molly leans back immediately. “What’s wrong?” he asks, sounding worried.

“Nothing,” Caleb says quickly, “Nothing is- nothing is wrong, Molly. I am just-“ He pauses, takes a breath, and then continues. “Earlier, when you said I could- I could touch you anywhere, did that include, um…”

Molly raises a knowing eyebrow. “Did that include where?”

Caleb makes a small gesture down, feeling his already flushed face turn darker still, his blood seemingly split between his face and his cock. “Your, um, your- can I- is it alright if I-…”

Caleb stammers hopelessly for a few more moments, before Molly takes pity on him and answers what it’s clear that Caleb is trying to ask. “I’m not going to lie,” he says, his thumbs rubbing lazy circles on Caleb’s hips, “I would absolutely love it if you touched my cock, Caleb. You’re not going to get any complaints from me there. But – and this is important – I only want that if you want it too.” He catches Caleb’s eye for a moment and doesn’t seem to mind when Caleb looks away almost immediately. “You’re enjoying this too, right?”

“Ja. I- I want this…” Caleb admits, his voice soft and shameful.

“You want this,” Molly repeats back at him, and Caleb nods, hiding his face against Molly’s neck. He wants this. Gods above, he wants this. He wants to touch Molly, and he wants to kiss Molly, and he wants to be touched by Molly. He wants Molly’s hands on his waist, on his hips, on his cock. He wants Molly’s hands all over him

“I want this,” he confirms in a whisper. He hears a soft rustle of fabric, and then Molly’s fingers card slowly through his hair, gently playing with the ginger strands.

“You want this, and I want this,” Molly says simply. The fire beneath Caleb’s skin, which had been fading slowly over the last few minutes, starts to stir to life again at Molly’s words. Molly wants this, Caleb thinks hopefully. Molly wants me. “We both want this, Caleb. So what’s the problem?”

Caleb swallows. “I- I don’t-” He can’t finish. He can’t speak.
When Molly replies, Caleb can hear his frown in his voice. “You don’t want this?” he asks, sounding confused. Caleb shakes his head.

“Nein,” he says softly. “I want this, Molly, I assure you I do, but I- I do not…”

“You don’t what, sweetheart?”

_Say it, Widogast._ “I do not deserve it,” Caleb admits in a whisper, and Molly’s fingers still in his hair immediately. Caleb doesn’t raise his head. He doesn’t move, doesn’t try to press closer or to push away. _If Mollymauk wants me gone, he will say so._ “I’m sorry,” he whispers, and squeezes his eyes shut. “I’m sorry…”

“Caleb…”

“You do not… I am sorry for this, Mollymauk…” He squeezes his eyes shut tighter, and tries to press closer still to Molly. “I know I do not deserve this,” he says, and his words are so quiet he doesn’t know if Molly heard them or not.

“Hey, hey, Caleb…” Molly starts shifting a little beneath him, and Caleb sits up a little, giving Molly the space he needs to move into a more upright position. Molly leans forwards, one hand still on Caleb’s waist, and Caleb thinks he feels Molly’s tail twine loosely around his calf. “There’s nothing to apologise for. You deserve this,” Molly says softly, gently cupping Caleb’s face. “You deserve to feel good, Caleb.”

“I don’t,” Caleb objects quietly.

“You do,” Molly insists. “Caleb, listen to me.”

“I am listening.”

“Then understand.” Molly’s eyes widen earnestly, and Caleb glances at them for a moment before looking away. He can’t do eye contact at the best of times, let alone now. He certainly can’t do eye contact when his cock is still pressing insistently against the front of his pants and Mollymauk Tealeaf has one hand on his face and one hand on his waist and is looking at him as if Caleb deserves the stars themselves. Caleb certainly can’t look at him then.

Thankfully, Molly doesn’t seem to mind.

“Caleb,” he says gently. “I want this. You want this. We both want this, darling. And I know for a fact that you deserve this, no questions asked.”

Caleb frowns. “But you don’t- you do not know what I’ve done.”

“I don’t have to,” Molly replies promptly. “I know you, Caleb, or at least I’d like to think that I do. And the man that I know deserves this, and so many other things.”

“But-“

“Do you want this?” Molly asks again. Caleb nods.

“I do,” he says quietly.

“Do you want me to kiss you and touch you?”

Caleb answers that by kissing Molly quickly. He feels that should be answer enough.
It seems Molly disagrees. He kisses Caleb back for a while, sweet and hot and good, but just when Caleb is ready to lose himself again to the slick slide of lips and tongues Molly leans back, making Caleb whine quietly.

“Caleb,” Molly says, “Can you answer me with words? I really don’t want to ruin anything here by making assumptions. I want you to be comfortable.”

“I am comfortable,” Caleb replies. “I would- ja, I would like you to kiss and to touch me, Mollymauk.”

Molly smiles. “Good boy,” he says, and kisses Caleb quickly. “What else do you want me to do?”

Anything. Everything. I want you to touch me everywhere. “I…“

Molly glances down to where Caleb’s interest is still very much evident in his trousers, and nods towards it. “Do you want to do anything about that?” he asks quietly, and there’s no expectation anywhere in his voice.

Caleb feels himself flush, and he shifts a little in place, which only makes things worse. “I- ah- I…”

“You can say no, Caleb. That’s absolutely fine. If you just want to kiss and cuddle, or not even do that, just say so, alright? Whatever you want to do.”

Caleb squeezes his eyes shut. He can’t look at Molly for this. “I, um- I would like to do something. About it. With you.”

“What do you want us to do?”

Caleb peeks one eye open. Molly is still smiling up at him, his hands soft and light and perfect on Caleb’s waist, resting against his sides like it’s exactly where they’re meant to be. Somehow, despite- well, despite everything, Caleb doesn’t actually feel… bad. He feels awkward, yes, and a little bit unsure and more than a little bit like his face might combust at any second, but he doesn’t feel nervous.

He doesn’t feel afraid.

He also doesn’t know what he wants to do.

“I- I don’t-…” he starts, and then trails off into a sigh. “I don’t know what I want us to do,” he admits. “It has been, um- it has been a while.”

“That’s alright,” Molly replies easily. “What do you want to do? We only have to do what you’re comfortable with.”

“I don’t- I don’t know, Molly.” He does. He absolutely does. He wants so many things, but he can’t say them out loud. Not yet. Despite all of Molly’s words, despite everything, he still finds himself worried that he might scare Molly off. “I don’t know,” he mutters again, and he leans forward to rest his head on Molly’s shoulder. Molly gives a small hum and lifts a hand to start running it slowly through Caleb’s hair.

“Would some ideas maybe help?” he asks casually. “I can give you some suggestions, and you could let me know if you like them.”

Caleb makes a small sound. “That could- that could be good…” Surely Molly wouldn’t suggest things that he doesn’t want to do, right? And if Molly’s suggesting them, then Molly wants them,
which means that Caleb doesn’t have to worry about if Molly is into it or not.

All things considered, it’s not a bad plan.

Molly’s hand doesn’t stop playing with Caleb’s hair. “I could jerk you off,” Molly suggests softly, the words murmured against Caleb’s ear, and Caleb freezes. “I could jerk you off, or you could get me off if you don’t want to be touched yourself – which is absolutely fine, by the way – or I could blow you, or I could finger you, or I could-“

Gods above, but fuck.

Caleb doesn’t think he’s ever felt his erection turn that urgent, that quickly. Just hearing Molly suggest all the things they could do in that lovely, faintly accented voice of his is enough to make Caleb shiver, and Molly just keeps on talking. Caleb’s mouth turns dry with each passing suggestion, but he only needed to hear the first one to know what he wanted. He pushes himself upright, feeling Molly’s hands slip down to settle on his waist. “Caleb?” Molly asks, sounding a little concerned, and Caleb takes a moment to catch his breath before speaking.

“Touch me,” he says, in a desperate blur of sound. “I- please, Molly, bitte, touch me.”

“You want me to jerk you off?” Molly asks, his thumbs skimming the soft skin below Caleb’s waistband, and Caleb nods frantically.

“Ja, bitte.”

“… That means ‘yes, please,’ right?”

Caleb nods again. “Ja.”

Molly grins. “I’d be delighted to, love. Any no-go areas?”

“…What?”

“Any areas you don’t want me to touch?” Molly clarifies, not a hint of judgement in his voice, and Caleb pauses and thinks for a second before nodding slowly.

“My, um, my upper back?” he says cautiously, the request coming out sounding more like a question. “And, ah, my- my upper arms.”

“Upper back and upper arms,” Molly repeats back at him. “Got it.” He hands drift lower, one slipping around to Caleb’s back as his fingers start to ghost over the curve of Caleb’s ass. The other drifts towards the bulge of Caleb’s erection, fingers brushing lightly over the stretched-taut fabric. “May I…?”

Caleb nods. “Please.”

Molly doesn’t waste any time after that – despite his calm demeanour it seems that he’s just as impatient as Caleb. No sooner does Caleb speak than Molly thumbs open the button of Caleb’s fly, tugging the zipper down and relieving some of the pressure on his aching cock. Molly’s fingers run teasingly over Caleb’s clothed erection, making him groan and roll his hips into the touch. It seems that was the sign that Molly was waiting for – Molly only pauses to quickly ask and receive Caleb’s permission before he tugs Caleb’s boxers a little lower, wraps his fingers around Caleb’s cock, and draws him out.

“Oh, Caleb,” Molly breathes, and Caleb whines and presses his face against Molly’s neck again.
“Oh, sweetheart, you’re gorgeous.”

“Mollymauk…”

“Caleb, darling, you’re stunning, just look at you…” Caleb doesn’t see Molly move, but he feels it when Molly’s hand settles around his cock – he can’t stop a soft moan from escaping him, his hips twitching into the faint, barely-there contact. He’s not as hard as he was earlier, but even this slight touch is starting to remedy that. Caleb can already feel his heart starting to pick up speed again, his body craving Molly’s hands and Molly’s lips and Molly.

Gods, but Caleb wants him.

“Molly,” Caleb groans, and Molly turns his head and kisses Caleb, taking the sound from his lips. Caleb keens into the kiss, his hands tightening slightly on Molly’s sides. He wants- he wants- he wants everything, wants whatever Molly is willing to give him, whatever that may be. He wants Molly to kiss him, and he wants Molly to touch him, and he wants Molly to keep touching his cock, to keep talking to Caleb like he’s something revered and precious and not the twisted, disgusting thing that Caleb knows he is inside.

That Caleb thinks he is inside. Somehow, in this moment, with Molly’s praise and compliments sinking deep into Caleb’s bones, it is becoming easier and easier to forget this thing that Caleb knows he is.

“Good boy,” Molly murmurs, the words little more than a whisper, and Caleb feels the bramble-thread in his brain melt away a little bit more. Molly’s hand leaves his cock for a second, making Caleb whine quietly at the loss, but it returns a moment later spit-slick and tighter than before. “Come on, darling, let me know what you need…”

Caleb groans. This is- it’s too much, somehow; it’s too much and it’s not enough and he wants more. “I- I want- Molly…”

“I’m right here, love,” Molly says softly, working his hand over Caleb’s cock. Caleb moans again, the sound hanging between them in the silence of the living room, and he feels Molly lean in and start kissing a pattern up the column of his throat, only to stop at the junction of his jaw. “Caleb?” he asks quietly, “Can I- can I give you a hickey? Would that be alright?”

Caleb doesn’t even think before he answers. “Ja,” he gasps, “Ja, Ich-bitte.” He wants that. He wants to be marked by Molly, and in the absence of any wine-dark lipstick Caleb has absolutely no issues in taking a hickey to be his mark instead. “Please.”

“You sound very nice when you beg,” Molly murmurs absently, and then his lips fasten over Caleb’s pulse and he sucks.

“Ah!” Caleb cries out, his hands scrabbling desperately at Molly’s sides. “Molly!” He feels Molly hum against his throat, easing the sting of the bruise with small, feather-light kisses.

“This alright?” Molly asks, the words muffled slightly by Caleb skin, and as he speaks he twists his hand around Caleb’s cock and makes him cry out again.

“Ja,” Caleb manages to say. “Ja, very.”

“Good.” Molly tilts his head up, and Caleb meets him halfway in a messy kiss, all teeth and tongue and ragged, panting breaths as Molly continues to stroke at his cock.

“Molly,” Caleb gasps against his mouth, clutching at Molly’s hips with desperate, trembling hands.
“I’m- Molly.”

“I’ve got you,” Molly murmurs and he ducks his head to press another kiss to the mark on Caleb’s throat, dragging his teeth over the blossoming bruise and making Caleb whine. “Gods, you’re responsive, aren’t you?”

“Your fault,” Caleb manages to hiss.

“My fault?”

“Mhm- ah-“

Molly smirks and twists his hand around Caleb’s cock again, watching Caleb’s hips roll and thrust to meet his grasp. “How is it my fault?” he asks calmly, as if he was having a lunchtime discussion in Caleb’s office and wasn’t sitting pressed against Caleb’s front on Caleb’s couch, his own erection straining at his jeans and his hand stuffed down Caleb’s pants.

“It- you-“ Caleb begins, but then Molly does something with his hand and Caleb feels his voice break off into a whine again, his head falling forward to press against Molly’s shoulder. It is Molly’s fault though, the way that Caleb sees it – thanks to Molly, his dick has spent the last several months in a state of high, if quiet, alert. Caleb might be far from a teenager these days, but that doesn’t mean his dick necessarily agrees with that. As it is, he feels like he might be a teenager all over again – they’ve barely even started, but he can already feel his orgasm gathering close and hot in his gut, recognises it in the way that his breath comes shorter in his chest and his hips start to grow erratic in their thrusts.

“Molly,” he gasps again, “Ich werde- Scheisse.”

Molly’s thumb runs around the head of his cock again, his mouth meeting Caleb’s in a burning kiss, and then Caleb’s coming, damnit, embarrassingly soon, shooting hot and white and sticky over Molly’s fist as Molly drinks down every gasp and whine and whimper Caleb makes into his mouth.


Caleb whines again. He’s starting to feel oversensitive now, Molly’s hand still wrapped around his cock, and he reaches down to messily bat it away before he reaches for Molly’s fly. Distantly, he’s aware of Molly leaning over to wipe his hand on his own discarded shirt, but it’s hard to focus on anything beyond the warmth of Molly’s body against his and the warmth curling through his bones.

“Molly,” he manages to say, his voice sounding hoarse even to his own ears. “Can I- I want to- please, Molly…”

“What do you want?” Molly murmurs back, still sounding almost entirely calm even as Caleb ghosts his fingers over the bulge in Molly’s pants. It’s only the faint hitch in his voice that gives Caleb’s orgasm-addled brain any indication that Molly is actually feeling Caleb’s touch at all.

“Want to touch you…”

“Please,” Molly laughs breathlessly, angling his hips towards Caleb’s hand. “Touch away.”

Caleb doesn’t hesitate to follow Molly’s permission. He opens Molly’s fly as quickly as he can without looking at it, too distracted by Molly’s lips on his own to even consider tearing his attention away. It takes a few half-fumbled attempts, but soon enough, Caleb can reach out and touch with no ridiculously tight fabric in the way.
His fingers slip past the fly of Molly’s pants, and the very first thing that he feels is lace.

Oh, *fuck*. Oh, Gods above. Caleb groans, louder than he thought he would, and feels his limp cock give a half-hearted, but nonetheless spirited, twitch. *Fuck*. Molly’s wearing lace. Molly’s wearing lace, and Caleb is touching it, and he can feel the warmth of Molly’s skin through it, and he can hear Molly’s breath coming shorter as he starts to work his fingers lower, and Caleb-

Caleb is allowed to do all of this.

Caleb wants this, wants this more than he can remember ever wanting anything else, and he is *allowed to have it*.

More than that, in fact: he’s being actively encouraged to want and to have this. Even now, Molly is still murmuring and gasping small pieces of praise to Caleb, his hands solid and sure on Caleb’s hips and his breath coming in warm bursts against Caleb’s neck.

“Yeah,” Molly says softly, his voice breaking off into a soft groan when Caleb’s fingers move lower, brushing against the swell of his cock. “Yeah, that’s- *ah*- that’s it, take all the time you need…”

“*Molly,*” Caleb says, trying to find the words. “I’m- this-…”

“Yeah?”

There are no words that can convey what Caleb is thinking and feeling. There are no words to sum up how, in this one, single moment, he feels like he is allowed to want this. There are no words for any of the thoughts in his head.

Caleb turns his head, and kisses Molly instead.

He kisses Molly like he’s trying to remember the shape of his lips for the rest of his life. He kisses Molly like life, like a lifeline, kisses him again and again and again as he starts to stroke Molly’s cock. Caleb hasn’t done this for many, many years, but somehow with Molly, it feels easy. It feels right. Molly is responsive beneath his touch, writhing and moaning and gasping and groaning out ‘yes, Caleb,’ and ‘*good boy*’ whenever Caleb does something that he particularly likes, and Caleb is nothing if not a quick learner. He learns within minutes that Molly likes it when Caleb uses his free hand to play with the barbell in his nipples while his other hand strokes slowly along his cock. He learns that brushing his thumb over the pattern of ridges on the underside of Molly’s cock makes his breath catch in his throat.

He learns that watching Molly flush dark, dusky purple all the way down his chest, turning his tattoos several shades darker, only makes Caleb want to touch and kiss and lick them more.

So he does.

Caleb presses his lips to twisting lines of ink as he works his hand over Molly’s cock. Part of him wants to watch, wants to sit back and observe as the bobbing purple head of Molly’s dick slides in and out of his fist, but Caleb has been wanting to get his mouth on the feathers on Molly’s neck for a while now. Besides, the sounds that Molly is making are more than enough to have Caleb whining against Molly’s skin – what had started as small, bitten-off gasps and groans have started to escalate to full on moaning, overlaying the slick sound of spit- and pre-come-lubricated skin on skin. It’s disgusting. It’s filthy.

Caleb can’t get enough of it.

He latches his lips directly over a blood-red eye in the peacock’s tail, worries the skin between his
teeth for a moment, and starts to suck.

“Ngh- ah!” Molly cries out, throwing his head back as his hips stutter in Caleb’s grasp and his hands scrabble at Caleb’s waist. “Caleb!”

Caleb groans again. He wants to leave a mark, he so desperately wants to leave a mark, wants to lay claim to Molly with his touch and his mouth, but he does not deserve to, and he does not want to do this without Molly’s permission. “Molly- can- can I-“

“Leave a hickey on me?” Molly asks around gasped breaths. “I- fuck, Caleb, yeah, of course, I- ngh, fuck- mark me however the fuck you want, please.”

Please.

Caleb has Mollymauk Tealeaf sitting on his couch, his fly pulled down and his cock sitting heavy in Caleb’s hand, and Molly is begging for him.

And as if Molly can hear the thoughts in Caleb’s head, he asks again.

“Please,” he says, groaning when Caleb’s hand twitches on his cock, “Gods, please, Caleb, just fucking mark me, wherever you want, I don’t care, just please.”

Caleb has never claimed to be a strong-willed man.

The moment that Molly begs again, Caleb groans into the curve of his neck, muffling the sound against skin as he works his hand faster on Molly’s cock. He wants- he wants so much. He wants to mark Molly and he wants to hear Molly and he wants to know what Molly sounds like when he comes, wants to know if Molly is loud or quiet or if he’ll claw at Caleb’s sides or if he’ll tremble or if he’ll scream. Caleb wants to know so much.

For now, he does his best to content himself with learning what Molly sounds like when he sucks a mark onto his neck. He swipes his tongue against Molly’s skin again, tasting the salty tang of sweat and feeling his lungs fill with lavender and incense, and sinks his teeth gently into Molly’s skin. It has been a long, long time since Caleb last gave one of these, but he barely thinks about it as he sets about sucking a blossoming bruise amongst the feathers of the peacock’s tail. Molly whines loudly, his breath cutting off in a soundless gasp when Caleb scrapes his teeth over the new mark. He can feel the heat of Molly’s skin against his lips and tongue, and he very nearly doesn’t want to move away to look at the mark that he left.

He does, though, and the moment he sees it, dark and flushed against the twisting, twining feathers, he feels his mouth grow dry.

“I-“ he begins. “Molly, I- I want-“

“Yeah?” Molly asks, his breath coming in shorts bursts and pants as he fucks up into Caleb’s fist. “What do you want, Caleb?”

“I want- I want to mark you again,” Caleb admits, and Molly moans again. For a moment, Caleb could swear that he feels Molly’s cock twitch in his grasp.


Caleb groans. He thinks that one day he would like to lay Molly out beneath him, clear of clothes and anything else that may obstruct his gaze and hands and lips, and paint a constellation across his body using his mouth alone. He want to mark him everywhere; he wants to leave hickeys on
Molly’s neck and throat, wants to suck marks in amongst his narrow, silvered scars. He wants to take Molly by the thighs and leave bruises on the soft purple skin there before sucking his cock, learning the taste of it and how the ridges and grooves of it feel on his tongue. He wants to see how far down Molly’s tattoos go, and leave marks on all of them.

He thinks that he would like to see Molly naked save for his ink and jewellery and a host of love-bites and scratches left by Caleb’s own hands, his lavender skin marked white with Caleb’s come, and the mental image is so sudden and jarring that Caleb feels his hand falter for a moment on Molly’s cock.

Molly just groans again. “Caleb…”

Caleb whines. He wants, wants everything that Molly could ever possibly offer him, and he very nearly thinks he could beg for it. “Please, Mollymauk,” he manages to say, and when he runs his thumb around the head of Molly’s cock Molly gasps into the still air of the apartment. “Bitte.”

“You don’t have to ask, Caleb,” Molly manages to say, his voice trailing off into a groan. “You- oh, fuck- whatever you want, love.”

It’s all that Caleb needs to hear. He kisses down the line of Molly’s neck, following the pattern of feathers, and sucks another bruise into place at the base of his throat. Molly moans again, louder and more broken than before, his hands spasming on Caleb’s hips. “Caleb-“

“Liebling,” Caleb murmurs, kissing the mark he just left and making Molly whimper. “Gods, Mollymauk…” He twists his hand around Molly’s cock, remembering what Molly did to him and how it left him shaking. He wants to do that to Molly. He wants to make Molly come undone from his touch alone. “The things I want to do to you,” he whispers against Molly’s skin, and he feels Molly’s cock jump in his hand as he gasps.

“Caleb, I’m- fuck-“

Molly comes with a groan that sends heat flooding through Caleb’s veins. He turns his head, capturing Molly’s lips in a kiss, and kisses him again and again as he feels Molly’s come land on his hand, Molly’s hips stuttering up into his fist. Caleb slows down his strokes as Molly’s hips stop jerking, and when he hears Molly whine a little he pulls his hand away, feeling Molly’s come cooling against his skin.

“Caleb?” Molly murmurs curiously, watching as Caleb lifts his hand to inspect it. “What are you-oh.”

Caleb darts his tongue out, and runs it along another droplet of Molly’s come. It tastes salty, strange and bitter and somehow almost spicy, but it’s not actually bad. It’s certainly not a taste that he minds. He tilts his head, turning his hand to better reach the splashes of white, and licks again. And again. Across from him, Molly’s eyes grow wide.

“Caleb,” he says, his voice sounding somewhat strangled. Caleb hums quietly, unable to stop himself from smirking a little when he feels Molly’s hand twitching and flexing against his hip. He glances up at Molly through his eyelashes, and watches as Molly’s cheeks grow even darker.

*I did this,* he thinks to himself, as Molly gapes. *I did this to Molly.*

It’s a heady thing, to realise the power that he has over Mollymauk in this moment.

Caleb takes his time licking his hand clean. What had started as a simple curiosity had quickly turned into Caleb wondering how hard he could make Molly from cleaning his hand alone. As it turns out
the answer to that is ‘not very,’ but Caleb isn’t surprised. He knows that his dick definitely feels worn out, and though he would assume that Molly would be much quicker to recover than him, it seems that, right now, Molly is just as tired out as Caleb is.

When Caleb finally cleans the last drop from his hand, there’s a moment’s pause, and then Molly holds out his hands to him. Caleb takes them in silence. When Molly tugs gently, Caleb doesn’t hesitate to tumble forwards onto Molly’s chest. He feels Molly’s arms wrap around his waist, and it feels instinctive for him to rest his head on Molly’s chest, right above the gradually slowing rhythm of his heartbeat.

“Caleb,” Molly says eventually, when a few quiet, comfortable moments have passed. “That was-you’re you’re exceptional, darling. A secret tease, apparently, but exceptional.”

Caleb can’t stop his smile. “Thank you,” he says quietly, the words muffled a little by Molly’s skin. “You were very good too.”

“Mm, I should hope so. I wanted to make it good for you.”

“It was. It was very good.”

“You definitely seemed to enjoy it.”

Caleb can hear Molly’s slight smirk, but that doesn’t stop him from smiling himself. After all, Molly definitely isn’t wrong. “I just hope that you enjoyed this, Mollymauk.”

“Darling,” Molly replies around a soft laugh, “I adored it, I assure you.”

“Mm, gut.” Caleb turns his head and presses a quick, absent-minded kiss to one of Molly’s scars. “Mollymauk?”

“Mm?”

“Do you want to- do you want to stay for dinner?” he asks hopefully, and Molly’s reply is immediate.

“I’d love to.”

Caleb smiles to himself. He shuts his eyes, snuggling a little into Molly’s chest. Everything smells like Molly and comfort, and Caleb feels warm down to his bones, pleasantly light and a little bit floaty in the aftermath of his orgasm. It’s nice. It’s very nice. He would very much like to experience it again.

He would also like to experience this again: this comfort that comes from being pressed so close to Molly’s body. He feels calm, calmer than he has in a long time. He knows logically that at least some of that feeling is due to everything that just happened, but he feels that a fair amount of it is due to Molly’s presence and how one of Molly’s hands is once again running through Caleb’s hair, playing with the strands and lulling Caleb into what is almost a doze. He feels safe, cradled against Molly’s chest.

He thinks he would like to stay there for a long time.

“Stay,” he murmurs softly into the crook of Molly’s neck. “Stay here tonight.”

Beneath his head he thinks he hears Molly’s heart trip. “Caleb?”
Caleb turns his head and presses a soft kiss to the first mark he left, right over the red eye in the peacock’s tail. “Stay with me tonight,” he whispers quietly. “Please.”

“Is that- would that be alright?” Molly asks. He sounds almost worried, Caleb realises absently. He sounds like he doesn’t quite believe what Caleb is saying.

Caleb wants him to believe. He doesn’t want Molly to go. “It would very much be alright,” he says, raising himself up slightly to look at Molly properly. In the soft light of the worn-out bulbs in the living room Molly looks gentler, his hair shaken free of its previous updo and his jewellery shining softly on his horns. Caleb wants to kiss him again. He wants to hold him. He wants to press himself to Molly’s side until he feels like he can sink into Molly’s bones and leave behind every bramble that has ever settled in his mind.

He leans down and presses a quick kiss to Molly’s lips. “I don’t want you to go yet,” he admits quietly and feels Molly’s hand settle in his hair.

“Alright,” Molly says softly. His other hand settles on the small of Caleb’s back, and Caleb shivers slightly at the touch. “Alright. I’ll stay.”
Chapter 14

Molly is naked beneath Caleb, his skin lit by some indeterminate light source until he looks like he’s glowing. The flowers on his arm and shoulder look almost real, like Caleb could reach out and touch them at any time and feel the velvet softness of petals beneath his fingertips, and Molly is grinning up at Caleb in a manner not dissimilar to how he did last evening. The area around them is unclear and fuzzy to Caleb, with no defining features or really anything at all to give it any degree of form, but it doesn’t bother him. That’s how it should be, he feels. And besides, he doesn’t need to look at the room. He just has to look at Molly, and watch as Molly’s eyes skim him from head to toe.

Caleb’s naked too. He’s not quite sure how or why, but he doesn’t feel any worry about it. He doesn’t feel any shame about the burn scars that crawl across his chest and back and down over his shoulders, encasing his upper torso in a mantle of twisted, ruined skin. The scars don’t matter to him, not now. All that matters is Molly. All that matters is Molly, and Molly’s hard cock curving up towards his belly, and the beautiful, twisting tattoos winding across his body that Caleb wants to taste.

It’s hard to focus on Molly’s tattoos when they move below his waist – every time Caleb tries to look at them it feels like his vision blurs slightly, smudging the fine lines of ink together until he can no longer make out any of the detail. He can’t make out much detail at all, really. Everything feels a little bit strange and a little bit nebulous, but it also feels completely, perfectly normal. It feels right.

Caleb looks down, making eye contact with Molly.

Molly grins up at him. “Are you going to do anything except stare?” he asks, and Caleb finds himself smiling.

“I was thinking I was going to fuck you,” he replies, his voice soft and low. Beneath him Molly’s cheeks flush darker, and Caleb can feel when one of Molly’s thighs nudges between his own, making him gasp when it brushes against his cock.

“Then get to it,” Molly says. He reaches up, curls a hand around the nape of Caleb’s neck, and draws him down for a kiss.

From there, time seems to blur. Caleb’s not sure how long it’s been, isn’t even sure if any time has passed at all, but somehow he now has Molly’s leg between his thighs, the firm length of it pressing up against his cock. He can feel Molly’s tail curled around his calf and when he pulls back from kissing him to catch his breath he can see Molly’s beautiful wine-dark lipstick smudged across his lips, and Caleb knows that it is painting his own mouth just the same now.

“Caleb,” Molly groans, pawing needily at Caleb’s waist. Caleb shivers at the touch of his fingers, ducking his head to mouth along the peacock feathers inked onto Molly’s neck. “Don’t tease…”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Patience, ꞌ�ƶƐƐ,” Caleb replies, the Ancient Sylvan word falling easily from his lips.

Molly shivers beneath him. “So stop teasing and do something.”

Caleb does something. Molly’s thigh is solid and firm between his legs, providing just the pressure and friction that Caleb needs. He rolls his hips forwards, groaning slightly, and slips a hand down Molly’s side until his fingers wrap around Molly’s cock to start jerking him off in time to his thrusts.

Molly moans softly. “Caleb…”
Caleb groans and buries his face against Molly’s neck, humping unashamedly against his thigh. He feels one of Molly’s hands land in his hair as the other settled on his ass, grabbing a handful and using the contact to urge Caleb on. “Yes, Caleb, good boy…”

Caleb groans again. He can feel heat gathering in his gut but it feels annoyingly distant, like it’s just out of reach. He rolls his hips forwards, gasping into the curve of Molly’s throat, and tastes salt on his tongue when he licks over a mark resting just above Molly’s collarbone. Molly sighs.

“Caleb, mm, darling…”

Caleb shuts his eyes, opens them again, and wakes up.

He’s in his bed, wrapped around Molly’s back like a closing parenthesis, and he’s hard. He’s achingly, almost painfully hard, his cock nudging up against the cleft of Molly’s ass beneath the tight lace undies that Molly wore to bed. Even as Caleb realises this he feels his hips betray him; they shift almost without his permission, rolling up against Molly, and Caleb has to bite his whimper off in his throat as he feels his face turn scarlet. This is—this can’t—this isn’t okay. This can’t be okay. Molly hadn’t agreed to this and to all intents and purposes he still appears to be asleep, soft and relaxed beneath Caleb’s duvet.

Caleb bites his lip, lifts a hand, and very gently shakes Molly’s shoulder.

“Mollymauk…”

“’S alright,” Molly mumbles sleepily. “I’m awake, Caleb. I know.” He reaches back over his side, patting around absently until his hand lands on Caleb’s hip. Much like how he did in the dream he uses the contact to tug slightly, pulling gently at Caleb’s hips until they roll again, and Caleb whimpers at the contact. “’S alright, Caleb, c’mon…”

Caleb whines, leaning forwards to hide his face against Molly’s neck. He feels bad—he doesn’t know for how long he was grinding against Molly’s ass in his sleep, but judging by the damp spot he can feel at the front of his pyjama pants he can only assume that it’s been a while. “Molly…”

“Caleb, love, it’s alright.” Molly shifts slightly, rolling in bed and glancing back over his shoulder to smile sleepily at Caleb. The motion pulls the sheets down a little bit, just enough that Caleb can see the bruises he left on Molly’s neck. “It’s alright, Caleb,” Molly repeats, and Caleb fights to keep his hips still when Molly squeezes his side. “I want this.”

“You- was?”

“I want this,” Molly says again. He pauses to yawn, lifting a hand to rub the sleep from his eyes, and then continues, sounding a little more awake. “No pressure, of course, but honestly, darling, I’d be more than delighted if you wanted to keep going.”

Caleb considers that. He does want to keep going—his cock is a heavy, insistent ache between his legs, and he can’t deny that it felt good to grind against the lace-covered curve of Molly’s ass—but he still feels a little unsure. He doesn’t want to do anything wrong. He doesn’t want to cross Molly’s boundaries. He doesn’t want to make Molly feel uncomfortable just because Caleb apparently can’t control himself in his sleep.

But Molly wants this, he reminds himself. Molly wants it, and is okay with it, and he wants Caleb to keep going. He wants Caleb to keep grinding against his ass until he comes. Caleb bites back a whine as he feels his cock throb again. We both want this, he tells himself, and he slowly, tentatively, rolls his hips against Molly again.
“Good boy,” Molly murmurs. Caleb feels his face burn, and ducks his head to hide against Molly’s neck. He rolls his hips again, and again, pressing his gasps and whimpers into Molly’s neck and shoulders as he feels the pleasure build in his gut. *Gods.* This is barely anything, is even less than the messy handjobs they shared last night, but it still feels so good that Caleb almost doesn’t know what to do. He just knows that he *wants*; he wants to come, and he wants to make Molly feel good too, and he wants to feel the warmth of Molly’s skin beneath his hands.

He reaches out, one hand settling on Molly’s waist, and on the next thrust of his hips he tugs slightly at Molly’s waist, pulling the curve of Molly’s ass back against his cock as he moves to meet it.

Molly gasps.

“*Yeah,*” Molly says breathlessly, “*Yeah, that’s it, use me- mm-*”

Caleb groans, the sound muffled by Molly’s neck. He reaches down, fumbling beneath the covers, and after a few seconds of blind searching he finds what he’s looking for when his fingers brush lace. Molly’s hard too, and when Caleb awkwardly stuffs his hand into Molly’s panties, wrapping his fingers around Molly’s cock, he hears the tiefling give a soft gasp.

“*Caleb…*”

_Fuck._ Molly sounded just like how he had in the dream. Caleb stifles another groan, not wanting to miss any of the delicious sounds tumbling from Molly’s mouth with every awkward twist of his wrist, and feels his hips buck forward again. He’s *burning,* his breath coming in heavy pants beneath the stifling heat of the blankets, but he makes no move to push them away. In order to do that he’d have to stop grinding against the perfect curve of Molly’s ass, would have to let go of Molly’s cock, and both of those sound like absolutely awful ideas to Caleb. He doesn’t want to stop. He doesn’t want to leave this moment, where the flames licking under his skin are pleasant instead of terrifying, where he gets to hear Molly whine and gasp and feel him press his ass back against Caleb’s cock.

It doesn’t take long for Caleb to come like this – after a few more minutes of desperate grinding he comes in his pants, whimpering his release into Molly’s neck as his hand twitches on Molly’s cock. He pants hotly against Molly’s neck, faintly tasting the salt of Molly’s sweat on his tongue, and his hips roll a few more times before falling still, his body still wrapped around Molly’s back like a comma.

“*Caleb,*” Molly whines, needy and squirming beneath Caleb’s touch. His hips roll into Caleb’s lax fingers, seeking out any possible amount of friction. “*C’mon, touch me. Don’t be a tease.*”

“You said that in the dream,” Caleb mutters absently, still somewhat out of it. He pulls his hand away for a moment, making Molly whine again, and quickly leans back to spit into his palm. It’s not much, but combined with the pre-come already gathering on his fingers he figures it’ll be enough. When he wraps his fingers around Molly’s cock again Molly sighs, arching back against Caleb a little.

“You were dreaming- _ah-_ you were dreaming about me?” Molly asks, his breath coming a little quicker as Caleb starts to work his fist over his cock, and Caleb nods, his hair tickling the back of Molly’s neck.

“*Ja,*” he confirms quietly, and Molly groans.

“*Fuck, Caleb,* that’s so fucking hot…”

Caleb feels his cheeks darken, and is momentarily happy that Molly can’t see him like this. He twists
his hand, making Molly moan softly.

“Tell me,” Molly asks, his breath turning into pants as Caleb speeds up his strokes.

Caleb frowns. “Tell you what?”

“In that- ngh, yes- in the dream, what happened?”

“…Oh. You really want to hear that?”

Molly groans. “Yes, Caleb, of course I do. I want to know what your- ah, Gods, you’re good- what your brain came up with that made you so hard.”

Caleb swallows, his throat suddenly dry. “You, ah, you were beneath me, and I- we were both- I wanted to kiss all of your tattoos...”

“Mm, what else?”

“…I- I told you I was going to fuck you,” Caleb admits after a moment’s pause. “And you- you told me to get to it, and then- and then I was grinding against your thigh, and I was jerking you off, and you had lipstick all over your mouth.”

“So you really liked the lipstick on me?” Molly asks, but his attempt at a flirtatious tone is ruined slightly when his voice breaks off into a breathy gasp, his hand scrabbling at Caleb’s hip as Caleb kisses along his neck.

“I did,” Caleb says quietly, “I- I wanted-“ Say it, Caleb. You know it’s alright. Molly has said it’s alright. “I wanted to see it around my cock,” he whispers, and Molly swears.

“Fuck,” he says. His breath is shorter now, coming in pants around the delicious punched-out little moans that he’s making with every brush of Caleb’s thumb around the head of his cock. “What- ah- what else? What else happened?”

Caleb swallows again. “I called you $\text{ⱴƽƺƈƾ}$,” he says quietly, and he can feel the blush turning his cheeks red. He knows that Molly doesn’t know what the word means, and somehow that makes it better and worse at the same time. He wants to tell Molly what it means, just so that Molly doesn’t worry about it, but Caleb cannot help but be concerned that if Molly were to learn the meaning of $\text{ⱴƽƺƈƾ}$ that he would be less than delighted.

Molly, however, doesn’t seem to care what the word means. He groans again, louder than any of his previous sounds had been, and Caleb feels Molly’s cock twitch in his hand before Molly’s tail coils tightly around his ankle.

“Fuck, Caleb,” Molly pants, the rhythm of his rolling hips faltering a little. “You’re so- Gods- you’re so hot when you speak Sylvan, did you know that?”

“Ancient Sylvan,” Caleb corrects absently, before his brain catches up with what Molly said. “…You think I am hot? When I speak Ancient Sylvan?”

Molly nods desperately, his horns scratching gently across the pillowcase. “Yeah,” he gasps, “Yeah, Caleb, you sound- you sound really fucking sexy. Like, always, but- ngh- but especially with the Sylvan- Ancient Sylvan. That’s just- Gods, that’s- I- I want to- ah!”

Caleb pulls his mouth away from Molly’s neck, releasing the skin he had been sucking another bruise onto. “You want to what?” he asks softly.
“I want to hear it more,” Molly admits. “In- in bed.”

Caleb thinks back to yesterday evening. “What about on-couch?”

“During sex in general, Caleb,” Molly clarifies, and Caleb smiles to himself. It’s a little strange, honestly, this idea of bringing his research, his doctorate, his entire life’s work into what he supposes he can only call his sex life, but it doesn’t feel bad. Strange, yes, but not bad.

How could it feel bad when the mere act of Caleb saying one word in Ancient Sylvan has Molly reacting as wonderfully as he is?

“Oh,” he says quietly, “I can- I can try that.”

“Yeah?”

“Ja, of course.”

Molly groans. “Caleb…”

An idea starts to form in Caleb’s mind. “Would you,” he begins, feeling himself start to turn an impossibly darker shade of red. “Would you, ah… one day, would you touch yourself as I read to you in Ancient Sylvan?”


Caleb smiles. “Good ⱴƽƺƈƾ, he whispers, and, just as expected, Molly whimpers softly.

“Say it again?” Molly asks, and there’s a hint of pleading to his voice.

Caleb can’t resist that. “ⱴƽƺƈƾ,” he says. Molly moans.

“Again?”

“ⱴƽƺƈƾ.”

“A- ah!- again, please.”

“ⱴƽƺƈƾ,” Caleb says. He ducks his head, pressing his lips to the nape of Molly’s neck in a pattern of sloppy kisses. “ⱴƽƺƈƾ, ⱴƽƺƈƾ, ƽǫ ⱴƽƺƈƾ, ں³ɿ ڦ Mollywood…”

Molly whines, and it’s all the warning that Caleb gets before Molly’s cock twitches in his hand, and come coats his fingers.

“ⱴƽƺƈƾ ں³ɿ,” Caleb murmurs one more time. Molly’s cock twitches again and Molly gives another whine, reaching down to gently push Caleb’s hand away. Caleb shifts it away, being careful not to touch his hand to the sheets. He doesn’t know what to do with the come drying on his hand – it had been nice to lick it up last night, but right now he’s worn-out, and tired, and made extra sleepy by his orgasm, and half the joy in licking his hand clean had been in Molly’s reaction to it. After a few moments contemplation Caleb reaches down and wipes his hand clean on his pyjama pants. They’ll have to go in the wash anyway, he reasons. After all, he did just come in them.

He just came in them after rutting against Molly’s ass in his sleep, he realises, and suddenly all the worry from earlier comes rushing back.

Fuck. Fuck. What was he doing? He’d woken up hard – which, he understands, wasn’t exactly something that he could control – and he’d realised what he was doing, and then he’d kept on doing
And it wasn’t like he could ask for Molly’s consent, or like Molly would even have been capable of giving his consent when he was asleep. Caleb had—he’d just—he’d used Molly.

He’d used Molly, he realises quietly, and he feels the brambles sink their thorns back into his brain.

“Molly,” he whispers, torn between wanting to shuffle backwards and put some space between his awful, awful body and Molly’s back, and not wanting Molly to think that he suddenly doesn’t like him anymore. “I’m—Molly…“

“Mm?”

Caleb swallows, but his voice is still nearly inaudible. “I’m so sorry…”

“…For what?”

“For— in my sleep— I— I’m sorry…”

“Don’t apologise, Caleb.” Molly sounds a little more awake now, and after a moment he shuffles around in the bed, rolling over so that he’s facing Caleb. He reaches out, placing his hand back on Caleb’s waist, and rubs his thumb gently against the soft fabric of Caleb’s pyjama top. “You were having a good dream, that’s all. There’s nothing to apologise for.”

“But I used you—“

“And I gave you my permission, and I wanted it,” Molly interrupts, making Caleb fall silent. He peers up at Molly worriedly, still feeling concerned, but Molly’s smile looks open and genuine in the weak sunlight filtering past Caleb’s curtain. He doesn’t look like he’s lying, and Caleb trusts that Molly wouldn’t lie to him. “I wanted it,” Molly repeats when a few quiet moments have passed. He presses a finger under Caleb’s chin, tilting his head up slightly, and shuffles in to press a kiss to Caleb’s cheek. “I wanted it, and I liked it, and you seemed to like it, and if I’m honest it was really quite horrifically hot that you got that worked up just from dreaming about me, love.”

Caleb feels himself flush darkly and he looks away, but he’s still able to see Molly’s smile from the corner of his eye. “I— you are—“ He pauses, clearing his throat, and then continues. “You are very tempting even in dreams, Mollymauk…”

Molly grins wider. “That sounds to me like you think I’m tempting in the waking world.”

“You, ah, that might… that may… ja…”

There’s a rustle of motion, and then Caleb feels Molly’s lips press to his cheek again.

“It’s alright,” Molly whispers. Caleb glances back at him, blue eyes meeting red in the soft darkness of his bedroom. “There’s nothing to be ashamed about in finding me attractive, Caleb. And I know that sounds vain, and it is, a little bit, but I mean it. It’s—it’s really nice, actually. Knowing that you’re definitely attracted to me.”

Caleb frowns. “You thought that perhaps I wasn’t?”

Molly gives a small shrug, the movement tugging at the blankets for a moment before they settle. “I was—well, yeah, kinda.”

“…How?”

Molly shrugs again. “I know I’m a lot,” he says simply. “With the make-up, and the tattoos, and the
colours, and the patterns, and the jewellery. Some people find that overwhelming, or unattractive. I would understand if you do too.”

For a moment, Caleb doesn’t reply. Because that’s… it’s… it’s baffling to him that anyone, anyone at all, could look at Molly and not be attracted to him in one way or the other. He can understand how Molly could be considered ‘overwhelming’ to a certain extent, but Caleb knows that he gets overwhelmed easily in comparison to a lot of people and Molly has never, ever been overwhelming to him. If anything, Molly has only ever been the opposite – he’s only ever been calm and soothing and comfortable to Caleb, settling him over text, or over a phone call, or face-to-face when Caleb feels the stresses and worries of his life start to get the better of him. How could Caleb possibly find Molly overwhelming when Molly is always making sure that nothing he does does overwhelm Caleb? When he’s always asking, always checking, always making sure that Caleb wants and is okay with whatever Molly is considering doing, even if it’s just something as small as a hug when Caleb is feeling twitchy inside his own skin?

Molly could never be overwhelming. Not to Caleb.

And, right now, in his post-orgasmic, rather tired state, Caleb feels surprisingly comfortable in telling him as much.

“Mollymauk,” he says softly, when he can feel Molly starting to twitch uncertainly in the lengthening silence, “You are beautiful, and handsome, and very, very, distracting. You are certainly not too much. You are not overwhelming. Not to me.”

“Not even with the tattoos?” There’s a hint of teasing to Molly’s voice, but it’s weak – Caleb can still hear the faint uncertainty underlying his words.

Caleb leans in and presses a kiss to the peacock inked into Molly’s cheek. “Not even with the tattoos,” he replies, and finds himself having to stifle a yawn. He’s tired still, and he can feel it starting to gather heavy on his eyelids, making them droop even as he tries to keep himself awake. He doesn’t want to fall asleep yet. He wants to keep talking to Molly. He yawns again and continues. “I- I rather like your tattoos, Mollymauk. They’re beautiful.”

Molly smiles a little. “Thank you, Caleb,” he says. Caleb smiles back, shuffling down a little in the blankets to better cocoon himself in their warmth. He doesn’t say anything back, feeling much more like watching Molly from across the expanse of the pillow, even as his eyelids grow heavier and droop more and more with each slow, sleepy blink.

Molly seems to notice Caleb’s waning consciousness – he gives a soft laugh, finding Caleb’s hand and tangling their fingers together. “Go back to sleep,” he murmurs, leaping in to press a fleeting kiss to Caleb’s lips. Caleb tilts his head, doing his very best to chase after it, and he hears Molly laugh quietly before three more kisses are pressed to his lips in quick succession. “We can kiss more when you wake up properly, darling,” Molly says. Caleb grumbles some nonsense to himself even as he burrows further down in the blankets. He doesn’t want to have to wait until he wakes up. He wants to kiss Molly now. He also doesn’t want to move in any way, shape, or form, but he’s sure that he can kiss Molly without moving. That must be possible. He’s a smart man; he’s got a doctorate to prove it. He can definitely figure out how to kiss Molly without moving.

Distantly, he feels Molly’s hand leave his waist, and the bed dips slightly as Molly repositions himself. Caleb shifts a little, shuffling the few inches needed for him to tuck his head under Molly’s chin, his cheek pressing against the soft fabric of the pyjama top that he had lent Molly to go to bed in. He feels Molly’s tail twining gently around his calf, and it feels like an anchor of sorts, grounding him further as, between one breath and the next, he falls back to sleep.
“Caleb,” says a voice. Caleb frowns, not opening his eyes, and cuddles further into the warm body beneath his own. He hears a soft chuckle. “Caleb,” the voice says again, “Let me up. I need to pee.”


“I don’t know what you’re saying, love, but I’m going to assume that it’s a ‘no’ from how tightly you’re cuddling me.”

“Richtig.”

“Well, lovely as it is to cuddle with you – and it is very lovely, I assure you – I really do have to piss. Kind of urgently. And I’d rather not do it in your bed.”

Caleb wrinkles his nose at that. He doesn’t want to let go of Molly, but he supposes that he must. “Wenn es sein muss,” he sighs, and reluctantly loosens his arms. He doesn’t open his eyes but he feels the bed shift as Molly pulls away, leaving cold air to rush in and fill his place. Caleb shivers slightly before the blankets are tucked back in around him.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” Molly whispers. There’s a soft rustle and then Caleb feels a pair of lips press to his forehead in a quick kiss. He smiles to himself a little and the lips pull away, only to return a moment later in another fleeting kiss. And then another. There’s one final kiss pressed to his lips but Caleb doesn’t chase it this time. He is tired, and the bed is warm, and he trusts that Molly will return soon.

He trusts Molly a lot.

“Caleb?” Molly asks softly.

Caleb cracks open one eye, just about able to see Molly past the pillow and blankets he’s managed to cocoon himself in. “Mm?”

Molly smiles at him. “You’re very cute when you’re sleepy,” he whispers. Caleb smiles a little wider, giving a small, happy little shuffle beneath the blankets. He may not believe that he has any redeemable qualities to speak of, but he does believe Molly. And Molly seems to think that he’s cute.

He hears the soft padding of footsteps, followed by the sound of the door to his bedroom opening and shutting quietly, Molly clearly making an effort not to disturb Caleb any more than necessary. There’s a few long minutes of silence, broken only by what sounds like Molly pausing to delightedly greet Frumpkin, and then there’s the nearly inaudible sound of a key turning in the lock of the front door.

Nott must be home, Caleb thinks absently, and hears the door slam shut. He smiles to himself, content in the knowledge that Nott has just arrived home as she always does, and that Molly-

“Ahhhh!”

“Ahhhhhh!”

-And that Molly is somewhere out there in the living room on his way to or from the bathroom, dressed in nothing but his pretty lace undies and one of Caleb’s old t-shirts.

Oh, Scheisse.
Caleb finds himself upright and out of bed almost before he’s even aware that he’s moved. He doesn’t even bother to turn the light on as he half-falls out of bed, tripping over his own feet and stumbling to the door through the darkness of his room. He somehow manages to reach it without tripping over anything more deadly than his own feet, and he flings it open to reveal a tableau not unlike one that he feels could be found in a Renaissance painting.

“What are you doing in my flat?!” Nott is shrieking. She’s standing on the kitchen counters, ears pinned back flat against her head, and – oh, Gods above – she’s got her work multitool held firmly in her hands, pointed in Molly’s direction. The fact that it’s open to the pliers and not the ludicrously sharp knife blade isn’t even slightly reassuring.

“I-“ Molly begins, but he doesn’t get any further before Nott cuts him off.

“I know who you are!” she says accusingly. “I know where you work!”

“I know, I-“

“Why are you in one of Caleb’s t-shirts? Did you steal it from him?” She pauses, eyes widening as she comes to some sort of realisation, and when she speaks again her voice is nothing short of venomous. “Did you kill him?” she hisses, stepping up to the edge of the kitchen counter. Molly takes a step back, his hands still raised. “Did you convince him that you were nice and then- and then persuade him to invite you over, and then kill him and take his t-shirts?”

“No!” Molly exclaims. “No, I-“

“Because if you did I will fuck you up so hard it’ll take years for you to be un-fucked. I will- I will fill your shoes with jello. I’ll leave tuna behind your radiators if Frumpkin hasn’t eaten all of it. I will make your life hell.”

It’s at that point that Caleb, still leaning against the doorframe to his room, picks his jaw up from the floor and quietly clears his throat.

“Um,” he says. “I am- I’m not dead, Nott.”

“Oh,” Nott replies. She seems almost disappointed - her posture relaxes slightly when she glances over to see Caleb standing very much alive in the doorway, her ears drooping, but she doesn’t stop pointing the multitool at Molly. “Are you sure?” she asks, sounding a little bit hopeful. “Because I am very tired and I’m not sure if I’m drunk, or hungover, or somewhere in-between, and if you are dead then there’ll be no one to stop me from stealing all my tuna back from Frumpkin.”

“…I started feeding Frumpkin dry food a week ago,” Caleb replies, more than a little bit confused. “He doesn’t get any tuna now.”

“He doesn’t get any tuna that you know of. He could get it himself.”

“He doesn’t have thumbs.”

“Not physically,” Nott replies promptly and, off to Caleb’s side, Molly gives a tiny snort of laughter. “You don’t know what Frumpkin’s capable of. He could be a fey cat for all we know.”

Now that is preposterous. “Nott, I feel that if Frumpkin was fey I would know it by now. The vet assured me that he is a normal cat.”

Nott shrugs. “The vet could be under Frumpkin’s spell,” she says simply, and Caleb hears as Molly tries – and fails – to stifle his laughter. It seems that laughing at Nott wasn’t the best idea, though –
the moment Nott hears Molly’s laughter her ears stand upright and she spins to look at him, raising the multitool again.

“Let’s put aside Frumpkin for a moment,” Nott says, and she nods in Molly’s direction. Molly smiles back at her and lifts a hand in a small wave. “What’s he doing here?”

Caleb feels his cheeks darken. “This is-“ he begins, glancing back and forth between Molly and Nott. “This is- this is my- this is Mollymauk.”

“I know, Caleb,” Nott replies. “I met him at the carnival too.”

“Ja, ja, I know that,” Caleb mutters. “I am just- he-“ He pauses, clears his throat, looks away from both of them, and then continues. “He- he stayed the night…”

“He what?!”

“He stayed the night,” Caleb repeats.

“That was a ‘what’ of shock, Caleb, not one of confusion,” Nott says. Her expression softens a little, briefly turning into a genuine, sweet smile. “But thank you for the clarification.”

“Oh,” Caleb replies. He looks down at his feet, curling his toes into the carpet, and notices, to his absolute and immediate mortification, the dried white mark smudged across the side of his pyjama pants. He immediately glances up at Nott, terrified that she might have seen it, but she’s still eyeballing Molly, though the multitool has now vanished into one of her seemingly infinite pockets.

“So, you stayed the night?” she asks, still staring down Molly. Molly nods.

“Yeah,” he says. “I did. Caleb asked me to.”

“Hmm,” Nott replies. She glares at him a little bit harder for a while, and then speaks to Caleb without look at him. “Caleb? Can you confirm this?”

“Um,” Caleb says. “I, ah- ja. I- I did ask him to. That is, um… I lent him one of my t-shirts. To use as pyjamas. He did not steal it from me. It was a, um… it was an unplanned sleepover…”

Gods. Caleb winces as he hears himself finish speaking. How much less subtle could he get? He feels like there’s a massive neon sign hanging over his head, shining out the words ‘I had sex with Mollymauk Tealeaf last night! Ask me all about it!’ for all the world to see.

“You could have lent him more pyjamas,” Nott mutters disapprovingly, apparently missing the neon sign as she shoots a glance to Molly’s crotch. “I didn’t need to see that first thing this morning.”

“In my defence, I was absolutely intending to be properly dressed when I officially met you as Caleb’s flatmate for the first time,” Molly protests.

“Flatmate and best friend,” Nott corrects immediately. “Don’t forget that second part. The second part is very important.”

“I was absolutely intending to be properly dressed when I officially met you as Caleb’s flatmate and best friend for the first time,” Molly repeats placatingly, and Nott gives a small sniff of approval.

“That’ll do.”

“I will- I will go and, uh, get Mollymauk some more… clothes…” Caleb stammers. He turns, about to start heading back to his room to hide away from Nott, and also find Molly some trousers in the
meantime, but Nott’s voice stops him in his tracks.

“Caleb?”

“Hm?” Caleb half-turns, and Nott nods in his general direction.

“What’s that on your neck?” she asks accusingly. Caleb frowns a little, temporarily confused. He lifts a hand, pressing it gently against where her gaze seems to be focused, and it’s only when he feels a soft burst of pain spread from under his thumb that he remembers the mark that Molly had left on him.

“Oh,” Caleb says. “Um.”

“Is that a bruise?”

“Um… yes?”

“Did he leave it on you?”

Caleb feels his blush deepen. “…Also yes?” Nott narrows her eyes, turning her attention back towards Molly. Caleb, frantically trying to prevent any over-protective-goblin-induced bloodshed, quickly speaks up again. “But it’s alright!” he says, and Nott looks back at him. “I- I am- I asked for it, Nott.”

Nott’s ears shift. “Oh,” she says flatly. “Oh.”

“Ja.”

“So this is-“

“Can we please, please not talk about it?” Caleb asks desperately. “Please? You are my best friend, and I love you, and you know everything about me, but can we please not talk about this?”

Nott takes a deep breath, shuts her eyes for a moment, and then opens them again. “Caleb,” she says, in her very best ‘completely calm’ voice. “As long as you are being safe we will have nothing to talk about. I love you too, and you are my best friend-“ she turns her head, looking pointedly at Molly for a second, “-but I have never, and will never, have any interest in this area of your life. Ever. I am more than alright with this being completely private to you. As long as you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“Thank you,” Caleb says. He steps in, wrapping one arm around Nott in a quick hug, and presses a kiss to her forehead. He feels Nott wrap an arm around him in return, pressing a kiss of her own to his cheek, and then she leans back, looking significantly calmer.

Caleb takes that as a good sign.

“Also,” he asks quietly, “Could you maybe threaten Mollymauk with your multitool a little bit less?” He steps back and a little to the side, moving over so as to be closer to Molly, and doesn’t miss how Molly’s tail swishes out to brush against his ankle when he gets close enough. “I- I rather like him. As you know.”

“…I won’t make any promises,” Nott replies, but there’s a hint of a smile in her eyes and her tone is softer. Caleb smiles back at her.

“Thank you, Schatz,” he says quietly. Nott shrugs.

“I work where he works now,” she says simply. “If I really wanted to do anything it would be much
easier to do it there. And I’m sure Beau would back me up and help me hide the body.”

“Um,” Molly says.

“Please do not do that either,” Caleb says.

Nott grins, and finally hops off the counter. “No promises!” she says cheerfully. “Now go and find Mollymauk something to wear – I don’t want to be interrogating him when he’s just in lace.”

“Interrogating?”

Nott waves a hand at Molly, already moving over to the couch. “You’ll be absolutely fine!” she says. “Promise.”

Caleb reaches out and takes Molly by the hand as Molly continues to stare at Nott, looking somewhere between amused and genuinely afraid. “You will be fine,” Caleb murmurs, even as he worries over what questions Nott will think to ask them. “Nott is- she’s a good friend. She won’t ask anything too terrible.” He pauses, and then appends, “Probably.”

“You don’t sound very sure of that.”

Caleb shrugs, tugging lightly on Molly’s hand to start leading him back to his bedroom. He can still feel his heart thrumming in his chest, chasing anxiety along his veins, and he feels like he can’t get them out of the living room fast enough.

“I am so sorry about that,” Caleb whispers the moment that Molly pulls his bedroom door shut behind him with a click. “That was- I should have warned you that she was getting back, I should have asked if she could stay at Jester’s today, I should have-“

“Caleb,” Molly interrupts. Caleb falls silent immediately, ducking his head slightly. “It’s alright.” Molly’s voice is soft, and when Caleb risks a glance Molly is smiling slightly, his hand part way between them as if caught reaching for Caleb’s waist. Caleb glances down at it, looks back up at Molly, and gives a small nod. A moment later he feels Molly’s hands settle on his waist, and feels the end of Molly’s tail wrap gently around his ankle. “It’s alright,” Molly says again. “You couldn’t have known that she was going to get back just then. You didn’t even know yesterday that I was going to be staying over. It was just bad timing.”

“But I knew she was away,” Caleb protests quietly, “And I know when she normally gets home after events such as this, and I- I didn’t warn you.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“But-“

“I was going to meet her officially at some point, Caleb. If we’re going to keep doing this – and trust me when I say that I would really, really like to – then I was going to have to meet Nott outside the carnival at some point, and it just so happened that that point was today.”

Caleb hears all that, and picks up on one thing in particular.

“…You want to keep doing this?” he asks, his voice small and hopeful. He doesn’t lift his head, doesn’t meet Molly’s gaze, but he feels Molly’s thumbs brush against his sides in a small, reassuring sweep.

“Yeah,” Molly replies quietly. “I’d like to keep doing all of this, Caleb. The- well, the dating, and the
talking, and the texting, and the hanging out, and definitely the kissing and the cuddling and the sex, but mostly—yeah. All of it. Whatever you want to call this. Whatever you want to call us. If you’re happy with it, and you want to continue whatever we are, then I’d love to.”

“And what are we?” Caleb asks, his voice little more than a whisper. He knows what he wants to hear. He knows what he really, truly, desperately wants Molly to say; what he wants to say himself but is not brave enough to do so.

Molly smiles and gives a small shrug. “I’d like to consider us boyfriends,” he says simply, and Caleb feels his breath catch in his chest. “But if you’re not comfortable with that then that’s more than alright, Caleb. Whatever you want this to be, whatever you want to call us—“

“I want us to be boyfriends,” Caleb says all in a rush, and Molly’s mouth drops open into a round ‘o’ of surprise.

“Oh,” Molly says, sounding faintly stunned at how quickly Caleb had agreed. “I- alright. Okay.” He smiles, soft and just a little surprised, and gives a small laugh. “I, um… if I’m honest, I wasn’t actually expecting you to agree to that. I thought I was getting my hopes up.”

As if. Caleb smiles to himself. “I thought I was getting my hopes up,” he confesses. “I was- I was hoping you would say- that. I just didn’t want to scare you off...”

“Just like how you didn’t want to scare me off last night?”

“…Ja. Exactly like that.”

Molly laughs again and the sound is beautiful. Caleb lifts his head, unable to stop his smile from widening as he watches Molly laugh quietly for a moment, and steps in a little bit more. He wants to be closer to the sound of that laughter. He wants to be closer to Molly. Molly, it seems, has no problems with that – he tightens his hold on Caleb’s waist a little, tugging him in as Caleb steps closer, and leans in to gently nudge their noses together.

“Caleb,” Molly says, his voice achingly fond. “You could never scare me off.”

Caleb smiles. He cannot make Molly’s features out, not this close to his face, but he knows the smile that Molly’s wearing. He can hear it in his voice. “As I said yesterday; you could never scare me off, Liebling. You are very- you are very, um, reassuring. To me.”

Molly tilts his head a little, their noses still touching. Caleb can feel Molly’s breath brushing against his lips. He wants to taste it. “Liebling?” Molly repeats, and his accent is so atrocious that Caleb cannot help but give a small huff of laughter.

“Darling,” he translates.

“Oh! I like it.”

“Ja?”

“Yeah. It sounds nice.”

Caleb smiles a little wider. “Liebling,” he says again, and feels Molly’s fingers tighten briefly on his sides.

“I’m going to kiss you,” Molly murmurs, his lips already mere millimetres from Caleb’s. “Is that alright?”
Caleb answers him by pressing his lips to Molly’s.

It’s not a particularly hot kiss, or a particularly long one, but Caleb doesn’t feel like it has to be. It just feels… it feels simple. It feels simple, and comfortable, and safe. It feels exactly how Caleb feels when he’s around Molly; like the world has, for a moment, become balanced and gentle and quiet, unwrapping the brambles from around his brain and letting him breathe again. He pulls back after barely a second, finding that in that time his hands had somehow migrated to Molly’s hips, mirroring the position on Molly’s hands on his waist.

“Boyfriends,” Caleb says quietly, feeling a smile tug at the corner of his lips.

“Boyfriends,” Molly confirms, and he kisses Caleb again. Caleb leans into it, following it with another kiss of his own when he feels Molly pull away – it’s little more than a brush of lips against lips, but it’s wonderful all the same. Caleb feels light, his head bramble-free and quiet for what feels like the first time in years, and he can’t stop of a small bubble of delighted laughter from escaping him.

“Boyyfriend,” he whispers, more for his own sake than anything else, and Molly laughs too and lifts a hand to run it through Caleb’s hair, cradling the back of his head when Caleb leans in to hide his smile against Molly’s neck.

“Yeah,” Molly says, sounding as surprised and delighted as Caleb feels. “You’re my boyfriend.”

Caleb gives a small, happy wiggle. He never thought one word would feel like this, like it’s settling around his heart and making a home there, but this one does. He is Molly’s boyfriend, and Molly is his boyfriend, and Caleb has never done anything in his life to deserve this, but he has it all the same. He has Molly.

He lifts his arms slightly, and between one breath and the next he finds himself pulling Molly into a hug, holding him close against his chest. Molly makes a small sound of surprise but he hugs Caleb back immediately. After a moment Caleb feels Molly’s tail ghost against his leg again, and barely a second later it coils gently around his ankle, brushing against his skin.

Caleb smiles a little wider, presses a chaste kiss to Molly’s skin, and breathes.

“I should get dressed properly,” Molly whispers what could be several minutes later. Caleb jumps a little, briefly startled, and then gives a small nod, leaning back with a sigh.

“Ja,” he says, “I suppose you should.”

“Do you have, um… I think my jeans are in here somewhere…” Molly begins, glancing around the room, but Caleb shakes his head and steps back.

“Give me a moment,” he says. “I have- give me a moment.” He quickly moves over to his dresser, and spends a few minutes digging through his drawers before he manages to locate what he’s looking for. When he finds the sweatpants with the hole cut just below the waistband he makes a triumphant noise and stands up, turning around and holding them out to Molly. “Here!”

Molly takes them and shakes them out, his eyes widening a little when he recognises the garment. “You kept these?”

Caleb shrugs. “I did not know when you would next need to borrow my clothes,” he says simply. “So I kept hold of them when you gave them back.”
“That’s- that was very nice of you, Caleb.”

Caleb crosses his arms, leaning back against the wall. “It seemed sensible.”

“It seemed sweet.”

Caleb doesn’t have a comeback for that. He doesn’t know if it really was a sweet act or not, but he’s not going to be the one to say that and wipe the wonderfully soft, almost smitten smile from Molly’s face. He just shrugs again, glancing away, and tries not to stare too much when Molly bends over to tug the sweatpants on, the motion drawing Caleb’s gaze back to him.

Caleb fails miserably. He’s just one man, and he’s one man who’s almost ridiculously attracted to a particular purple tiefling, and he’s been more than a little fixated on the lace that Molly’s wearing since the first time he spied it a week and a bit ago. He just about manages to look away when Molly takes a moment to slip his tail through the hole cut in the back of the sweatpants, but when Molly straightens up entirely, brushing his loose hair out of his face, he catches sight of Caleb face and gives a knowing grin.

“Like what you see?” he asks teasingly, and Caleb swallows.

“Um,” he replies. “I, um…” He knows this is alright. He knows it is. I am allowed to enjoy this, he tells himself, and somehow the voice in his head comes out sounding more like Molly. I am allowed to enjoy seeing my- my boyfriend in lace. Caleb pauses, takes a breath, and continues. “Ja,” he says, not letting himself look away, and Molly’s grin softens.

“Good,” he says simply. “Thank you for letting me borrow these, Caleb.”

Caleb smiles a little, giving a slight shrug. “You are my boyfriend,” he says, and feels his smile turn into a ridiculous, completely smitten grin. “I feel it would be rather bad of me to not offer you clothes before you were interrogated by my flatmate.”

Molly laughs a little. “That’s very fair,” he says, smiling softly. “And speaking of, are you ready to face Nott?”

“Are you?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be. But are you ready, Caleb?”

Caleb doesn’t reply for a while, taking a moment just to look at Molly. The curtains in his bedroom are still drawn, softening the growing morning light, and between that and the slightly oversized clothes that Molly’s dressed in, Molly somehow looks more real. He doesn’t look like some impossible, unobtainable tiefling spinning fire outside Caleb’s office. He doesn’t look like a Lucien, being held aloft by Jester before sailing through the air. He doesn’t look like what Caleb has told himself time and time and time again that he is not allowed to have.

He just looks like Molly.

He just looks like Caleb’s boyfriend.

Caleb smiles to himself and feels his hand twitch at his side. Molly glances down at it and reaches out for him without hesitation, leaving his hand hanging in the space between them like an invitation. Caleb takes it, feeling Molly’s fingers tighten around his own, and squeezes back. “Ja,” he says. “Ja, I am ready.”

“Alright,” Molly replies, and he presses a quick kiss to Caleb’s lips before he opens the door. They
leave Caleb’s room with Molly’s tail still brushing lightly against Caleb’s ankle, cross to the sofa, and sit down across the coffee table from Nott.

Nott smiles at them.

“So,” she says, leaning forwards. She reaches into two of her many pockets, withdrawing a pencil and a little notebook, and turns to Molly, her smile turning downright dangerous. “I have a couple of questions...”
[To: Jester] Jester?

[From: Jester] yessssss???

[To: Jester] Would you be free on Friday? At about 5pm?

[From: Jester] yessssss i would be
[From: Jester] why

[To: Jester] There is someone I would like you to meet.

[From: Jester] :O !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
[From: Jester] CALEB!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
[From: Jester] AM I FINALLY GOING TO MEET MYSTERY TIEFLING?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!

[To: Jester] Yes, you are finally going to meet mystery tiefling, now that he has been sufficiently interrogated by Nott.

[From: Jester] :O !!!!!!!!!!

[To: Jester] Mystery tiefling who is my boyfriend.

[From: Jester] !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
[From: Jester] aaaaAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
[From: Jester] CAAAALLLLLLEBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB!!!!!!!

[To: Jester] Why are there so many capital letters?

[From: Jester] YOU ARE HAVE A BOYFRIENDDDD!!!
[From: Jester] OMG IM SO HAPPY FOR YOU IM CRYING
[From: Jester] CALEB <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3 <3
[From: Jester] WHAT IS HIS NAME WHERE DOES HE WORK DO YOU LIKE HIM TELL ME EVERYTHING

[To: Jester] You will find out on Friday, if you can make it.
[To: Jester] :3

[From: Jester] you are the worst
[From: Jester] i will absolutely be there on friday
[From: Jester] i dont care where ‘’’there’’’ is i will BE THERE

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‘There’ ends up being The Invulnerable Vagrant, to no one’s surprise. It’s a familiar space to Jester and Caleb both, one in which Caleb feels safe and comfortable, and by the time that Friday rolls around he definitely feels like he needs that. As laid back as he knows this meeting will be, seeing how it will just be him, Molly, Jester, and Jester’s boyfriend, who she has assured him is perfectly pleasant, Caleb can’t help but feel anxious about it. More than anxious, even – he doesn’t think he’s felt this nervous since his PhD defence.
In fact, the upcoming double date reminds Caleb more of his PhD defence than he ever could have expected. He’s preparing himself to answer questions on a topic that he feels he knows a lot about (his relationship with Mollymauk), to a panel of people who he knows are not trying to be harsh or confrontational, even if they sound that way (Jester and her mystery boyfriend), and if it all goes terribly he has a friend on hand to usher him to a quiet place where he can have his panic attack in peace (previously Nott, and this time Molly).

And, just like at his viva, he has a list of expected questions and prepared answers on hand. Just in case.

He has no doubt, though, that Jester will ask him things that he never would have thought of. Hell, she’ll likely ask him things that Nott hadn’t thought of, which is a truly terrifying prospect. Nott’s repertoire of questions had seemed practically endless, but Caleb knows Jester. Nott tends to ask bizarre, but somewhat useful and informative questions, in one sense or another. Caleb worries that Jester, on the other hand, will only ask embarrassing stuff.

She already knows that they’ve kissed. She already knows that Caleb has been crushing on Molly – admittedly unknowingly – for a while. She’s already heard Caleb’s ‘crush-disguised-as-annoyance’ rant about Molly, and she’d cooed enough at him then. Caleb doesn’t dare to imagine how much she’ll coo at them today.

And, Gods, but what if Nott has told her stuff? What if Nott has told her about Molly staying over? What is Nott has told her about finding Molly wandering around the flat in just his underwear and one of Caleb’s t-shirts? What if – Caleb feels his breath catch in his lungs – what if she already knows that they’ve had sex?

Caleb feels something squeeze his hand, and is immediately pulled back to the present.

“Caleb,” Molly murmurs softly, squeezing Caleb’s hand again. “Breathe, love.”

“I am breathing,” Caleb replies automatically, even as he registers the faint ache in his lungs that comes with holding his breath for too long. He breathes out, breathes in, and feels his heart rate start to settle just a little bit.

Next to him, Molly smiles. “You’re breathing now,” he corrects, and Caleb feels his own lips twitch upwards in a weak facsimile of Molly’s smile. “Now all you have to do is keep breathing, and enter the building, and be your normal lovely, charming, wonderful self when Jester and her boyfriend get here, and it’ll all be fine. Alright?”

“Alright,” Caleb echoes quietly.

Molly squeezes his hand again. “Caleb?” he asks softly.

“Mm?”

“It’s going to be fine.” Molly leans in, pressing a quick kiss to Caleb’s lips. Caleb feels his smile grow a little, becoming a bit more certain. It’ll be alright, he tells himself, and kisses Molly back. It’ll be alright. He kisses Molly again, and then once more for good measure, and leans back to see Molly’s small, happy smile. “Come on,” Molly says, and he kisses Caleb one more time before he leads them inside.

The bell above the door lets out a cheerful tinkle as Molly pushes the door open, making one of the Pumat’s behind the counter look up and wave in their direction with a broad smile. Caleb gives a weak smile back as Molly waves a hand in response but he makes no move to approach the counter.
He doesn’t think he could eat *anything* right now – his stomach seems to have turned itself into a writhing knot of nerves, twisting in on itself to the point that Caleb feels that if he tried to eat anything it would immediately be rejected.

Unfortunately, Molly doesn’t know that.

“Do you want to get anything?” Molly asks as the door swings shut behind them. “You didn’t eat much at lunch today.”

Caleb shakes his head. “No, thank you,” he replies quietly. “I, um… no.”

“Nerves-nausea?” Molly asks understandingly. Caleb nods, feeling Molly’s tail curl gently around his ankle, the touch of it soothing even through his trousers.

“**Ja,**” he says.

“You want to go sit down?”

“**Ja, bitte.**”

Molly nods and raises up on tip-toe for a moment, briefly becoming taller than Caleb as he scans the room. “There’s a little booth bit over there in the corner,” he says. “It looks like it should sit all four of us.” He glances back at Caleb, giving him a small smile. “It should be nice and isolated,” he adds, absently running his thumb over the back of Caleb’s hand, and Caleb finds himself smiling back. Bless Molly. Bless Molly for *understanding.*

“Thank you,” Caleb says quietly. Molly raises his shoulders in a shrug, starting to lead Caleb through the mish-mash of tables and chairs and couches that fill The Invulnerable Vagrant towards their chosen seats. Caleb slips into the booth first and Molly follows him, only smiling when Caleb leans into his side, his hand resting on the table between them.

“You doing alright?” Molly asks quietly, and Caleb pulls a slight face.

“**Ja,**” he says. “I think so…”

Molly nudges his shoulder against Caleb’s and reaches out to tangle their fingers together. “It’s going to be just fine, darling. It’s just Jester and her boyfriend. They can’t ask us anything worse than what Nott’s already asked us.”

Caleb sighs. “I am still sorry about that,” he mutters quietly, “I- I did not know that Nott would ask you what your preferred weapon would be in a battle of you against fifty pigeons, and then *grade* you on it.”

Molly laughs a little. “I mean, she seemed to like my answer of ‘two scimitars and freaky blood magic,’ even if she was just a little bit grossed out by the ‘blood magic’ bit. And besides, I don’t think either of us could have seen that question coming, Caleb.”

“No, but we both could have seen that I still had my- my pyjama pants on,” Caleb replies, flushing a little as he remembers the mess that had been left on them. “That was, ah… *unpleasant,* when Nott noticed.”

“I’d never seen a goblin recoil so hard,” Molly muses thoughtfully. “I thought she was going to push her way right through the back of the chair, or ascend to the Ethereal Plane, or *something* of that nature. It was incredible.”
“It was certainly a strong reaction,” Caleb agrees. *And with good reason.* He feels he would react similarly if he were to encounter any of his friends in a similar state.

“It’s a shame neither of us has magic,” Molly remarks absently. “That prestidigitation spell would have been really useful then.”

Caleb feels his blood turn to ice inside his heart.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

He’s not surprised that he’s kept his magic a secret from Molly – he’s kept it secret from *everyone* except for Nott – but he still finds himself caught off-balance by how *shit* it feels to remember that. He’s accustomed to lying about his magic. He lies to *everyone* about his magic. He lies to Bryce, and he lies to Jester, and he lies to the other professors in his department and to his students and to everyone he’s ever met since the age of seventeen, and it’s been fine. It’s always been fine. He’s never felt bad about hiding it.

He feels bad now.

He doesn’t want to lie to Molly. He wants to tell Molly the truth. He wants to be open and honest with Molly the same way that Molly has always been open and honest with him, but what the fuck is he going to say? *I have magic but I haven’t mentioned it this whole time because I’m a coward? I have magic but I don’t use it because it using my own magic gives me panic attacks? I have magic but I don’t use it because it using my own magic gives me panic attacks? I have magic but I don’t use it because I’m a coward? I have magic but I don’t use it because I’m afraid of what might happen again?*

No. He can’t say that. He can’t say *any* of that. Not now, and possibly not ever. There’s too much pain and shame and fear wrapped around his magic for him to feel comfortable talking about it, even with Molly.

Even with Molly, who he trusts almost as much as he trusts Nott.

Caleb tries to draw in a breath and feels it catch in his throat. He can’t- he *can’t.* He can’t talk about his magic, and he can’t breathe, and he can’t fucking think for the fear and shame and terror in his head and in his chest, wrapping around his limbs like wire and weighing down his lungs with lead. He’s done too much in his past, has hidden too much from Molly, and he’s a *liar,* a liar and a deceiver and he’s been tricking Molly this whole time, tricking him into thinking that he was someone worthy of attention and affection and *love* and-

“Caleb?”

Caleb jolts in his seat and looks over at Molly, who’s looking at him with a fair amount of concern. “Hm?”

“Are you alright?”

Caleb doesn’t answer. He *can’t* answer.

Molly seems to understand what Caleb’s silence means. He rubs his thumb over the back of Caleb’s hand, skimming the ridges of bone and tendon, and Caleb feels some of the tension in his body loosen. The lead in his lungs lightens. “Breathe, darling,” Molly reminds him softly, and Caleb pulls in a breath. “Good. Now hold it… and exhale slowly.” Caleb complies, feeling the breath leave his lungs in a soft rush of air. Molly smiles at him, still gently rubbing the back of his hand. “Again?” he suggests, and at Caleb’s nod he continues to walk him through the breathing exercise.
It helps. Within a handful of repetitions Caleb feels calmer, in body if not in mind. The fear and worry is still in his head but it’s lessened now, focused more on the approaching conversation with Jester than on his past. He breathes and breathes again under Molly’s quiet directions, and keeps on going until his heart no longer feels like it’s trying to run a marathon inside his chest.

“You alright?” Molly asks quietly several minutes later. Caleb nods slowly.

“I- ja,” he says. “Thank you, Molly. I’m sorry for… for that…”

Molly gives him a soft smile, running his thumb over the back of Caleb’s hand again. “It’s alright, love,” he says and he leans in to press a quick kiss to Caleb’s cheek before he continues. “Listen, I’m going to get a drink before Jester gets here with her boyfriend. Do you want anything? A Classic Widogast?” Molly’s voice is quiet, soft and low and calming, but Caleb can still pick it out over the background bustle of The Invulnerable Vagrant.

“Bitte,” Caleb murmurs, squeezing Molly’s hand. He might not feel like he’s able to eat anything but he can’t see any downside to having a mug of his favourite drink on hand. At the very least it should stop him from scratching at his own wrist if his nerves start to get the better of him. “That would be- yes, please, Mollymauk.”

“Alright,” Molly replies, standing up. He drops a quick kiss to Caleb’s cheek before turning and moving over to the counter, his fingers trailing over Caleb’s as he leaves. Caleb watches him go, enjoying how the light sparkles on his highlighter and catches on the fine silver threads woven through his loose black blouse, and waits until Molly joins the back of the queue to finally turn his attention back to the table. He pulls his phone out of his pocket, fidgeting with the soft leather case that Molly had got him for it. He flips it open, running his fingers over the stitching inside, and traces the shape of the magnet in the clasp before shutting the cover again.

Naturally, it’s at that exact moment that his phone buzzes twice.

[From: Jester] hi sorry we’re running just a little bit late!!!
[From: Jester] fjord and I will be there super soon I promise!!!!

Caleb stares down at his phone. Fjord. Oh.

Oh.

Oh, Gods above, this is going to be an absolute clusterfuck.

Caleb carefully turns his phone face down, pushes it away from himself, and then drops his head into his hands, stifling a manic, more than a little bit terrified giggle. Oh, Gods. Fjord. Of course Jester’s boyfriend is Fjord! Caleb’s actually amazed that he hadn’t learned that earlier considering how long Jester’s been crushing on him for, but then again he hasn’t spoken to Jester much recently. Between the new performance keeping both her and Molly busy and Caleb’s increasingly frantic schedule of research, coursework marking, and exam preparation, Girl’s Night Featuring Caleb has been put on hold for a little while. He’s barely even been texting her, and when he has it’s mostly been to ask how practise is going, or to ask her to make sure that Nott doesn’t pick any fights with people more than three times her size. He used to ask Jester to stop Nott from picking fights with anyone bigger than her at all, but as that was pretty much the entire population of Zadash it was a bit of an impossible request.

But, back to the point at hand: Fjord.

Fjord, the half-orc of unknown employee. Fjord, Jester’s boyfriend. Fjord, Molly’s flatmate.
For a brief, horrifying moment, Caleb wonders if perhaps Molly knew all along. He wonders if Molly was aware that Jester was dating Fjord, and that he knew in advance who was going to be here, and just hadn’t chosen to tell Caleb for some horrible, unknown reason.

But- no. No. Caleb knows Molly. Molly wouldn’t do that. If Molly didn’t tell Caleb that Fjord was going to be here it was because Molly also didn’t know.

Caleb glances over in the direction of the queue at the counter. Molly’s tapping away at his phone, his tail swishing gently behind him, bedecked with a collection of moonstone-set silver bands that match the jewellery hanging from his ears and horns, and he looks calm. He looks content. He finishes typing whatever it was he was typing and tucks his phone away into the pocket of his high-waisted black shorts before looking over towards their corner booth as if he could feel Caleb’s eyes on him.

Molly catches Caleb’s eye and gives a small, reassuring smile. Caleb feels himself smiling back.

“It’s going to be alright, he tells himself. In his head, the voice sounds like Molly. It’s going to be fine. Jester is not the examination panel at your viva.

Molly smiles a bit wider, giving Caleb a quick wink before he turns his attention back to the counter, stepping up to place their order. Caleb continues to stare for a moment, watching as Molly effortlessly engages the Pumat – Pumat #3, Caleb thinks – in conversation, laughing and smiling and generally looking far, far too beautiful. Caleb doesn’t understand how it’s possible for one individual to be as beautiful and as charming and as nice and as- as everything as Molly is.

He doesn’t understand how Molly is his boyfriend.

He doesn’t understand, but he’s definitely not complaining. Molly is his boyfriend, and Caleb is Molly’s boyfriend, and he knows that for a fact, and they’re about to meet Jester and her boyfriend and it’s going to be fine.

It’s going to be fine.

Caleb breathes in, breathes out, and picks up his phone.

[To: Jester] That is alright, Jester. I have saved you some seats.
[To: Jester] Would you like me to order you anything?

[From: Jester] caleb that’s super sweet but theres no point because we’re hereeee~~~~~

“Caleb!”

Caleb barely has time to look up from his phone before Jester barrels into his side, practically knocking him over in the booth as she wraps her arms around his shoulders in a hug that knocks all the air out of him. He gives a small wheeze, raising a hand to pat Jester on one of her absurdly muscular arms, and Jester squeezes him a little tighter before letting go, skipping backwards a few steps with a massive smile on her face.

“Hi!” she says.

Caleb pulls in a breath and only feels his ribs complain a little bit. “Hallo,” he replies weakly, only now catching sight of the rather strapping half-orc standing next to her. “I take it this is-”

“This is Fjord!” Jester finishes for him, turning to the half-orc in question with a grin. “Fjord, this is Caleb. You have to be nice to him; he’s one of my best friends and he’s very sweet.”
Fjord smiles at him. Caleb thinks he sees two tiny tusks just about protruding from his mouth, shining slightly in the light of Pumat’s shop. “Fjord,” Fjord says, holding out a hand to Caleb with a winning smile. Caleb takes it cautiously, feeling Fjord’s fingers squeeze around his hand in a gentler-than-expected grip as the half-orc shakes his unresisting hand.

“Caleb Widogast,” he replies, doing his very best to give a polite smile, though he worries it comes out looking more like a grimace.

Fjord doesn’t seem to think so. He shakes Caleb’s hand one last time and then lets go, still smiling warmly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Caleb.”

“Likewise.”

“Jester’s told me a lot about you,” Fjord comments, and Caleb immediately feels worry coil cold and heavy through his stomach. Oh, Gods.

“Nothing bad, I hope?” he asks, unable to keep his concern out of his voice. Fjord laughs quietly, shaking his head a little.

“No,” he says. “Only good things, I assure you.”

Jester tutts. “As if I would have anything bad to tell him,” she says, sounding almost affronted, and Caleb gives her a weak smile and a small shrug. “You are a delight, Caleb.”

“Ah, if you say so.”

“I do say so,” Jester insists. “You’re almost as much of a delight as I am!”

Caleb blinks. “That is… that is quite the compliment, coming from you.”

Jester grins back at him. “I know,” she replies cheerfully, and Fjord gives a small laugh. Jester moves around to the other side of the booth, carefully gathering up her poofy skirts as she starts to sit down. “Anyway,” she says, sliding into the seat across from Caleb and immediately leaning forwards, propping her hand up on her chin and giving Caleb a rather mischievous grin. “On to the important stuff! Where’s this mystery tiefling of yours?”

Caleb can practically hear the tildes that he knows Jester would follow that question with if only it was text-based. He tilts his head, nodding towards the counter where Molly is just starting to collect their drinks. “He’s over there,” he says as Fjord slides into the seat next to Jester. “He is, ah, he was getting me a drink.”

Jester practically coos. “Aw, Caleb! That’s so sweet of him! Does he know about the Classic Widogast?”

Caleb nods. “He, um- yes. I got one when we came here for our first date. He offered to get me one just now.”

“Caleb!” Jester says again, and Caleb feels her tone could definitely be considered ‘cooing’ now. “And he remembered from then? That’s so cute!”

“Well,” Caleb says, shrugging a bit, “We have been here a few times since then.”

“Still! He remembered your favourite drink! That’s so sweet of him!”

Caleb supposes that it is a bit sweet that Molly remembers his favourite drink. Just a tiny bit.
“Perhaps.”

“He must be very nice,” Jester remarks. Caleb feels his smile widening.

“He is very nice,” he agrees quietly, and catches a blur of purple from the corner of his eye.

“One Classic Widogast for you, love,” says a familiar voice. Caleb watches as a purple hand neatly deposits a mug in front of him, the familiar smell wafting up to him. He wraps his hands around it, looking up at Molly with a thankful smile, and Molly smiles back before sitting down and looking across the table at Jester, who’s watching them open-mouthed. “Hello, Jester. Hey, Fjord. Didn’t expect to see you here.”

There’s a pause.

“You!” Jester exclaims, standing up so fast that the wooden table is pushed back a couple of inches, scraping loudly over the floor. Caleb snatches his mug up before it can spill anywhere and watches as Fjord similarly stares at Molly, his mouth likewise agape. “You’re- I- you!”

Molly raises an eyebrow, smirking more than Caleb feels is strictly necessary. “Me,” he agrees. Jester draws in a breath. Caleb sinks down a little in his seat, hiding behind his mug as he waits for Jester’s inevitable annoyed tirade about keeping secrets.

It doesn’t come.

“I knew it!” Jester exclaims triumphantly instead, her expression turning from one of shock and annoyance to absolute, unfiltered delight. “I knew it, I absolutely knew it, I knew the Traveller wouldn’t lie to me!” She turns to Caleb, her poofy skirt swishing around her knees even in the confined space. “But, Caleb, how could you keep this a secret? From me? Your friend?” She pouts a little, puppy-eyes on in full effect, but Caleb has seen them too many times in the course of their friendship to be particularly affected. “I can’t believe that mystery tiefling has been Molly all along and you didn’t tell me!”

“In my defence,” Caleb points out, still hiding behind his mug, “I did not know that he was Molly for a very long time.”

Jester waves a hand. “But you knew at the carnival, Caleb! You could have told me then!”

“In my defence,” Caleb points out, still hiding behind his mug, “I did not know that he was Molly for a very long time.”

Jester waves a hand. “But you knew at the carnival, Caleb! You could have told me then!”

“I was not dating him then.”

“No, but you liked him. He was still mystery tiefling, this super cool and super hot and super mysterious figure who’d stolen your heart.”

Caleb thinks that’s laying it on a little thick. “I did not even know I had a crush on him then, Jester. I only realised at that party.” He fidgets with his drink, taking a sip of it. “And besides, how did you even know it would be Molly?”

Jester shrugs. “Simple!” she says, sitting back down and tugging the table back into its proper position. “There are only so many pretty tieflings in Zadash who aren’t me who you could have a crush on. Also, Molly is super hot, and super pretty, and he’s got a really good ass, and he’s just really nice, and he’s been super smitten with you for ages so I just knew that he would ask you out at some point when he finally got his ass in gear and stopped worrying about it.”

Caleb blinks at her. “…Molly was- he was smitten with me?”
“Mm-hm!” Jester nods cheerfully, her tail waving in the air next to her. “I mean, I didn’t know it was you at the time. He just kept talking about this hot, adorable professor who he sometimes saw at campus. And - no offense, Caleb, you know I love you – there’s a lot of hot, adorable professors at uni. Like, a lot. And he didn’t know what you studied so that really didn’t narrow it down at all.”

Caleb turns to look at Molly, still feeling somewhere between shocked and quietly delighted. “You were smitten with me?” he asks quietly, unable to hide the faint smile on his face. Molly blushes a little, one hand reaching up to fiddle with a silver spiral wrapped around his left horn, and he gives a small shrug even as he smiles back at Caleb, the expression small and sheepish.

“I,” he starts, quickly cutting himself off to shrug again. “I, I mean… yeah, Caleb. You were this really hot, nameless professor with a really nice voice, and you always looked really cute and kind of flustered, and you looked extra hot and cute whenever I made you blush, and- yeah.” He moves his hand, rubbing awkwardly at the back of his neck. “Yasha kept telling me to just go talk to you, but- I don’t know, you didn’t know who I was, and I didn’t really know who you were beyond some professor who had a habit of being hot and adorable in my general direction, and you always seemed so awkward. I didn’t want to, y’know, scare you.”

“So you decided to scale the building to return my thermos?” Caleb asks, but he’s smiling even wider now, releasing one of his hands from the mug to curl his pinky finger with Molly’s.

Molly glances down at where their fingers tangle together and smiles a little wider. “I- yeah,” he admits. “Yasha said it would be a good excuse to talk to you, and a no-pressure way to give you my number. The plan was that if you didn’t want to text me then you could just ignore it and we could interact how we always had, and I’d eventually get over my crush on you because I’d know nothing was going to come of it. It was a brilliant plan, really.”

Oh, bless him. Caleb feels his whole heart grow warm within his chest.

“Liebling,” Caleb says softly, and before he can think better of it he lifts his other hand, gently cups Molly’s cheek, and draws him in for a quick kiss.

“Awwwww!”

Across the table from them, Jester sighs happily. “Oh, Caleb,” she says, “I’m so happy for you!”

Caleb leans back from Molly and looks across the table. Jester’s resting her elbows on it again, her head propped up on her hands, and when she sees Caleb looking she just grins. “No, no, don’t mind me!” she says, waving a hand. “You two go back to smooching.”

Caleb glances at Fjord. Fjord doesn’t seem to mind Jester’s antics – he’s watching her with a fond, almost love-struck expression, and with the knowledge that it’s only Jester watching them Caleb feels bold enough to dart back in and kiss Molly again.

And then again after that, just because he can.

Across the table from them, Jester sighs happily. “Oh, Caleb,” she says, “I’m so happy for you!”

Caleb can’t stop himself from smiling back. He looks away from Molly but he doesn’t let go of Molly’s hand, tangling their fingers together without a second thought. “Thank you, Jester,” he says quietly.

Jester just smiles wider. “You look really cute together.”

“We, um… thank you.”
“Molly’s going to be really good for you, Caleb.”

Caleb frowns at that. That’s a weird statement. “...What?”

“Like, with getting you comfy with yourself!” Jester clarifies. “Like how I’ve been getting you comfy with saying that you’re gay, but, y’know, **more**.” She grins. “In the **bedroom**.”

Oh.

“Oh.”

“**Yeah.**”

Caleb feels himself turning red. He doesn’t dare to look over at Molly. “I, um-”

“Like, if you’ve ever wanted to try something Molly can **totally** help you out! We’ve had a lot of deep chats at the carnival and I can tell you **so much** about him—”

“I am right here, Jester,” Molly interrupts, but Caleb can hear the humour in his voice.

“-And he can help you learn **so much**, because he knows so much and he’s into so much stuff! Like, he’s into **dirty talk**, and **bondage**, and-”

“Say, Jes.” Fjord interrupts loudly, clearing his throat. “How about we, uh… how about we tell these nice folk how we met, hm? This is meant to be a double date and all. We can’t let them do all the talking.”

Jester, somehow, perks up even more. “Oh!” she says, grinning from ear to pointed ear. “Oh, yes! It was so **cute** and **romantic**!”

“It was not **that** cute and romantic.”

“It was,” Jester insists, turning to Fjord and fluttering her eyelashes. “I fell from the trapeze, and you **caught** me, and it was **just** like a movie. There were birds singing, and you were all surrounded by light, and you looked so **handsome**, and I was **swooning**-”

“You had a concussion.”

“And then you carried me to your office, and asked me if I was okay, and you asked for my **name**, and then you asked me to look into your eyes-”

“Because you were concussed.”

“And it was just **magical.**”

“You called me ‘Oskar’ and I got seriously worried that you had actually properly damaged yourself,” Fjord says flatly but he’s smiling at Jester all the same, his expression soft and fond. “Luckily for us, you hadn’t.”

“Lucky for **you**,” Jester replies, waggling her eyebrows.

“Lucky for the carnival, and for your brain,” Fjord corrects, still smiling.

“So, you, ah, you work at the carnival?” Caleb asks a little bit pointlessly, already entirely aware that the answer is ‘yes’. Fjord looks over at him, giving him a warm smile and a quick nod.
“Yup,” he agrees. “Sure do. It’s how Molly and I ended up sharing a flat, actually! He needed someone to stay with after we found—well, when he first joined us, and I happened to be looking for a flatmate. It all worked out pretty well, really.”

“I still maintain that Yasha and I would have been fantastic flatmates,” Molly points out, and Jester snorts.

“Yes,” she agrees. “Fantastic and terrifying.”

“Terrifying how?” Caleb asks. He doesn’t know much about Yasha, having only seen her a handful of times times and spoken to her even less, but she’s always seemed perfectly sensible to him. He can easily imagine that she’d be an excellent flatmate.

Jester sighs loudly. “She’ll let Molly get away with anything. She looks all nice and sweet and—“

“Like she’ll rip you apart if you look at her funny?” Fjord interrupts, and Jester pauses for a moment before nodding.

“Yes,” she says, “and like that. But the point is that when you get to know her she’s really sweet, and really nice, and really quiet, and just generally great, but she’ll let Molly do anything.”

“I would like to point out that she absolutely does not,” Molly says.

“She does,” Jester insists.

“Prove it.”

“There was that time that you dropped off the trapeze onto her while shouting ‘Yasha, catch me!’, and she did and didn’t tell you off for it?”

“Yasha always catches me.”

“That time you stood on her shoulders to rearrange the letters on the display board?”

“That was—”

“That time she arrived with three pounds of salt and helped you spend all day replacing all the sugar at the entire carnival with it? Even in those little sugar packets?”

“Hey!” Molly says, forcing the word out around his growing laughter. “Don’t you dare act like you weren’t in on all of those!”

“That’s not the point!” Jester retorts. “The point is that you and Yasha would be terrifying flatmates. Caleb, do you agree?”

Caleb blinks. “Um,” he manages to say, still overwhelmed by the high-speed deluge of facts and tales that he’ll absolutely be following up on later. “…Ja?”

“Fjord?”

“You know I agree too, Jes.”

“I rest my case,” Jester says smugly. “And besides, I have another reason why you and Yasha would be awful flatmates.”

Molly takes a moment to wheeze and catch his breath, wiping tears from his eyes before he replies.
“Which is?”

“You don’t know where she lives.”

Molly smirks. “I think you’ll find that I do,” he corrects.

Jester rolls her eyes. “No one knows where Yasha lives, Molly,” she says. Caleb watches with a not insignificant degree of amusement as Fjord sighs quietly and shakes his head next to her, smiling fondly as Jester continues to speak. “I don’t know, and Fjord doesn’t know, and Beau doesn’t know even though she’d really like to if you know what I mean, and—”

“And I do,” Molly repeats.

Jester squints at him. “…How?” she asks.

Molly smiles, leans back, and mimes zipping his lips shut.

“Tell me,” Jester says. It’s not a question.

Molly grins at her. “No.”

“Molly.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Absolutely not.”

Jester pouts, putting on her puppy-dog eyes. “Pretty please with cherries on top?”

“No!” Molly insists, laughing. “It’s a closely guarded Tealeaf secret! Passed down through generations!”

“Bullshit!” Jester retaliates immediately. “How can you pass it down through generations if you don’t have any generations to pass it down from?”

“Magic,” Molly replies immediately. “I don’t have to know who made me to know secrets like that.”

Caleb freezes for a moment as he processes what Molly said. I don’t have to know who made me. Somehow, despite their hours of conversation, family had never come up. Admittedly that was partly by design – Caleb rarely wants to talk about his family, knowing how easily questions about them can lead into questions about his past - but he hadn’t realised he’d subconsciously avoided the topic so well, and for so long. He doesn’t know anything about Molly’s family. He didn’t even know that Molly doesn’t know who his parents are.

Caleb forces himself to relax, and tucks that topic of conversation away for later. They can’t talk about that now. He can’t talk about that now, not here, not with Jester and Fjord sitting across from them and Molly looking so light-hearted and happy at Caleb’s side. Talking about his parents means talking about his past, and that is...

Well, suffice to say, that’s not a conversation he’s going to enjoy in the slightest.

“So,” Caleb says abruptly, cutting across Jester and Molly’s quiet bickering as he looks over at Fjord. “How long have you and Molly been flatmates?”
Fjord lifts a hand, scratching at the back of his neck as he thinks. “…About four years?” he says eventually. “Maybe five? I dunno, somewhere in that ballpark. It’s been a while.”

Caleb nods slowly to himself. That is quite a while – it’s not quite as long as he’s been flatmates with Nott for, but it’s still a lot of time to spend sharing space with another person. As he knows from experience, you learn an awful lot about a person when living with them.

He opens his mouth, intending to ask another perfectly normal question, but then, like the spirit of Nott has suddenly possessed him, he instead finds himself asking, “Do you have any embarrassing stories of him?”

“Caleb!” Molly exclaims, looking at him aghast even as Caleb can see amusement dancing at the corners of his eyes. “Darling! I can’t believe you! Asking my flatmate for embarrassing stories about me? I am wounded.”

Caleb finds himself smiling. “If you are wounded then I will kiss it better for you,” he says, trying to match Molly’s lightly teasing tone, and Molly’s expression turns from comically horrified to something noticeably softer.

Across the table from them, Jester coos quietly. “Aww, Caleb,” she says. “You two are so cute! Would you kiss Molly better if he was wounded on his lips?”

Caleb frowns a little, confused. “Of course I would,” he says, “Why would I not-”

“Would you kiss him better if he was wounded on his chest?”

“Ja, but-”

“Would you kiss him better if he was wounded on his di-”

“Jester!” Fjord says loudly, clearing his throat. “Why don’t you and I go order some food and leave Caleb and Molly in peace for a little while? I’m absolutely starving.”

Jester sighs. “You’re no fun,” she grumbles but she stands up anyway, and Caleb doesn’t miss the way she reaches out for Fjord’s hand. “Caleb? Molly? Do you want us to get you anything?”

“Ask Pumat to surprise me,” Molly says with a grin, and Caleb merely shakes his head when Jester turns her attention to him.

“Nothing for me, thank you.” He’s feeling significantly less nervous now but he still doesn’t think he’ll be able to eat anything. Jester smiles and nods, pushing gently on Fjord’s shoulder to get him to leave the booth.

“Alright, we’ll be back in a bit! You two have fun while we’re gone!” She grins at them, throwing a wink in Caleb’s direction, and then turns towards the counter with a swirl of her brightly-coloured skirt.

Caleb watches her leave, and the moment she’s out of earshot he lets himself slump against Molly’s side.

“Gods,” he mutters to himself. “Gods.”

“Caleb?” Molly asks quietly, tangling his fingers with Caleb’s and giving his hand a quick squeeze. “You doing alright, love?”
Caleb draws in a shaky breath, exhaling it with a nod. “Ja,” he says quietly. “Ja, I-I think so. Is this-am I saying the right things? I don’t know what to do on a double date…”

Molly smiles. “You’re doing just fine, Caleb,” he says softly, leaning in to kiss him quickly. “You’re being just as wonderful and charming as I knew you’d be.”

Caleb smiles back weakly. “I am not sure I could be considered charming, Liebling.”

Molly scoffs. “Darling, you are exceedingly charming. Anyone who thinks otherwise is blatantly incorrect.”

“Am I blatantly incorrect?”

“In this instance, yes,” Molly says, and he kisses Caleb again. Caleb leans into it, dropping one hand to Molly’s waist and brushing his thumb against his side, feeling the silky-smooth fabric of Molly’s blouse beneath his fingertips. Molly leans back after a while, laughing softly when Caleb tries to chase after the kiss. “Darling,” Molly says, and Caleb kisses him again. “Darling,” Molly lifts a hand and Caleb feels it settle around the nape of his neck, holding him close even when he finally decides to break the kiss. “Darling,” Molly says again. “You’re doing just fine.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Jester loves you already, and Fjord’s a good guy. He knows how much I like you; he’s going to like you too if he doesn’t already.”

Caleb smiles a bit at that. “Thank you,” he says quietly. Molly smiles at him, finding Caleb’s hand and squeezing it reassuringly.

“It’s going to be alright, Caleb tells himself, and this time he finds it much easier to believe the Molly-voice in his head. It's going to be alright.

Fjord and Jester return after a while, each bearing a plate of food. Jester has Molly’s plate balanced on her arm and she slides it in front of Molly as she sits down, grinning happily.

“What is it?” Molly asks.

Jester shrugs. “I have no idea,” she says. “But Pumat said that you should like it.”

“Which Pumat?”

“…The one behind the counter?”

Molly twists around, glancing at the counter over his shoulder. “Ah, Pumat #3,” he muses. “Excellent. I trust that Pumat.”

Caleb frowns. “They are all the same Pumat, surely?”

“They are, but they do have their differences,” Molly says. He picks up his cutlery, carefully shifting the food on his plate around. “For example, Pumat #4 makes the best coffee.”

“But they all use the same coffee machine.”

“I know, Jester, but trust me on this. Pumat #4 makes the best coffee. Pumat Prime makes the best tea, but he’s the worst to talk to.” Molly grins, and takes a bite of his meal. “And,” he adds once he’s swallowed it, “Pumat #3 makes the best surprise meals. Case in point: this is excellent.”
Jester frowns at him, still looking unconvinced. “If you say so…”

“I do say so.”

Next to Jester, Fjord sighs and picks up his fork. “Well,” he says, “You two are welcome to keep debating the differences in Pumats, but I’m going to enjoy my food.” He takes an emphatic bite and, just like that, the table lapses into silence as everyone starts to eat.

“So, um, Fjord,” Caleb says, when the silence at the table starts to get a bit overwhelming. “What-do you do? You said you were at the carnival. Do you work there?”

Fjord makes a so-so gesture with one hand, quickly following his mouthful of food. “Kinda,” he says. “I’m a physiotherapist, but I work there and a number of other places. It kinda depends on where I’m needed and where my agency sends me.”

“I don’t trust your agency,” Jester grumbles, sinking down in her seat and taking a sip from her massively oversized mug of hot chocolate. “They’re creepy.”

“Creepy?” Fjord asks. “How are they creepy? There’s nothing creepy about them.”

“There is!” Jester insists. “Their logo is an eye! Just an eye! A creepy, glowing, golden eye!”

“It only glows under UV light.”

“Yeah,” Jester says, “And do come.”

“And blood,” Molly adds.

“See! You’re working for a company who’s logo is an eye made of come-blood! How is that not creepy?”

“It could just be a UV fluorescing ink,” Caleb points out quietly. “They exist. I ordered some for Nott as a birthday present once.”

“Thank you, Caleb.” Fjord turns to Jester, gesturing in Caleb’s direction. “You see? Not creepy. Purchasable online, in fact.”

“Still creepy,” Jester mutters into her mug, and next to Caleb, Molly laughs quietly.

Fjord shakes his head at their antics, turning his attention back to Caleb. “What about you, Caleb? What do you do?”

“I, ah, I’m a professor at the university,” Caleb says quietly. Fjord raises an eyebrow.

“Really?” he asks. “That’s mighty impressive, Caleb. What do you lecture in?”


“He’s working on his second doctorate,” Molly says proudly. Caleb looks down at his half-empty mug, feeling himself smile at the tone of Molly’s voice even as his ears pinken. “And he’s published several books! It’s really very impressive. He can speak Ancient Sylvan too.”

“Can you?” Fjord asks. Caleb looks up, giving a small nod.

“Ja,” he replies. “And modern Sylvan, and Celestial. But Ancient Sylvan is my area of expertise.”
“I can’t say I know much about it, but well done you for that first doctorate!” Fjord says. “That can’t have been easy.”

Caleb shrugs. He never really knows how to react when people compliment his qualifications. “I mean,” he says, feeling a little bit awkward, “It was- I just- I didn’t really want to go into the job market after I got my Masters, you know? And I liked my subject, and I like to learn, so I just sort of… it just sort of happened.”

“And then you decided to do another?”

“…Ja.”

Fjord laughs. “Well, Caleb,” he says, “I hope your research goes well.”

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The conversation continues to flow easily from then on, and before Caleb knows it they’ve been sitting chatting for several hours, their drinks finished and their empty plates long since pushed to one side. He finds himself leaning into Molly’s side, Molly’s arm a heavy, comforting weight around his waist, listening as Jester regales them with yet more tales of the shenanigans she and Molly get up to at the carnival. It’s half-way through one of these stories that Fjord’s phone beeps, interrupting Jester’s ramblings.

Fjord glances down at it. “Aw, shit,” he says, picking it up and scanning the alert that popped up. “Jes, we gotta go.”

Jester pouts. “Why?”

“I’ve got that meeting with my agency this evening, remember? And I think Pumat’s going to be shutting up shop soon, too.”

Caleb glances around. He’d been aware of the time in the vague, absent-minded way he always is, but somehow he’d completely missed how the shop had been slowly emptying out over the last several hours, until it was just their group and a couple of other people dotted around the shop left. He spots one of the Pumat’s behind the counter, wiping down the surfaces, and tidying up the mugs, and generally giving the impression that the shop’s open time is winding to an end, and forces himself to stop leaning against Molly’s side and instead slowly sit upright.

“Ja,” he says, stretching a little. “I agree, Fjord. I should probably head home as well – I need to feed my cat.”

“Well, we should do this again sometime!” Jester pipes up, smiling widely. “This was super fun, right?”

“I mean, I had fun,” Molly replies. “Caleb?”

“Ja, I had fun.” More fun than expected, if he’s being entirely honest – he’d definitely been expecting far more awkward and uncomfortable questions from Jester, but he feels that he may have been a bit too harsh on her. Jester is Jester, after all, which means that first and foremost she is his friend. A friend with a tendency for asking Caleb somewhat inappropriate questions, but a friend all the same.

“I had fun, too,” Caleb hears Fjord say. Fjord looks over at him, catching his eye, and reaches a hand out across the table. “It was great meeting you, Caleb.”
Caleb takes his hand, shaking it quickly. “Likewise. Maybe we will see each other again at some point.”

“Well, if Molly ever gets round to inviting you over to the flat then I’m sure that’ll happen,” Fjord replies. He releases Caleb’s hand, standing from the table and tugging on his jacket.

“It was nice to finally meet you, Mystery Tiefling,” Jester says, standing up and holding her hand out to Molly. Molly takes it, shaking it politely, and performs a little bow.

“Please, the pleasure was all mine, Miss Lavore,” he replies with a wide grin.

“Maybe we will run into each other some day and get to know each other better, seeing how we are complete strangers.”

“Maybe we will.”

There’s a brief moment where they both grin at each other with matching expressions of tiefling delight, and then Jester turns her attention to Caleb. “I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me that Molly was mystery tiefling.”

Caleb shrugs. “It never came up.”

“That is a lie, and you know it,” Jester replies, but she’s still grinning as she follows Fjord out of the booth. Caleb glances up at Molly, catching his eye for a moment, and can’t stop himself from smiling when he sees Molly’s ridiculous grin before Molly grabs his jacket and tugs it on, following Fjord into the open space of the shop. “Caleb,” Jester whispers, catching his arm as he stands to leave and pulling him back behind Fjord and Molly. Caleb glances down at where her hand is curled into the crook of his elbow, and then looks ahead to Molly and Fjord. They don’t seem to have noticed Jester and Caleb’s small absence, or if they have they’re not bothered by it.

“What?” he asks quietly.

“I wanted to ask you something.”

“Alright.”

Jester looks up at him. “Are you happy?” she asks quietly. “You seemed really happy but I never got the chance to ask you. Are you happy, Caleb?”

“Ja,” Caleb finds himself replying immediately. There’s no hesitation with his answer, no uncertainty – he is happy with Molly. He’s happier than he can remember being in a long time. “I am, actually. I’m very happy, Jester.”

Jester grins. “Good!” she says, patting Caleb on the arm. “In that case, can I tell you something?”

Caleb shrugs. “Go ahead.”

Jester’s grin turns noticeably more mischievous. “Did you know that Molly likes languages?” she asks, and the tone of her voice leaves no uncertainty as to the context of her question. “Like he really, really likes languages.”

Caleb feels himself smile a little bit. “Oh?”

“Yeah! He really likes them. Like, a lot. So – and this is just a suggestion from a friend, you can totally ignore this – but you should definitely consider maybe using just a teensy bit of Ancient
Sylvan in the bedroom. Y’know, for when you…” She trails off, glancing up at him and raising her eyebrows. “Y’know.”

Caleb feels himself turn scarlet. “I have, um, I’ve already done that,” he whispers back. Jester gives a delightsed gasp, gently hitting his arm.

“Caleb!” she says, sounding almost impossibly proud. “Was it good? Did Molly like it?”

“He, um… yes.”

“Have you tried dirty talk?”

“Um,” Caleb says, thinking back to just a few days ago, when he woke up hard after dreaming about Molly. “I, ah, I mean…”

Jester gasps again. “Caleb! Is that a yes?”

“It was Ancient Sylvan, but…”

“Does Molly know what it meant?”

Caleb shakes his head. “No,” he says quietly, “No, I- I didn’t want to, um, to upset him.”


“But what if he doesn’t like the meaning?”

“Tell me,” Jester says. “I know Molly, and I know what he’s into. I can let you know if he’ll like it or not.”

Caleb contemplates that. He likes Jester, and he trusts her – for all her energy and tendency to ask embarrassing questions he knows that her heart is firmly in the right place. She wouldn’t lie to him, especially not about something like this. Jester, Caleb knows, has only ever wanted him to be happy.

And so with that in mind he leans in closer, and quickly whispers the translation of $v5zC3$ in Jester’s ear.

Jester gasps.

“Oh, Caleb,” she says. “Molly will be delighted.”
The days grow warmer as Zashash starts to edge towards summer, and the lengthening days and higher temperatures bring with them yet more coursework for Caleb to mark. It shouldn’t catch him by surprise, seeing how he was the one who set it in the first place, but somehow he still finds himself caught off-balance by the speed at which the university year is approaching its end. The approaching deadline means exam script finalising, coursework marking, and a lot of student emails to answer, and by the time a week has passed since the double date with Jester and Fjord, Caleb has come to the annoying conclusion that he’s simply not going to be able to see Molly much until exam season finishes.

Still, that doesn’t mean he can’t text him.

Caleb’s not entirely sure how much his phone plan costs, what with how Nott keeps insisting that she’ll take care of it regardless of how much Caleb wants to help, but he just has to hope that it covers the truly ridiculous number of texts that he’s been exchanging with Molly over the last few weeks. Caleb’s never been much of a texter to begin with but he still feels that it’s telling how Molly is the first person he texts in the morning and the last person he texts at night. It’s not even just texts these days, either – they video call most days when they don’t get the chance to see each other in person, and ever since Nott showed him how to send images, Caleb has been sending Molly what feels like endless pictures of Frumpkin. Molly, in return, sends back pictures of the carnival, or something interesting that caught his eye, or selfies, or videos of him training topless that make Caleb’s mouth run dry. Those videos he saves.

But despite all that, texting and phone calls and video calls are still no substitute for seeing each other in person.

Caleb’s sitting in his office, elbow-deep in coursework marking, when his phone buzzes quietly from somewhere under a stack of papers. He pauses in his marking, glancing over in the general vicinity of where he thinks his phone might be, and as he watches a pile of paper vibrates again, knocking the top few sheets out of alignment.

It could be Nott.

It’s probably Molly.

Caleb smiles to himself, setting his pen down, and pushes the paper around until he unearths his phone.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Caleb darling!!!
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Jester wasn’t able to make practice today sooooooo I’m free today if you want to get lunch! -smiling tiefling emoji-
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] if not that’s fine, I know you’re very busy x
It’s rather ridiculous, Caleb thinks absently as he stares down at his phone, just how much a few short texts from Molly, from his *boyfriend*, can make him smile.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I would like that very much, Mollymauk :)
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -cat emoji-

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -cat emoji-

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Although, if it is alright, I might not eat anything.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Nott insisted that I eat a ‘proper breakfast’ this morning.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] that’s fine, love!
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’m assuming the ‘proper breakfast’ was the three course fry-up you mentioned earlier?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Ja, that was the one.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] She said I looked as if I wasn’t eating enough.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Even though you, and Bryce, and her have all been reminding me to eat lunch.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Which I do appreciate -blue heart emoji-

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -purple heart emoji-
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] is one a good time for you?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] One is excellent.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -smiling face tiefling emoji-
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] how do you feel about sitting in the yard instead of getting lunch? I can eat before I get there
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] !! I could show you my fire-spinning!

… Oh.

*Molly doesn’t know*, Caleb reminds himself quietly, even as he feels his lungs start to tighten at the mere suggestion that Molly has put forwards. *Molly does not know that I am afraid of fire.*

Molly doesn’t know, but he doesn’t know because Caleb hasn’t told him. Caleb cannot blame him for this – he cannot blame Molly for suggesting an activity that put would Caleb so close to the very thing that he is most afraid of. All he can do is politely decline, and try and think of something else that they can do, and tell himself that one day he will have to come clean to Molly about his fears. Caleb doubts that Molly will stop fire-spinning while he still works with the Carnival, and Caleb doesn’t *want* him to stop, either – it’s Molly hobby, and something that he’s very skilled at, if afternoons spent staring at him are anything to go by, and Caleb cannot ask him to give it up just because of some stupid *fear*.

Caleb clicks his phone awake, stares at the screen for a moment, and starts typing out a rejection.

And then he stops.

He trusts Molly. He doesn’t trust fire and he doesn’t like fire, but above all else he doesn’t trust *himself* with fire. But Molly is good. Molly is safe. Molly has been doing this for months, if not years, and Caleb trusts him. If Molly is confident in his abilities then Caleb will be confident in Molly. Molly is safe, and fire is not safe, but Caleb trusts Molly more than he mistrusts fire.
This will be okay.

Caleb takes a breath and types out his reply.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I would like that.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -grinning face tiefling emoji- wonderful!
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’ll see you at one -purple heart emoji- -cat emoji-

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I will see you at one, Mollymauk.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -blue heart emoji-

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -purple heart emoji-

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] You just sent that.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I know, but I wanted to send it again
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -purple heart emoji- -purple heart emoji- -purple heart emoji-

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] x

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :O x

Caleb smiles down at his phone for a few more seconds, watches as the screen grows dark, and then he flips the leather cover shut, places it to one side, and throws himself back into his marking.

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The knock at Caleb’s door comes at one pm sharp, and it comes as a bit of a surprise. Molly has swung by Caleb’s office a few times, but normally he has to text Caleb, or Caleb has to text Bryce, so that when he arrives there’s someone to let him into the keycard-locked building.

Not today, it seems.

“Bryce saw me outside,” Molly says by way of explanation, the moment the door opens and he sees the confused look on Caleb’s face. “They let me in.”

“Oh!” Caleb says, stepping aside to let Molly in. “That was nice of them.”

“It was. They also asked if I was here to take you to lunch.”

Caleb smiles, absently reaching out to settle his hands on Molly’s waist. “And what did you say?”

Molly shrugs, pushing the door shut behind himself before draping his arms over Caleb’s shoulders. “I told them that while lunch had definitely been discussed, you’d ultimately decided against it, and we were just going to go outside and get some good, healthy fresh air instead. Speaking of…” He leans in, pressing a quick kiss to Caleb’s lips. “You ready to go?”

Caleb kisses Molly back, taking a moment to enjoy his closeness before forcing himself to step back. “Mm, in a moment,” he replies, “I have- I would like to finish marking this assessment first.”

“That’s alright,” Molly says easily. “Do whatever you have to do, love – there’s no rush.” He smiles at Caleb, comfortable and confident in Caleb’s space, and Caleb smiles back. It’s nice seeing Molly here, in his office, in his life. It’s another reminder, one of many, that Molly doesn’t just exist as Caleb’s boyfriend, there to kiss and cuddle and hold him, but as Caleb’s friend, too. He is a feature in
Caleb’s life now, as much as his work is.

He’s important to Caleb, and sometimes, like now, Caleb remembers that he is important to Molly.

“Thank you,” he says. “I will just…” He gestures vaguely in the direction of his desk and the stacks of paper that adorn it, and Molly grins and pushes gently at his shoulder.

“Go on,” Molly says around a laugh. “Go do your professor-ing. I’ll keep myself distracted being nosy, if that’s alright with you.”

“That’s fine,” Caleb replies. He moves back to his desk, sitting down and picking up his pen even as he hears Molly drop his bag next to the door and start to rummage through his bookshelves again. It doesn’t take long for him to finish marking the assignment, only a couple of minutes, but the whole time he can hear the soft sounds of Molly moving around his office, and the rustle of Molly flicking through pages of Caleb’s books. They’re nice sounds, comforting in their domesticity.

Caleb thinks he could very easily get used to hearing them more often.

He smiles to himself, listening as Molly takes a seat on the floor, and turns his attention back to the assignment before him. He’s about half-way done already, and, thanks to the wonder that is requesting his students type all of their assignments, he doesn’t have to battle his way through impossible-to-read handwriting, meaning that only a few minutes later he’s setting his pen aside.

“Molly?” Caleb calls out, giving the paper a final glance over before adding it to one of the stacks on his desk. “I am ready to go now.”

“Marking’s all done?”

“Ja- well, this piece is.”

“Fantastic,” Molly says, and Caleb can hear the faint jingle of his jewellery as he stands up from where he was sat on the floor, leafing through one of Caleb’s books. “We can cut lunch a bit short if you need to get back to work, love.”

Caleb shakes his head, smiling as he stands from his chair and grabs his cardigan off the back of it. “No, no,” he says, “I need to get out of this office. It is- Nott says it is good for me to get outside. And besides, Bryce has become, uh, very insistent about me not staying in my office too long.”

Molly grins, swinging his bag onto his shoulder before opening the door for Caleb. “In that case, I shall do my best not to invoke Bryce’s wrath. Come on, Mr. Caleb.”

Caleb grins back at him and presses a quick kiss to Molly’s lips before they leave. Soon enough they’re both in the yard beneath Caleb’s office, Caleb sitting a healthy distance back as Molly slowly starts to spin fire around himself.

It’s mesmerising to watch. Caleb had thought that he’d know what it looked like, having observed Molly from his office window on a fairly regular basis for several months, but it’s entirely different close up. The fire seems alive around Molly, but for the first time that he can remember, Caleb isn’t unnerved by it. The fire is alive, yes, but it’s entirely under Molly’s control. There’s no hesitation in Molly’s movements, no uncertainty – with every step and twist and graceful, carefully executed spin it’s clear to see Molly’s mastery over the art.

Caleb thinks he could even grow to like fire, if it always looked like this.
“So,” Molly says, once it appears that he’s settled into a comfortable pattern, weaving fire around himself like he’s casting some sort of long, intricate spell. “How’s your day been, Caleb? Anything interesting happen? Anymore excellent department gossip you can share with me?”

Caleb pulls a face. “Nein,” he sighs, “Everything has been rather dull. We are all just marking right now, mostly.”

“Is it exam season already?”

“No, but it is coursework deadline season,” Caleb corrects. “I have a lot of very stressed students in my emails.” He pauses. “Well, I have about five very stressed students in my emails. I do not teach a very large class…”

Molly laughs, side-stepping effortlessly as he spins the fire behind himself. “Do you teach them Ancient Sylvan?”

Caleb makes a so-so gesture with one hand that Molly, still focused intently on the fire circling his body, doesn’t see. “A bit,” he says. “Sort of. We tend not to focus so much on the pronunciation of it
– that tends to be less important than the actual translation process. Although!” he adds brightly, “I do enjoy teaching new students a small piece. It is– it is a fun activity. If you are interested in ancient languages.”

Molly grins. “Do you now?”

“I do. It is always very enjoyable.”

“…That was me trying to get you to say it, if you didn’t notice.”

Caleb feels himself pinken. “Oh!” he says. “You’d, ah, you’d be interested in hearing it?”

“Caleb,” Molly says fondly, “I will always be interested in hearing you speak more Ancient Sylvan.”

Caleb remembers their double date. He remembers what Jester told him.

Caleb remembers how Molly reacted last time he spoke Ancient Sylvan to him.

Caleb feels his flush grow a bit darker, and he can’t help but smile to himself. He likes making Molly blush, and he likes speaking Ancient Sylvan. He sees no reason why the two can’t go hand-in-hand now. “Oh,” he says again. “Would you like to hear it now?”

Molly shoots him a glance. “Obviously.”

“I suppose I can do that,” Caleb says with a smile. “It is just, um, it is a small piece from some Ancient Sylvan wedding vows.” He pauses, quickly clearing his throat. After several years of teaching the passage to students he doesn’t have to think to hard about what he’s saying.

After all, he’s the one who translated it.

“3boq’oi co2 8wyqzgn 38,” he says, and watches as the fire around Molly wavers slightly. “5q 3zcqo[ivv’35’”

For a long moment, Molly says nothing. He continues to stare intently at the fire dancing around him, but in the light of it Caleb thinks he can see Molly’s cheeks darkening, and as he continues to watch Molly darts his tongue out, quickly licking his lips.

“Do you have any idea,” Molly says eventually, his voice just slightly hoarse, “just how hot you sound when speaking Ancient Sylvan?”


“I mean, if there was a scale from one to ten of ‘sounding hot when speaking an ancient language’, you’d be an eleven. Easily. Possibly a twelve.”

Caleb gives a small cough. “o2qo[53,” he says, just loud enough for Molly to hear. Thank you.

Molly laughs. “You see!” he says, “Exactly like- oh, shit, whoops.”

Time does not slow as Molly fumbles with his kit. It does not pause; the world does not go silent. Caleb watches as, mere metres before him, the fire that was once so perfectly and exactly under Molly’s control leaves his hands, leaving him desperately flailing for it, and kisses a tongue of flame to Molly’s arm. The fire touches to Molly’s skin, tracing along his arm like a lover, and in that moment Caleb’s mind goes dark.

He is back in his family home, eighteen years of age, and fire – his fire, Caleb’s fire – is climbing up
his parents’ legs as the house burns around them. He can hear the rafters cracking and splintering overhead, can hear the dull roar of the flame as it wraps him in an embrace and starts to devour his skin.

He can feel his shoulders and back itching where his flesh still remembers the touch of fire.

Caleb blinks, and the world reforms around him.

There is no burning house. There are no cries, or screams, or the desperate, terrified meows of Frumpkin, trapped in the kitchen. There is just grass and birdsong and Molly, quickly and calmly patting the fire out on his arm until it’s entirely extinguished.

“It’s alright,” Molly says, the words wrapped up in a laugh. “Don’t worry, Caleb, I’m fine.”

Caleb swallows, unable to draw his eyes from where the fire had, just for a moment, touched against Molly’s skin. “But, but you were-“

“I’m a tiefling,” Molly says. “We’re fire-resistant. I’m alright, Caleb. I’ve dropped my stuff a thousand times before.”

Caleb’s sure that he has, but Molly’s never dropped it in front of Caleb.

Molly’s never set himself on fire in front of Caleb, who still dreams of ashes and sparks and flames.

Caleb feels his hands shift in his lap and he glances down at them, twisting his fingers together and watching as the sunlight and residual flames dance shifting light over his skin. In his mind’s eye he watches the firelight brighten, growing sharper and stronger until it leaks out from under his skin, engulfing his hands in flames. He watches his hands shift, drawing the flame into his palm until he is cradling it.

Until he is wielding it.

This is his fire, his forte, his fault. This is his gift, this magic that churns amongst his blood, and he is responsible for it.

Caleb feels his breath start to come shorter. This is my fault, he thinks blankly. I did this. I caused Molly harm. I made this happen. He tries to draw in a breath and feels as though he doesn’t have lungs. There’s no air, no space and no oxygen and he can’t fucking breathe, he can’t breathe and he can’t focus and he can’t- he can’t- he can’t.

He can’t have a panic attack. He can’t have a panic attack, not in front of Molly, not when everything had been going so fucking well. Caleb draws in a breath as steadily as he can, feels it catch in the back of his throat, and forces it down into his lungs. He’s going to be fine. He’s going to be fine. He’s going to keep breathing, and he’s going to keep talking, and Molly will never have to know how, in the very back of his mind, Caleb can hear his parents screaming.

He’s not going to have a panic attack. He’s not. Caleb gathers up his thoughts as best he can, forcing them backwards in his skull, into the box and the chamber and the small, locked room that hold all his memories of fire, and he leaves them there.

And, just like that, Caleb isn’t there anymore.

Between one breath and the next he feels his mind shift and resettle. The fire is still burning behind his eyes, crawling along his hands and itching like a thousand spiders buried beneath his skin, but it no longer worries him. It no longer makes him feel like he can’t act, like he can’t think, like he can’t
breathe, like he can’t do anything but scratch desperately at his wrist until every spider-sensation is replaced by one that he himself made. He doesn’t feel any of that anymore.

He doesn’t feel anything.

He doesn’t think anything.

Caleb stares at the grass where a small ball of fire burns for a moment longer before Molly extinguishes it, and sees nothing at all.

“Caleb?” he hears Molly say through the wool in his ears. “Darling, are you alright?”

Yes. No. Caleb doesn’t know what he is. He doesn’t feel bad, but he also doesn’t feel alright. He definitely doesn’t feel alright. He just feels absent, like the whole world has gone monochrome and he has been left a silent monument in the middle of it. He feels not entirely there, like his mind has become untethered from his body to drift several feet above his head, and when he looks at Molly all he sees is flames.

“I’m fine,” Caleb hears himself say. Behind his eyes, the fire crawls along Molly’s skin, leaving soot and charred skin in its wake. “I- I am fine.”

“Forgive me for saying this, love, but you don’t seem fine.”

Caleb feels the words enter his mind and vanish like smoke. He doesn’t have a response for that. He doesn’t know how to respond to that. “I’m fine,” he says instead. It’s habit to answer like that. It’s routine. The instinct to answer however is necessary to deflect attention from him so that he can dissociate in peace is so strong that Caleb feels, in the strange way that he feels everything right now, that it might as well have been carved into his bones. “I’m fine,” he says again. “I’m fine.”

“Caleb…”

“I’m fine.” He drops a hand to his wrist, turning it to press a nail against his skin. The pain it produces against his wrist is good. The pain is sharp, clear like steel and ice and not at all like fire. Caleb shifts his hand, pressing the nail of his pinky finger to the side of his wrist instead. This pain is smaller, but it’s more focused. Caleb is able to follow it better as he drags his nail across his wrist, repeating the motion again and again until it feels like his entire being is centred on a few short inches of scratched skin.

“Caleb?” he hears Molly say. There’s a hint of motion in the corner of his eye, no more than a blur of purple, and then Caleb feels a hand wrap warm and gentle around his wrist, carefully tugging his searching nails away from his skin as Molly kneels down in front of him. “Caleb, love, can you hear me?”

“Ja,” Caleb replies unthinkingly. He can hear Molly. He knows he can hear Molly. He just doesn’t know if he’ll be able to follow anything that Molly’s saying. It’s all just sound to him now, leaving him operating and answering almost entirely on automatic, saying what he needs to say to make the sounds stop.

“Can you understand me?”

“Ja.”

“Can you say anything apart from ‘ja’?”

That’s a trickier question to answer. Caleb feels like he should know how to answer it – after all, he’s
aware that other words exist – but right now the ability to say anything apart from ‘ja’ seems beyond his grasp. He wants to say something, kind of. He wants to be able to open his mouth and assure Molly that he’s alright. But he’s not. And he can’t.

There are no other words in his head for him to choose from. There is no other answer that Caleb can give.

He holds ‘ja’ back behind his teeth, stares at the ink on Molly’s skin, and says nothing at all.

“Alright,” he hears Molly say. The word was more of a mutter, made blurry and vague by what Caleb thinks is worry colouring Molly’s voice. “Alright. Alright…” Molly nods to himself, the jewellery on his horns catching in the light, and the play of sunlight dancing on silver and gold is so distracting that Caleb barely even notices when Molly speaks again.

He does his best to force himself to pay attention, though. After all, Molly is speaking, and Molly is important. Caleb might not be entirely present, but he’s going to do his best to listen to Molly all the same.

Even if he can’t follow the words, Molly’s voice is very nice to listen to.

In front of him, Molly gives him a small, rather worried smile. “Alright. Caleb, I’m going to give you some ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. Or ‘ja’ or ‘nein’, if you’d prefer.”

Somehow, that makes Caleb smile. It’s a tiny thing, a miniscule thing, barely more than the faintest twitch of lips, but he can tell that Molly saw it because a moment later Molly gives a soft, relieved sigh, and presses a quick kiss to Caleb’s cheek. “Is that alright?” he asks quietly. “Just say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Or don’t say anything for ‘no’ if you can still only say ‘ja’. Are you following me?”

That’s a question, which means that Caleb has to answer it. “Ja.”

“Good, good. Now, just to make sure that that wasn’t you just saying the only word you can right now, I’m going to ask another question.” There’s a pause as Molly clears his throat, but Caleb barely acknowledges it. It still feels like half his mind is in his wrist, safe and warm beneath Molly’s touch. “Is my skin red?”

That’s another question, and it’s a stupid one. Caleb feels his nose wrinkle at it. He’s not annoyed, exactly, because he’s not exactly anything right now, but the question is stupid, and he feels like he should react accordingly. He goes to open his mouth and reply, but the word takes a while for him to say, the consonants of it feeling strange and heavy in his mouth for all that the word is in his mother tongue. “Nein.”

Across from him, Molly smiles a little bit more. “Good,” he says. “That’s very good, Caleb.”

Caleb opens his mouth again. He has more to say. “Lila. Nicht rot.”

“I don’t know what that means, Caleb.”

“… Lila,” he says again, more emphatically.

Molly frowns. “Lilac?”

“Ja. Lila.”

“… Are you trying to say that my skin is lilac? Or purple?”
Caleb nods. “Ja.”

Molly’s smile widens, and it’s beautiful. “Caleb,” he says, “That’s very sweet of you, darling.”

Caleb smiles back. He can’t help it. His brain is empty, and there is fire behind his eyes, but Molly is smiling at him, soft and gorgeous and just a little bit bashful, like he’s not quite sure how to react. Caleb wants to smile back at that. Caleb likes Molly’s smile. He likes how, right now, him smiling back at Molly makes Molly skim his thumb against Caleb’s wrist, right over where he had been scratching earlier.

Somehow, the gentle touch of Molly’s skin against his own is more grounding than Caleb’s scratches have ever been.

“How do you want me to get anyone?” Molly asks softly, still rubbing his thumb against the side of Caleb’s wrist, and Caleb shakes his head a little.

“No.” No. No, absolutely not. It’s bad enough that Molly has to see this – Caleb doesn’t need his other friends being dragged into it.

Alright,” Molly says quietly. “Do you want to stay here?”

Not with the memory of fire so close by. “Nein.”

“Do you want to go to your office?”

“Ja.”

Alright. Can I touch you? Beyond just your wrist, I mean.”

Of course he can. Molly is always welcome to touch him, no matter what. “Ja,” Caleb says quietly, and he turns his hand to catch Molly’s fingers with his own. The warmth of Molly’s skin beneath and against his own is comforting, grounding in a way that Caleb didn’t expect it to be.

Alright,” Molly says, gently squeezing his hand. “Caleb, I’m going to let go of your hand in a moment to grab your shoulders, alright? I’m going to stand you up and then I’m going to walk both of us to your office. Is that okay?”

“Ja,” Caleb starts, and then he frowns slightly. “You- your kit…”

Molly waves his free hand before settling it on Caleb’s shoulder, starting to stand and bringing Caleb with him. “I can get it later,” he says. “It’s not important right now.”

“Okay.”

Priority number one: get you inside, and get you comfortable.”

“Oh.” Caleb blinks at Molly, feeling as both of Molly’s hands wrap around his shoulders, keeping him upright as his balance gradually makes itself known. “Okay.”

Molly smiles at him. “Come on,” he says gently, and he drops an arm, wrapping it around Caleb’s waist instead. “Come on, love. Let’s get you inside.”

The walk to Caleb’s office helps. Moving helps. Caleb still isn’t entirely himself when they get there, still drifting somewhere roughly two feet to the left of what feels like his normal headspace, but he has a tether now. He has Molly’s hand warm around his wrist, Molly’s soft voice guiding him into the building, and up the stairs, and through the door to sit on the floor of his office. Within moments
of their arrival he has Molly’s coat draped around his body too, pressing grounding pressure along his shoulders and entirely enveloping him in the scent of Molly and comfort and safety, chasing the lingering memory-scents of fire and smoke and burning out of Caleb’s lungs. Caleb doesn’t think before he leans forwards, seeking out that same smell where he knows that it will be stronger still. Molly is sitting across from him, their knees touching, and in Caleb’s mind it makes perfect sense for him to reposition himself, lean in, and press his face to the warm curve of Molly’s neck.

“Hey,” Molly murmurs, sounding a little surprised. He doesn’t move for a moment, but after a few seconds his raises his arms, wrapping them around Caleb’s back. “Is this alright?”

Caleb hums. “Mm. Gut.” Very good, in fact. Molly’s arms are warm and heavy, and Caleb feels like they’re holding him together, slowly pulling him out of his fog-like fugue.

“Do you have any more words, darling? No pressure if you don’t.”

“I have… ja,” Caleb manages to say. Words are coming easier now. Thinking is coming easier now. He’s starting to feel like himself again. “I have words.”

“That’s good,” Molly says quietly. He ducks his head, pressing a kiss to the top of Caleb’s forehead, and Caleb feels the touch down to his bones. He feels safe. He feels protected.

He doesn’t feel afraid of the fire in the corners of his skull.

“I’m sorry I ruined our date,” Caleb mutters, the words half-muffled against Molly’s skin. He feels more than he hears Molly’s burst of surprised laughter, feeling the vibrations of it sinking into his bones. It feels nice.

“Darling,” Molly says, “You didn’t ruin our date. This wasn’t expected, but that doesn’t mean you ruined anything.”

“But we were- we were meant to get lunch.”

“Yeah, we were. And instead I ended up cuddling you in your office.” Molly’s shoulders rise in a shrug. “Admittedly, there’s fewer sandwiches here, and a distinct lack of Pumats, but cuddling you is still lovely, Caleb. Even if the circumstances were less than ideal.”

Caleb feels the corners of his lips twitch in a tiny, humourless smile. “The circumstances being me freaking out and then- and then dissociating?”

Molly laughs again, and there’s absolutely no meanness to it. “Exactly that. And besides, we decided that we weren’t going to get lunch, remember? On account of you having been subjected to Nott’s three-course fry-up?”

Oh. That’s right.

“So,” Molly continues, “Really we didn’t miss very much.”

“You missed your practice,” Caleb points out quietly.

Molly shrugs. “I can make up for it,” he says. “And I was hardly going to keep on practising after I’d set myself on fire and you’d dissociated.”

There’s a long pause.

“You should have,” Caleb mutters quietly, and Molly stills beneath him.
“No,” Molly says, his voice soft, and quiet, and absolutely certain. “No, I shouldn’t have, Caleb. Your health came first.”

“But you were the one who was- who…”

“And I’m fire-resistant,” Molly points out. “And you were clearly not doing so great, and what mattered then, and now, more than anything else, was making sure that you were okay. I can always practise later. I can’t leave your mental health after something like that until later. That’s not how this works.”

Caleb doesn’t know what to say to that. He doesn’t even know what to think. It’s too much of a bizarre concept for him – this knowledge that Molly prioritises Caleb’s health, physical and otherwise, over his own. Hells, even Caleb doesn’t do that.

He doesn’t, but maybe he should.

That feels like a thought for another time. That feels like a thought for when he’s not sitting on the floor of his office, bundled up in Molly’s coat after hearing his parents screams ring through his head again. Caleb swallows, feeling fire and soot threatening to rise up his throat again. He needs to keep himself distracted. He needs to keep himself occupied. He needs to keep himself in the moment and out of his own head.

Just before his eyes, Molly’s peacock tattoos glows green and teal and kingfisher-blue in the light streaming through the window.

Caleb draws in a breath, exhales, and tries to commit the exact shape of the peacock to memory, feather by feather.

“How are you so good at this?” Caleb murmurs, when a few long, silent moments have passed. “How do you know exactly what to say?”

Molly gives a short, humourless laugh. “Experience,” he says simply, and elaborates no further. Caleb doesn’t push. He feels tired, worn-out and exhausted down to his very bones, like he just clawed his way free from his burning home all over again, and he has no desire to make Molly uncomfortable with unwanted questions. If Molly had wanted to explain further, Caleb reasons, he would have. This is not his place to pry. Not now.

Caleb swallows, and he still tastes soot on the back of his tongue. It’s lessened now, overpowered by lavender and incense, and with Molly’s body pressed against his front and Molly’s arms wrapped around his back it’s that much easier for him to remind himself of where he is. To remind himself that he is not eighteen, and that he is not holding fire in his palms, and his family home is not burning around him.

The flames in Caleb’s skull flicker and fade a little, casting smaller shadows over the inside of his head. It’s alright, he tells himself, and commits the exact shape and position of another one of the peacock’s feathers to memory. I’m alright.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Molly asks what could be minutes or hours later. His hands are still running along Caleb’s back, smoothing over his coat as Caleb continues to trace the fine, dark lines of the peacock, losing himself to the warmth of Molly’s skin. Caleb shakes his head at the question. He doesn’t look up at Molly. He can’t. It is easier to look at the purple skin before him, and follow the lines of the peacock feathers with his eyes and fingertips, and bury his past deep in the back of his head.
It is easier to lie about his magic.

“Nein,” he whispers quietly, and feels guilt curdle his stomach. “I- nein, Molly. Not now…”

“Okay,” Molly says easily, ducking his head to press a kiss to Caleb’s forehead. “That’s alright, love.” There’s a whisper of motion, and then Caleb feels Molly brushing strands of hair out of his face, tucking what strands had come free of his ponytail back behind his ears. Molly doesn’t tilt Caleb’s head up but he does lean down a little more, pressing a matching pair of kisses to the tear tracks left on Caleb’s face.

*I don’t deserve this*, Caleb thinks to himself. *I don’t deserve this.* He doesn’t deserve any of this. He doesn’t deserve Molly’s kindness, and understanding, and gentleness. He doesn’t deserve Molly’s hands on his back, rubbing soothing patterns into his spine, and he doesn’t deserve Molly’s lips on his face, kissing away the dried salt, and he doesn’t deserve Molly’s voice, murmuring soft words in his ears and making Caleb feel like he is he beloved.

Making him feel like he is precious.

Caleb squeezes his eyes shut, presses his face to the curve of Molly’s neck, and wishes that the stain on his soul was gone.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I’m sorry, Mollymauk…”

When Molly replies, Caleb can hear the confused frown in his voice. “What for?”

“For not telling you why this happened.

“There’s nothing to apologise for, Caleb,” Molly says, and Caleb feels his heart squeeze at the open understanding in Molly’s voice. “This wasn’t your fault. I’m the one who dropped my kit.”

“But I- I…”

“Dissociated?” Molly offers quietly, and Caleb nods shamefully, hiding his face against Molly’s chest. “I’ve gotta say, that was rather scary, but that was partly because I wasn’t expecting it. And it’s not your fault. You couldn’t have stopped it from happening, darling.”

“I should have been able to,” Caleb mutters, and it’s only when Molly stills beneath him that he realises that he spoke the words aloud. “I should have been strong enough…”

“Oh, Caleb,” Molly says softly. He ducks his head, scattering a constellation of kisses across Caleb’s forehead and cheeks and lips, and somehow manages to hold him even closer. “It’s alright, my love. It’s alright. This has nothing to do with strength.”

Caleb winds his arms tighter around Molly’s body, pressing his face to Molly’s skin and doing his very best to breathe. “I should have- I should have warned you…”

“You had no way of knowing that I was going to drop my stuff, Caleb,” Molly points out simply. “It was just bad luck.”

“But I could have told you how I would react. I have known that you spin fire for a long time, Molly.”

“Caleb. You didn’t have to tell me anything.”

Caleb swallows. “I should have told you why,” he whispers, and feels hot shame prickling against
the back of his eyes.

Molly doesn’t stop holding him. Beneath Caleb’s ear Molly’s heart beats away strong and steady, with no hiccup or change to indicate that he is being anything less than absolutely open and honest. As if Caleb would doubt that.

As if Caleb would doubt Molly.

Molly hums softly for a moment, his thumbs skimming over Caleb’s spine. Caleb squeezes his eyes shut, pressing closer against Molly’s body even as his brain insists that he shouldn’t, that this is not for him, that he should keep his soot-blackened body as far from Molly as possible.

“Caleb?” Molly asks after a while.

“Mm?”

“Do you want to tell me? Why you reacted like this?”

Caleb opens his mouth to reply, and then quickly shuts it again. It should be an easy question to answer. It should be the easiest question to answer. It is not a question that Caleb has ever been asked outright before, but he knows that the answer should be ‘no’. The answer has always been ‘no’, ever since he- ever since he first became like this. He’s never wanted to share his past, not with Jester, or Bryce, or anyone at all outside of Nott. It has always been enough for them to just know that he is uncommonly wary around fire; they have never needed to know why before. They have never questioned it.

Molly has never questioned it, and he is not questioning it now. He is simply asking Caleb if he wants to tell Molly why he reacted so strongly.

And, for the first time since Nott, Caleb isn’t so sure what his answer is.

“I-“ he begins, and he has to break off immediately. “I… I don’t know.”

Molly hums again. “Do you want to tell me now?”

That’s an easy question to answer. “No.”

“Do you want to tell me later?”

That’s a much harder question for Caleb to answer. It’s a much harder question because he no longer knows what his answer is.

He’s never wanted to tell anyone before. He still doesn’t want to tell anyone now, but he wants Molly to know all the same. He wants Molly to know about his past, and about his fears, and the realisation of that want is terrifying. There’s years’ worth of compounded guilt and shame and self-hatred, all of it bottled up and tucked away safe and sound in the back of Caleb’s skull where only fire can touch it, and he is thinking of opening it up, and bringing it out into the light.

And he wants to.

He wants to show Molly every broken, twisted corner of himself. It is not a want that comes without fear – Caleb feels that would be impossible – but that it’s something he wants at all is a miracle in and of itself. He wants Molly to know. He wants Molly to understand. He wants to stop hiding his horrible, ugly past, wants to be as open and as honest with Molly as Molly has always been with him.
But he cannot speak about it now.

Caleb breathes in, and feels the incense and lavender of Molly’s skin settle inside his lungs like an embrace. It’s a familiar smell, a comforting smell; it does not chase the lingering flames from his mind but it dampens them, making them smaller in the crevices of Caleb’s skull. It smells like Molly, and like safety.

Caleb breathes, and breathes again, and finally brings himself to speak.

“I want to tell you,” he says softly, and surprises himself with how steady his voice is. “I- I want to tell you. But not- not now.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything now, Caleb,” Molly says quietly. “Or ever. You only have to tell me what you want, when you want. Whenever you feel comfortable. Whenever that is.”

Caleb squeezes his eyes shut. It’s too much. It’s too much. He has done too much, and ruined too much, and he does not deserve Molly’s kindness.

He does not deserve it, but something in his blood is telling him, for the first time in his life, that just maybe he does.

“Thank you,” Caleb whispers. “I- thank you, Mollymauk.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Caleb.”

“But I- you-“

“Caleb,” Molly says softly, cutting him off. “Darling. This wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t your fault, and you’re not to blame, and I’m just doing what any good boyfriend would do. I’m looking out for you, and making sure that you’re alright, because I care about you. I don’t need to be thanked for this. I want to make sure that you’re alright, dear heart.”

That’s not a pet name that Caleb has heard before, but he likes it. He likes it a lot. He likes dear heart, and he likes darling, but he thinks he likes boyfriend best of all. He likes being Molly’s boyfriend. It’s a silly thing, a tiny thing, but it still makes his heart feel warm, knowing that he is as much Molly’s as he could ever wish for Molly to be his.

Caleb presses himself impossibly closer to Molly’s chest, doing his very utmost to ignore whatever laws of physics exist to say that two bodies cannot become one, and sighs softly when Molly’s fingers return to brushing through his hair. Molly tugs the band free from Caleb’s ponytail when Caleb makes an assenting hum, and the soft, repetitive motions start to lull Caleb, gradually removing what remaining stress lingered in his body until he’s resting relaxed and boneless against Molly’s body.

“Caleb?” Molly asks quietly, several minutes later.

Caleb cracks one eye open. “Mm?”

“Is there anything else I can do to help?”

“Just… just hold me,” Caleb mumbles, feeling shame burn hot and bright beneath his skin. He should be better than this, he feels. It’s been fifteen years since the fire, and he’s still like this. He’s still like this, and he’s a grown man, and he should be better, he should be able to handle this on his own, he should be-
He should…

He should be allowed to have nice things.

This is a nice thing. Not the circumstances, obviously, but this; sitting on the floor of the office that he earned for himself, Molly’s coat a heavy, comforting weight around his shoulders and Molly’s arms warm around his back, feeling Molly’s heart drum away beneath his head. This is nice. This is good. This helps.

Molly wants him to be happy. Nott wants him to be happy. Jester and Bryce want him to be happy, and this helps with that. This makes Caleb feel better.

*I’m allowed to have this*, he tells himself, and feels some of the shame ebb. *This is allowed. This is alright.*

He feels fabric brush over him, and a moment later Molly presses his lips to Caleb’s cheek in a soft kiss.

“Allright,” Molly says quietly. “I can do that.”
Chapter 17

Caleb’s not sure how, but after the events of their rather disastrous fire-spinning date his relationship with Molly starts to feel… different. Not in a bad way, or even in a strange way - if anything it feels like some key component of it has shifted slightly, clicking into a position that it was meant to be in all along. It feels right. Caleb feels, impossibly, even more open with Molly now. He’s not ready to tell Molly every facet of his past, not yet, but simply knowing that he will tell Molly, that he wants to tell Molly, somehow makes everything feel… easier.

Molly saw the worst, flame-touched part of him, and he didn’t shy away from it. He embraced it, and he embraced Caleb, and he didn’t pry. Molly hasn’t asked any questions about what happened since either outright or in passing – he’s just been his normal, ostentatious, wonderful self, and with every day that passes Caleb feels a little closer to telling Molly everything. With every day he feels even happier.

He’s not the only one to notice Molly’s impact on his life. Nott has remarked on more than one occasion that Caleb seems happier, more prone to smiles and laughter, and even Bryce has made a small comment about how glad they are that Molly is around. It’s a little strange, knowing that Molly has affected his life to the point of his friends noticing it, but it’s also… nice.

It’s nice to know that Molly has become such a regular fixture in his life that even his friends recognise him. They’ve been on another double date with Fjord and Jester since the last one, much to Jester’s delight, and Caleb’s actually spoken to Yasha now, which was more than a little bit terrifying, but was somehow nice all the same. It’s nice to know that his friends care about this, and want to get to know Molly. It’s nice to know that Molly’s friends want to get to know him. It’s nice to lean into Molly’s side and listen to him chatting away with Nott in the safety and comfort of his own living room when Molly occasionally comes round to visit after work.

It’s nice to stand in his kitchen on a Saturday afternoon, washing his hands at the kitchen sink with Molly beside him as they both wait for Nott to return from the shops so that they can get on with baking.

“What did you say we’re making again?” Molly asks, leaning back against the counter and watching as Caleb dries his hands and meticulously rolls up his sleeves. One of the windows in the open living space is open, letting a late spring breeze drift through the room to play with the tiny charms adorning Molly’s ears and horns.

“Lemon drizzle cake,” Caleb replies. He finishes rolling up his sleeves and starts rummaging through his and Nott’s meagre collection of cookbooks, eventually finding the one that he’s looking for. “With- ah, here it is- with emphasis on the ‘lemon’. Nott has… she has the opposite of a sweet tooth.”

Molly raises an eyebrow. “A sour tooth?” he asks.

“Ja, you could certainly call it that. I’ve caught her eating lemons on their own before.”

There’s a pause.

“… Does she- does she peel them?” Molly asks, sounding a little bit horrified, and when Caleb nods solemnly he shudders. “I’ve never seen a peeled lemon before, but that just sounds wrong and completely unnatural.”
“They do look strange, but Nott seems to enjoy them,” Caleb replies simply, starting to rummage through the drawers and cupboards for the tins and mixing bowls he knows he’s going to need. Baking with Nott, he’s found, is always a… well, it could perhaps best be described as an experience. Caleb, by nature, likes to be precise and exact in his cooking. Nott, by nature, does not. The result, Jester has informed him before, is apparently quite fun to observe.

Caleb digs out what items he can from around the kitchen, accumulating everything on the kitchen island save for one thing. He glances up from where he’s crouched on the floor, peering into the depths of a cupboard in the hope that Nott had simply misplaced the mixing bowl, and abruptly realises that there’s still one cupboard left that he hasn’t checked.

The one that Molly is leaning against.

Caleb sighs, shuts the cupboard, rises to his feet, and crosses to Molly.

Molly smiles at him.

“Hello,” he says.

Caleb smiles back. “Hallo,” he replies. “I need you to move.”

Molly pouts. “Why?”

“You are in the way of the mixing bowl that I need.”

“Can you do without it? This part of the counter is very comfy to lean against.”

Caleb feels his smile widening. He leans in, placing a hand on the counter on either side of Molly’s waist. “No, I cannot do without it. I need you to move.”

Molly smirks. “Convince me.”

Well, that’s almost too easy.

Caleb leans in without a second though, pressing a kiss to Molly’s lips that quickly turns into another, and then another after that. He feels one of Molly’s hands shift, snaking behind him to settle on the small of his back and hold him in place against the tiefling’s front. Caleb doesn’t mind. He’s certainly not going to complain. He kisses Molly again, enjoying the simplicity of the action, and gently leans back, pressing one last kiss to Molly’s lips when Molly tilts his head to follow him.

“Are you convinced yet?” Caleb asks, smiling softly. Molly makes a thoughtful face, drumming his fingers against Caleb’s back as he pretends to think, his tail snaking loosely around Caleb’s ankle.

“Hmm,” he hums thoughtfully, before shaking his head. “No, not quite. If you wish to access the mixing bowl you must first pay the fee.”

Caleb raises an eyebrow. “And the fee is…?”

“Well, let’s put it this way – you’ve only paid half of it so far.”

“The fee is ten kisses?”

“…Yes.”

“You know,” Caleb says seriously, “That is a very steep price for access to a mixing bowl, Mr. Mollymauk.”
Molly hums again, wrapping both arms around Caleb’s waist. His fingers brush gently over the small
of Caleb’s back, making him shiver slightly despite the warmth of Molly’s body so close to his own.
“Well,” Molly says, “that depends on how badly you need the mixing bowl.”

“Quite badly,” Caleb replies. “Nott is going to be helping us to make this cake as soon as she gets
back with the lemons – I would not put it past her to go for your kneecaps if she finds out that you
have been hindering the process.”

“What is it with Nott and kneecaps?”

“As she likes to say, she is at perfect kneecap height. It makes sense that she would attack the part of
the body that is most accessible to her and that will also allow her to cripple her opponent.”

Molly narrows his eyes, leaning in to press his nose to Caleb’s. “You’ve spoken to her about this
before, haven’t you?”

“…Maybe.” Caleb can’t stop his smile, and after a moment he tilts his head and presses another kiss
to Molly’s lips.

“Six,” Molly mumbles.

“…Was?”

“That was kiss six. Out of ten. So no mixing bowl for you quite yet.”

Oh. Caleb huffs out a sigh at Molly’s smug expression, and presses three more kisses to his lips in
rapid succession.

“That only brings you to nine,” Molly murmurs, just as Caleb hears the front door to the flat slam
shut across the room. He smirks to himself, hearing Nott kick off her boots, and, feeling unusually
bold and adventurous, leans in to whisper in Molly’s ear.

“You will get kiss ten later,” he murmurs. “As I do not recall any condition that said the kisses have
to be on your lips.”

Beneath his hands, Caleb feels Molly grow still.

“Caleb,” Molly breathes, “What are you-”

“You will find out later,” Caleb interrupts, trying not to grin too widely, and with that he forces
himself to step away. He takes the opportunity to gently nudge Molly out of the way, ducking down
and finally retrieving the mixing bowl from the cupboard. He glances up at Molly as he pulls it out of
the cupboard, still settled on his knees on the cold kitchen floor, and when Molly swallows and darts
his tongue out to wet his lips, his tail twitching beside him, Caleb only smirks.

Oh, yes, he thinks to himself, rising to his feet as he hears Nott approach. This is going to be fun.

“I have lemons!” Nott says delightedly from behind him. Caleb turns, leaning back against the
counter next to Molly. Molly’s wraps an arm absently around his waist, and Caleb leans into the
touch with just as little conscious thought, watching as Nott approaches with a bag of lemons almost
as big as she is.

“Schatz,” Caleb says, a little concerned. “Did you- how many lemons did you get?”

“Lots,” Nott replies delightedly. She stretches up, attempting to deposit the bag on the countertop,
and Caleb reaches out to give her a hand. “I had to go to three different shops to get all of these!”

Caleb winces slightly as he takes the weight of the bag. It’s not particularly heavy, exactly, but it definitely weighs more than he was expecting. “Ja,” he mutters, twisting beneath Molly’s arm to put the bag down safely. “I can tell. You only needed to get three, though.”

“They were on sale.”

“Were they really?”

“…No. But it was cheaper to buy them by the bag! And this way I won’t have to buy any more for a long time, and we can have a really nice lemony cake.”

“Are all of those going in the cake?” Molly asks, sounding somewhere between horrified, fascinated, and impressed. Nott grins at him.

“As many as we can fit, yes,” she replies.

“What are you going to do with the leftovers?”

“Eat them.”

“We could make another cake,” Caleb suggests. “We could give it to Jester. She might like that.”

Nott pulls a face. “Jester says I make my cakes too lemony,” she says, clambering up onto the counter and starting to flip through the cookbook Caleb dug out earlier. “And I know that the recipe says that we need two lemons at most, but the recipe is wrong.”

“Nott scribbled out the lemon values,” Caleb whispers into Molly’s ear, both of them watching as Nott starts perusing the recipe. “And then she just wrote ‘lots’ over all the numbers.”

“…How many does she normally end up putting in the cake?”

“However many I fail to get away from her,” Caleb replies simply. “So anywhere from the suggested two to about nine.”

“Nine?”

“It was a very lemony cake,” Caleb says, and with that he just manages to stop himself from pressing a quick, absentminded kiss to Molly’s cheek, and steps away instead.

The baking, for the most part, goes smoothly. Caleb manages to sneak most of the lemons away from Nott, and Nott manages to sneak several of them back, but between himself and Molly they manage to make a four-lemon lemon drizzle cake, much to Caleb’s relief. Molly and Nott strike up conversation easily, arguing about some obscure thing or another as Caleb focuses on actually weighing and measuring ingredients, but it’s fun. He doesn’t mind doing most of the work, not when he gets to enjoy the company of his best friend and his boyfriend and hear them bickering playfully around him like this is always how it’s been. It feels like this is always how it’s been. It feels entirely right and entirely normal to pass Molly things to wash up as the cakes bake, and it feels entirely right and normal to hear Molly putting around putting things away as Caleb watches Nott squeeze what he considers far too much lemon juice into a mixing bowl.

“Caleb!” Nott says excitedly, pushing the bowl towards him. “Try the icing! Tell me what you think!”
Caleb shoots it a doubtful look. He’s not sure exactly how much lemon juice Nott managed to fit in it as he was rather distracted with distracting his boyfriend for much of the baking process, but he can see the lemon halves littering the countertop.

Nott seems to recognise his expression.

“It’s alright,” she assures him, “I know that you’re not as into lemons as I am, Caleb. There’s only three lemons in here.”

“…That is still a lot of lemons, Schatz.”

“Yeah, but it’s good!” Nott grins at him, snaggle-toothed and enthusiastic, and Caleb sighs.

“Do we have, um, do we have a spoon?” he mutters, quickly glancing around, but Nott waves a hand and holds the bowl in front of him again.

“Just use your finger. Your hands are clean anyway – it’ll be fine.”

“…Are you sure?”

“Just try it, Caleb.”

Caleb relents. He dips a finger into the icing for a taste and cautiously brings it to his lips.

“Oh!” he exclaims. “That is- that is very good, Nott.” That is not as sour as I expected it to be.

Nott grins at him. “I told you!” she says. “Molly, do you want to try some?”

Caleb doesn’t hear a response. He turns, looking over at Molly, and sees him standing beside an open cupboard where he’d been locating a cooling rack, silent and staring.

Staring at Caleb, and at the droplet of icing left on his lower lip.

Oh, Caleb thinks to himself. He darts his tongue out to wipe it away and doesn’t miss how Molly’s tail twitches beside him.

Oh. This could be fun.

“Nott,” he says innocently, looking back at her. “May I try some of the icing again?”

“Sure!” Nott doesn’t seem at all put-out by Molly’s lack of a reply to her question – she turns back to Caleb immediately, offering him the bowl, and Caleb quickly scoops up some more of the icing. He looks over the kitchen island at Molly, gives a slight smile, and slowly licks the sticky white icing off his finger.

Molly makes a small, strangled sound, his cheeks darkening, and drops the cooling rack. It hits the ground with a loud clatter, making Nott jump and swear loudly, but Caleb barely hears her. He’s too focused on trying to contain his delighted smirk as he finishes the last of the icing. He knows he’s not being subtle, and he doesn’t care one bit. It’s been fun, teasing Molly like this. It’s fun to watch the blush on Molly’s face grow and know that he made it happen. It’s fun to watch Molly staring at his ass and smirk knowingly at him when he catches his eye. It’s fun to try to wind Molly up.

And besides, it seems to be working. Molly only seems to grow more handsy as they ice the cake, and by the time it’s moved to a plate on the counter, Frumpkin silently observing the entire process, even Nott has noticed their closeness.

“I’m going to my room,” Nott announces loudly the moment the cake is settled, standing up on the counter and shooting a pointed look at Caleb and Molly. “Where I will listen to music. Lots of music.

Caleb frowns. “It is 5pm-”

“Goodnight, Caleb,” Nott says, more forcefully. She climbs off the counter, pats Caleb awkwardly on the knee as she passes him, and disappears into her bedroom without another word.

For a moment, silence rules the flat.

“Well,” Molly says after a few long seconds. “That was… pointed.”

“To be fair,” Caleb replies, “She has good reason.”

“Mm?”

“Your hand is still on my ass.”

“Oh! Do you want me to move it?”

Caleb contemplates this for a moment and then shakes his head, turning around so that Molly’s hand slides from his ass to his hip. He winds his arms around Molly’s shoulders, feeling a little more comfortable with open affection now that it’s just them in the room, and leans in as though he’s going to kiss him. Molly catches on immediately, shutting his eyes and tilting his head, his mouth falling open slightly, and Caleb waits until Molly’s lips are a hairs-breadth from his before he speaks.

“Let’s move to my room,” he whispers, feeling boldness race along his veins.

Molly blinks her eyes open. “Caleb?”

“Let’s move to my room,” Caleb repeats. “The cake can wait, ja?”

Caleb watches Molly’s eyes widen, understanding dawning in them almost instantly. “Oh!” Molly says. “Oh. Yes, let’s move. It’s much more comfortable in your room, love.”

“It is,” Caleb agrees, dropping his arms. “Could you… you go on ahead, Molly. I need to make sure that Frumpkin will not eat the cake.”

“Would he do that? Can cats eat cake?”

“He will certainly try,” Caleb replies, and he just manages to stop himself from automatically kissing Molly when he moves away. It’s been difficult to stop himself from kissing Molly all afternoon and it’s only getting harder now with the promise of being able to touch, and kiss, and feel Molly so soon, but Caleb restrains himself. He tries to settle himself as Molly leaves, watching his short skirt fluttering around his hips, and reminds himself that he has a plan. He has a plan, and he’s going to stick to it.

He quickly digs out an old biscuit tin, placing it upside-down over the cake, and is about to leave when he sees Frumpkin eyeing the covered cake with a look of distinct cattish malice.

“Frumpkin,” Caleb hisses. Frumpkin turns his head to look at him, giving a single long, slow blink. “If you do not knock the cake off the counter while Molly and I are gone, I will steal tuna from Nott’s stash for you.”

Frumpkin blinks again, but somehow this time it seems more understanding. Caleb reaches out, scratching Frumpkin quickly under the chin, and presses a quick kiss to the cat’s forehead.
“Thank you,” he whispers, and with that he turns, walks to his bedroom as fast as possible, shuts the door behind him, and is immediately struck dumb by the sight of Molly sprawled across his bed like he belongs there.

“Hello, love,” Molly says, grinning widely. “Hope you don’t mind that I made myself comfortable.”

“Uh, nein,” Caleb replies automatically, still staring. Molly smiles wider, stretching his arms up over his head, and Caleb swallows as he watches Molly’s shirt rise just enough to reveal a tantalising hint of purple skin. He wants to touch it. He wants to kiss it. He wants Molly.

“How do you want me?” Molly asks, and Caleb takes a moment just to stare before making a small, twitchy gesture with one hand.

“Could you—” he begins, and immediately cuts himself off to swallow. “Could you, um… could you take off your shirt?”

“You want to see me shirtless again?” Molly asks even as he complies, stripping out of his shirt with more flourish than is strictly necessary. “Why, Mr. Caleb, I might start to think you want something.”

Caleb huffs out a laugh, climbing onto the bed and moving to kneel astride Molly’s legs. He reaches out without even thinking, resting his fingertips lightly on Molly’s sides and trailing them lazily up and down Molly’s skin. “Do you really think so?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Molly confirms. He shivers a little beneath Caleb’s touch and Caleb’s gaze is drawn to the small metal bars running through Molly’s nipples, watching them shine in the soft light of his bedroom as Molly’s tail twists lazily through the air. “You know, I might even think that you were trying to proposition me.”

“And if I am?”

“I would tell you that I’m certainly not opposed to the idea.”

Caleb laughs again at that, still not moving his hands from Molly’s body. He runs them slowly over Molly’s torso, feeling the fine raised lines of the silver scars that pattern Molly’s chest. They’ve been a source of curiosity to him for some time now but he’s never felt the urge to ask Molly about them. If Molly wanted to tell him about them, if Molly was ready to tell Caleb about them, then Caleb knows that he would. It’s like his own scars – he does intend on telling Molly, on showing him the ruined skin that wraps around his shoulders and back, but not yet. Not today. Not now, when he has Molly stretched out beneath him, grinning and shirtless and beautiful. Caleb doesn’t want to tell Molly about his scars quite yet, but he wants to do so many things instead.

For starters, he wants to finally give Molly that tenth kiss.

But not quite yet. Caleb has other plans.

He leans in, inhaling the now-familiar scent of incense and lavender, and touches his tongue to the start of the peacock’s tail, right under Molly’s jaw. Molly gives a small gasp, his hands shifting to settle on Caleb’s waist, but he doesn’t complain or object as Caleb starts to move down his neck, licking and nipping but never quite kissing the ink beneath his lips. He mouths along Molly’s torso as he follows the peacock feathers down, tasting sweat and salt and lavender, but he never presses a true kiss to Molly’s skin. Molly squirms beneath his lips, writhing a little on the bed, and after a few moments of this Caleb reaches out and lays an arm flat across Molly’s hips, pinning him in place.

“Mollymauk,” he warns lowly, looking up at him. “Hold still. I am trying to count.”
Molly groans, flopping his head back against the pillow. “Why do you have to count?” he mutters. “What are you even counting?”

“I still have to give you that tenth kiss. As payment for the mixing bowl.”

“We can forget the mixing bowl, Caleb.”

“When could,” Caleb agrees, leaning down to mouth at where the peacock feathers curl around Molly’s hip. “Or, you could be good for me and hold still.” He looks up at Molly again, his lips brushing against Molly’s skin with every word. “Will you do that for me, Liebling? Will you behave?”

“…” What will happen if I say ‘no’?” Molly asks, but there’s a note of interest in his voice. “What happens then?”

Caleb sits up in answer. He doesn’t move away from Molly but he does lift his hands from Molly’s skin, settling them in his lap instead, and raises a pointed eyebrow.


“Thank you, Mollymauk,” Caleb replies. He places his hands back on Molly’s waist again and doesn’t miss how Molly shifts a little beneath his touch, trying to press up into his hands. He briefly considers mentioning how that doesn’t exactly fall under his request to ‘stay still,’ but he decides against it. He can give Molly some leeway. Besides, it’s nice – he likes feeling this clear, tangible reminder that, despite what worries still remain at the back of his head, he can know without a shadow of a doubt that Molly wants him just as much as he wants Molly.

Gods, he wants Molly so much.

Caleb continues working his way down Molly’s chest, sliding his hands over the fabric of Molly’s skirt until they settle on his thighs, feeling the warmth of Molly’s skin through his unusually muted leggings. Caleb is normally a fan of Molly’s leggings, enjoying the colours and the patterns and how tightly they cling to Molly’s frame, but today he wants them gone. He doesn’t want fabric beneath his hands. He wants to feel Molly’s skin, and Molly’s body, and he wants to taste all of it.

Caleb sighs out against Molly’s chest and laves his tongue over Molly’s nipple, flicking the small metal bar that runs through it. Molly gives a soft gasp that trails off into a whine when Caleb repeats the action, but as Caleb requested he doesn’t move.

“Mollymauk,” Caleb murmurs, and he slides his hands up Molly’s legs, running his hands along Molly’s thighs in time to the touches of his lips and tongue to Molly’s skin. “Liebling, you’re beautiful…”

“Caleb…”

Caleb hums quietly, feeling Molly tense beneath him when he mouths over his nipple again. He loves this, adores it – he loves being able to pull these responses out of Molly, loves knowing that he is allowed to touch Molly, loves knowing that this is good, and okay, and wanted.

He loves knowing that Molly wants him too.

He very nearly presses a kiss to Molly’s chest, but he just about manages to hold himself back. He’s still determined to draw this out, and he has a very specific place in mind to press the tenth kiss that he owes Molly. He moves his hands a little higher up Molly’s thighs, fingertips seeking out the waistband of his leggings.
“Wait- Caleb,” Molly says, suddenly sitting upright. Caleb leans back, confused, but all Molly does is quickly tug off his leggings, dropping them off the side of the bed before settling back into the pillows again with a grin. “I thought it’d be quicker if I did it,” he says. “And they were getting a little… restrictive.”

Caleb can see that. The folds of Molly’s skirt are not quite enough to hide the growing shape of his cock pressing up against them, the natural lay of the fabric distorted around it. Caleb skims his hands down Molly’s sides, enjoying the difference in textures as his fingers cross from warm skin to the silky-smooth material of Molly’s skirt. He pauses for a moment, deliberating as he looks down at it. Part of him wants to remove it, to see Molly in all his naked glory, but there’s something that feels distinctly dirty about blowing Molly under his skirt that send a shiver down Caleb’s spine, adding to the growing hardness between his legs. He thinks about rucking up that beautiful skirt, thinks about taking Molly’s cock into his mouth and blowing him until he’s whining, until he’s begging, until all he can do is tangle a hand in Caleb’s hair and hold on as Caleb gets him off, and-

Yeah, the skirt is staying. The skirt is definitely staying.

Caleb moves down lower, running his hands up Molly’s thighs and under his skirt, pushing the fabric up and out of the way. He’s excited now, more than he was before, and he has to adjust himself a little to relieve some of the pressure on his hardening cock as he nudge the fabric aside, smoothing it beneath his hands. He wants to see what Molly’s got on beneath the skirt. He wants to know what Molly decided would look good beneath his skirt and leggings. He wants to know what he gets to slide down Molly’s legs before he finally gets to blow him.

And then he has to stop and suck in a breath, because what he finds under the skirt is better than he ever could have imagined.

Molly doesn’t have any underwear on.

Oh, Gods above. Caleb’s not sure what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t this. He was maybe expecting lace again, or satin, or even just the soft, comfortable trunks he found beneath Molly’s shorts one day, but he wasn’t expecting nothing at all. He wasn’t expecting to come face to face with his boyfriend’s dick so quickly.

He doesn’t have an issue with it, though. Quite the opposite, in fact, because Caleb can already feel his mouth starting to water at the sight before him. There’s just the soft, lovely fabric of Molly’s skirt bunched up around his hips, and Molly’s gorgeous, peacock-inked purple skin, and Molly’s cock jutting out from between his legs, spade-tipped and ridged along the underside and beautiful.

Caleb swallows. He wants it in his mouth now. He wants it in his mouth yesterday. He wants so badly to lean forwards and taste Molly’s cock and see what other sounds he can pull out of Molly using nothing more than his lips and tongue; he wants to see how quickly he can take Molly apart and reduce him to a moaning, whining mess beneath him. He wants everything.

But tonight, he’s going to be patient. Tonight, he’s going to make Molly wait.

And that means neglecting Molly’s beautiful, beautiful cock, and instead turning his head to suck a mark into place on the soft skin of Molly’s inner thigh.

“Caleb,” Molly whines again. The tone of his voice suggests that he would be squirming but he isn’t, and when Caleb raises his head, leaving the new hickey lying dark and sullen against Molly’s skin, it’s to see Molly’s hands twisting tight in the sheets. “Caleb, please.”

Gods, but Caleb loves hearing Molly beg.
He smiles to himself, brushing his thumbs against Molly’s thighs above the fabric of his skirt, and finally takes pity on him.

“Ten,” he whispers, and he presses a kiss to the curving shaft of Molly’s cock. It’s a tiny touch but Molly gasps all the same, beautifully responsive beneath Caleb even as he complies with Caleb’s request to hold still. Caleb kisses his cock again, and then again after that, delighting in the sensation of the ribbed, textured underside pressing against his lips. He wants to taste it. He wants to feel it on his tongue and against the back of the throat. He wants to lean in, press his tongue to it, and see how much he can make Molly beg before even getting him in his mouth.

And so, because he knows he can, knows he is allowed to, he does.

Caleb presses his tongue to Molly’s cock and licks a stripe all the way up the underside. He feels Molly tense beneath him, a soft, shocked gasp leaving his lips as Caleb repeats the action. The ridges feel wonderful against his tongue, and Caleb soon learns that he can pull some really wonderful sounds out of Molly by pressing just the tip of his tongue to the underside of them, tracing the ladder pattern that they make on the underside of Molly’s cock. He likes the ridges. He likes the ridges a lot.

He thinks, one day, he may like to feel them inside him.

“We should-” Molly gasps as Caleb continues to run his tongue along the ridges of Molly’s cock as if he’s going to be examined on them later. “We- Caleb- condom.”

Oh.

That.

Caleb frowns to himself, reluctantly pulling away from Molly’s cock. He doesn’t want to stop licking Molly’s cock, drawing those beautiful little hitching gasps out of him, but he knows that this is important. He knows that this is something that they will have to talk about at some point.

“Are you- have you been checked?” Caleb asks, feeling himself turning scarlet but barrelling on all the same. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to ask of a sexual partner; he knows that. He and Molly have traded a fair few handjobs since the first one, but this is a new step for them. Caleb doesn’t want a condom in the way, though. He wants to taste Molly, and he wants to feel Molly, and he wants to learn every single ridge and bump and groove of Molly’s beautiful, gorgeous cock.

And if Molly is free from anything unpleasant, Caleb sees no reason why they would need a condom.

Above him, Molly blinks a few times.

“I- yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I got- I got tested not too long after we started dating. And-” He cuts off, shrugging. “And I haven’t been with anyone since then apart from you, so- yeah. Yeah, I’m good. Are you?”

Caleb nods. “It has- um, it has been a while.” A long while. A very long while. “But- yes. I am.”

“So… do you want to…?”

“I’d, um, I’d rather not,” Caleb admits softly, feeling his face burn. “I would, ah… I’d like to taste you, Mollymauk. If that is alright…”

“Caleb,” Molly says softly. Caleb looks back at him, making eye contact for all of a second before glancing away. “Trust me when I say that I have absolutely no issue with you not wanting to use a
“Oh,” Caleb says, blinking. “That is, um, that is- good. Okay.” He looks back down at Molly’s lap, where the shape of Molly’s cock is still clear and apparent even beneath the folds of his skirt, and swallows. “Okay,” he says again, more certainly. His hands are still on Molly’s thighs, thumbs still rubbing against Molly’s legs in absentminded circles, and this is- this is nice. This is very nice. Molly’s skirt is soft beneath Caleb’s hands, and it’s so easy to push it up again and give him free, unrestricted access to Molly’s cock. Caleb likes how Molly’s skirt feels against his skin and he loves how it looks rucked up around Molly’s waist. It’s colourful and a little bit uncommon and absolutely, entirely Molly, and Caleb adores it.

He adores this. He adores Molly.

He adores Molly, and he wants to make this as good for Molly as he possibly can. It has been a long, long time since Caleb last had a cock in his mouth – something that Jester had been very upset to learn when Caleb, rather drunk at a Girls’ Night, had told her many months ago – and he doesn’t want to accidentally do something that Molly doesn’t like. He doesn’t know Molly’s preferences, or what turns Molly on, and he’s determined to learn.

Caleb takes a moment longer to admire the sight before him, delighting in how flushed Molly is when he glances up to look at him, and then he crouches down, leans in, and starts to kiss along Molly’s thighs towards his cock. “Talk to me, Liebling,” he murmurs, beginning to press wet, open-mouthed kisses to the shaft of Molly’s cock. “Tell me what you like. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“C-Caleb,” Molly gasps and Caleb lets his eyes fall shut, focusing on nothing but Molly’s body beneath his tongue.

“Let me make this good for you,” he whispers. “I want you to feel good, Molly.”

“You’re- ah- you’re doing that already, darling.”

“I want to do more.”

Caleb hears Molly give a quiet groan above him, and without thinking he presses one last kiss to Molly’s shaft, moves his head, and finally, finally, takes Molly’s cock into his mouth. He knows that he’s sloppy and unskilled, and he doesn’t care at all. He trusts Molly. Molly will let him know what to do, and what to do better.

And, as if he could read Caleb’s mind, Molly speaks.

“Less- less speed,” he gasps out. “Take it- ngh- slower, please. And more- yeah, more focus on- on the- f-fuck!” His voice breaks off into a moan, his entire body twitching beneath Caleb as Caleb does exactly as Molly requested. Caleb can feel his own hardness making itself known and part of him is tempted to reach down and palm at himself through his trousers, but he doesn’t. He wants to focus on Molly, and only on Molly.

His own needs can wait.

He sucks at the head of Molly’s cock for a while longer, committing the shape of it to memory, and Molly moans again, his thighs tensing under Caleb’s hands. After a few long moments of this Caleb lifts his head, and when Molly gives a mournful whimper at the loss Caleb presses a consoling kiss to his thigh.
“Liebling,” he murmurs. “Be patient. I just wanted to ask what else I can do.”

“W-what?” Molly asks. He sounds wonderful – his voice is a little hoarse, his breath coming in pants, and even that one single word sounds absolutely drenched in want.

“What else?” Caleb repeats. “I want to know what makes you feel good, Molly.” I want to know what will make you scream.

For a while, Molly is silent. Caleb takes the opportunity to slide back down onto Molly’s cock, humming contentedly when he feels it settle heavy on his tongue, and it seems that the soft vibration was exactly what was needed to break Molly’s silence.

“That- that word,” Molly gasps, his voice breaking off into a quiet moan when Caleb swallows around his cock. “That- ngh- that Sylvan you called me a while ago. When- last time I stayed over.”

Caleb narrows his eyes. He’s very tempted to slide off Molly’s cock and remind him that it was Ancient Sylvan that he spoke, but the noises that Molly is making are much too beautiful for him to stop sucking Molly’s cock quite yet. Caleb figures he can let this one slide. For now.

“Can you,” Molly continues, “Could you- fuck me, Caleb, don’t stop- could you call me that a-again?”

Caleb has to lift his head up at that.

“Mollymauk,” he says, hearing the hoarseness in his own voice. “I can suck your cock, or I can talk to you in Ancient Sylvan, but I cannot do both at the same time.”

Molly groans, dropping his head back against the pillow. “Spoilsport,” he mutters.

“Human,” Caleb corrects.

“Spoilsport human.”

Caleb grins. He can hear the smile in Molly’s voice and knows exactly how it must look on his face. “I am a spoilsport human, ja,” he admits, “But I am also the spoilsport human who is currently sucking your cock.”

“Hey!” Molly pushes himself up onto his elbows, glaring down at Caleb in mock annoyance as his tail bats gently against the back of Caleb’s arm. Caleb just grins wider, ducking his head to innocently press a kiss to the shaft of Molly’s spit-slick cock.

“Mm?”

“Don’t- ah- I’m trying to be mad at you, love!” Molly objects, and Caleb hums and kisses his cock again before looking up at him. He likes looking at Molly at times like this. He likes how the light catches on the sweat on Molly’s face and chest, likes how Molly’s flush turns his lavender skin a darker, dusker shade. He likes listening to the song of Molly’s jewellery and the sounds of Molly’s gasps and moans and groans, and he likes knowing that he caused it.

He likes knowing that when Molly gasps again, one hand flailing and landing on Caleb’s head to card through his hair, it is because Caleb has taken just the tip of Molly’s cock into his mouth.

“I was- I was trying to say,” Molly continues, as Caleb continues to trace the spade-shaped head of
Molly’s cock with his tongue, making Molly tremble beneath him. “I was trying to say that— that if you get to be— ngh— if you get to be all pedantic and picky about semantics then I do too!”

Caleb glances up at Molly from between his eyelashes and raises an eyebrow.

“You- you said that you were the- f-fuck- the spoilsport human who was currently sucking my cock,” Molly elaborates. His breath is starting to come shorter now, his chest rising and falling faster as Caleb slowly works his way down Molly’s cock, savouring the weight of it on his tongue. “But you- you weren’t sucking my cock right then. So. Semantics.”

“Hm,” Caleb hums quietly, absently shutting his eyes as he runs his tongue along the ridges of Molly’s cock again. Normally he would be more than happy to argue semantics, but right now he has much, much more important things on his mind.

Like, apparently, speaking long-dead languages to get his boyfriend off.

“So, Ancient Sylvan?” he asks, lifting his head. Molly meets his gaze for a second before averting his eyes, looking almost flustered. It’s a strange look on him, and not one that Caleb thinks he’s seen much before. Especially not in the bedroom.

“I- I mean,” Molly says, swallowing. “I- yeah. It just- it sounds really hot when you speak it, Caleb. You know I think that. And I’m not going to lie – you speaking it when jerking me off was about the hottest thing that I’ve experienced in- well, for as long as I can remember.”

“Would you like that?” Caleb finds himself asking. He lowers his head, dropping kisses to the soft insides of Molly’s thighs, following the dark ink of the final few peacock feathers that curl around Molly’s hip and down over his leg. Molly gasps above him, his hand tightening briefly in Caleb’s hair, and Caleb kisses his thigh again, inhaling and tasting musk and Molly on the back of his throat. He wants to suck another mark there, leave a matching bruise to the one he placed amongst the feathers on Molly’s neck. “Would you like for me to talk to you in Ancient Sylvan, ⱴƽƺƈƾⱴ asylum…”

Molly shivers. “Y-yeah.”

“You don’t even know what I’m saying,” Caleb remarks quietly, ducking his head to nuzzle at the inside of Molly’s thigh and nipping at it gently. Molly’s hand tightens in Caleb’s hair again as the tiefling groans quietly, his tail starting to coil around Caleb’s wrist. “You do not even know what I’m calling you.”

“Honestly, love, I don’t care,” Molly says. “You can call me whatever you want.” He shudders again, precum gathering at the tip of his cock. Caleb lifts his head, touching his tongue to it and lapping it up without a second thought. It doesn’t taste great, but it doesn’t taste awful, and the reaction it elicits from Molly is more than worth it. Molly moans, his legs twitching beneath Caleb’s hands and his tail spasming around Caleb’s wrist, and Caleb marvels at how he can bring Molly apart with these soft, tiny touches.

“ⱴƽƺƈƾⱴ”, he murmurs again, “ƽǫⱴƽƺƈƾⱴȵ’ƺƾƫ…”

“Caleb-”

“Quiet, Liebling.” Caleb orders softly, the command falling from his lips without him even noticing. He shifts on the bed, pressing one last kiss to Molly’s beautiful thighs before starting to climb up towards him. Molly’s hand tightens a little in his hair but it is Caleb who leans in to press their open mouths together, and when Molly groans at the faint taste of himself on Caleb’s tongue Caleb only feels himself grow harder. “ⱴƽƺƈƾⱴƽǫ’ʒ3…” he says, pressing the words into Molly’s mouth and
letting him taste the shape of them. Molly whines, his free hand searching blindly until it settles on Caleb’s hip, clutching desperately. “50 3c0q0[6v35f…”

There’s a soft rustle of fabric and then suddenly Caleb feels Molly’s tail resettles around his ankle, winding tight as if searching for something to cling onto. Molly whimpers into Caleb’s mouth, hands twisting in Caleb’s shirt. “Caleb…”

"ƽ53C3,” Caleb murmurs, stroking a hand down Molly's side to curl it around his hip, so, so close to Molly’s leaking, spit-slick cock but not quite there yet. "My ƽ53C3."

Molly gasps beneath Caleb's touch, whining and arching up towards his hand. "Caleb,” he whines, "I'm- Caleb."

"Do you know what it means?” Caleb asks softly and he finally takes Molly's cock in his hand, stroking it in slow, lazy motions. Molly squirms beneath him, hips jerking up into Caleb's touch, and Caleb leans in and sucks a pattern of bruises onto the beautiful column of Molly's throat, making him gasp and moan in the silence of his bedroom. "ƽ53C3,” Caleb says again, "Do you know what it means?"

Molly thrashes his head. "I- fuck, Caleb, don't stop - you know I don't."

"Hmm,” Caleb hums and he swipes his thumb over the sensitive head of Molly's cock, making Molly moan brokenly. "It means whore."

Molly gasps. ‘It- what?’

“‘It means whore,” Caleb repeats, even as he feels worry and doubt start to settle heavy and cloying around his lungs. He told Jester what ƽ53C3 means. Jester told him that Molly would love it. Caleb has to trust Jester, and trust how well she knows Molly, and hope that Molly’s gasp was a good one. Thankfully, it only takes a second for his doubt to be dispelled.


“Do you like that?” Caleb asks quietly. He tilts his head, pressing small, soft kisses along Molly’s jaw, tracing the pattern of the peacock down his throat. “Do you like it when I call you ƽ53C3, Mollymauk?”

Caleb cannot see it but he can feel Molly nod, can hear it in the soft jingling of the chains hanging from his horns. “Y-yeah,” Molly says, his breath hitching when Caleb drops his hand from Molly’s cock to play gently with his balls. “Yeah, that’s- ngh- that’s- I like it, Caleb. I- I really- Caleb-”

Molly’s hand on Caleb’s hip spasms, his tail tightening around Caleb’s ankle when Caleb lifts his mouth from Molly’s neck.

“ƽ53C3,” he says quietly, just to watch Molly shudder and moan beneath him. “50 ƽ53C3 ƽv35f, Mollymauk.” He takes hold of Molly’s cock, stroking it in just the way that he knows now that Molly likes, and Molly’s throat tightens around a whine. “Gods, you’re beautiful…”

“Caleb,” Molly moans. He turns his head towards Caleb, eyes shut but mouth open, lips spit-shiny and swollen and so, so tempting. “Caleb, love, I’m- fuck- can you-”

“Say please,” Caleb instructs without thinking, and Molly doesn’t hesitate.

“Please kiss me, Caleb.”
How can Caleb deny Molly anything when he sounds that broken and desperate?

“ⱳ₅ⱳ₃Ђ,” Caleb murmurs, and he kisses Molly good and hot and deep, presses the shape of the word into his mouth and whispers it again, his hand working faster over Molly’s cock. “ⱳ₅ⱳ₃Ђ ⱳ₅ⱳ₃Ђ, my good ⱳ₅ⱳ₃Ђ, Gods, Molly, you’re so good for me…”

Molly moans. Caleb can feel his legs trembling, can feel Molly’s thrusts growing more erratic, and knows that he’s getting close. “Caleb,” Molly whimpers, the word almost inaudible over the sound of Caleb’s hand sliding swift and slick over his cock, and Caleb quietens him with a kiss, nips at his lip and at his jaw and soothes the sting away with his tongue.

“Molly,” he says softly, “Liebling. Can you be good for me?”

“Yes, Caleb, yes, always-”

“I want you to come only when I say so. Can you do that?” Caleb leans back from Molly’s throat in time to see Molly nodding desperately, his head flung back and his throat shining with sweat. In the dim light of Caleb’s bedside lamp the peacock curling down Molly’s neck and the snake coiled around his arm look almost alive.

“Mm, yes, yes, Caleb, I- please, I’m so close, I-”


“Caleb-”

“Quiet,” Caleb says again. The only noise in the apartment is the sound of his fist working over Molly’s cock; the sound of Molly’s panting breaths. “ⱳ₅ⱳ₃Ђ,” he says again, and hears Molly’s breath catch in his throat. “My ⱳ₅ⱳ₃Ђ, my whore… come for me.”

Molly does.

His whole body tenses beneath Caleb, his mouth open on a silent moan as he spills over Caleb’s fist. Caleb presses soft kisses to Molly’s throat and jaw, murmuring to him softly in Ancient Sylvan the whole time, and when he hears Molly give a soft whine he pulls his hand away, wiping it on his shirt without a second thought.

“Molly,” he murmurs, unable to hide his smile as he places a kiss at the corner of Molly’s mouth. “ⱳ₅ⱳ₃Ђ ⱳ₅ⱳ₃Ђ, you were so good…”

Molly turns his head, catching Caleb’s lips with his own in a fleeting kiss. “Yeah?” he asks.

“Mm,” Caleb hums, kissing Molly again. “Ja. You were wonderful.”

“Caleb?”

“Mm?”

“What does that mean?”

Caleb kisses Molly again, just because he can. “What does what mean?”

“What you just said. The Ancient Sylvan.”
Molly nods, leaning back just enough to see Caleb. His hands remain on Caleb’s waist, smoothing over his sides above his shirt, and Caleb shivers slightly. He’s still hard, his cock pressing up against the constricting fabric of his trousers, but he’s surprisingly unbothered by it. Molly got off. Molly felt good. Caleb made Molly feel good and now Molly is soft and comfortable before him, his pretty skirt lying rumbled around his hips and his come smeared across Caleb’s shirt.

“Yes,” Molly says. “That. I know that ƽǫ ƽƺƈƾ means whore, but I don’t know the rest of it.”

Caleb feels himself pinken. “It, um, it- it means- it means… ƽǫ ƽƺƈƾ means my good whore. Or my beautiful whore. ƽƺƈƾ has- it has a, um, a broad meaning. But it is generally translated to mean good, or beautiful, or favourite.”

Molly’s smile softens. “Am I your favourite whore?” he asks teasingly, but beneath the flirtatious tone in his voice there’s a hint of seriousness.

Caleb reaches out for Molly’s hand. “Molly,” he says softly, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. “You are very much my favourite.”

“Yes,” Molly says, his voice still uncharacteristically serious and soft. “You- you’re my favourite too, Caleb.”

Caleb doesn’t have any words to say in response to that, so he just kisses Molly again. He’s not accustomed to being anyone’s favourite. He’s not even accustomed to realising that people like him. This is- it’s strange, and unusual, and normally it would make Caleb feel like he has to bolt and run and hide, but coming from Molly, it’s somehow not too much. It doesn’t make Caleb feel uncertain, or afraid, or like he’s tricked Molly. It makes him feel-

“…It makes him feel beloved.”

Molly kisses him for a moment longer, trailing his tongue along Caleb’s lower lip before drawing back, letting Caleb’s soft whine fill the air between them.

“Come on,” he says softly, shuffling away from the pillows and patting them. “Come on, sit back. It’s my turn, love.”

“Oh!” Caleb says, feeling his blush darken. “That is- I mean, that is not necessary, Mollymauk.”

“Nonsense,” Molly says briskly. “You just sucked me off, talked dirty to me in Ancient Sylvan, and made me come. Boyfriend or not, it’s only polite that I return the favour.” He pauses, and then glances back at Caleb. “I mean… so long as you want me to. No pressure if you don’t, that’s absolutely fine, some people don’t-”

“Mollymauk,” Caleb interrupts, trying to fight his smile down from ‘ridiculously smitten’ to merely ‘extremely fond.’ “I am certainly not complaining. I am just saying that I do not mind if you would rather not, um…”

“Suck you off?” Molly finishes, and Caleb nods, still blushing around his smile.

“Ja. That.”

Molly smiles and leans in to press a kiss to Caleb’s lips. “Caleb,” he says, “I would be more than happy to blow you if you want me to. Would you like me to blow you?”
“…Yes, please.”

Molly grins and pats the pillows again. “I thought as much,” he says, shuffling back as Caleb awkwardly makes his way up the bed, adopting the same position that Molly was in earlier. He reaches down to unbutton his fly, stifling his groan when his hand ghosts over his aching cock, but then Molly’s fingers replace his own, tugging his boxers and trousers down just enough to draw his cock out, and Caleb let himself groan out loud.


Caleb wraps a hand around Molly’s horn, settles back against the pillows, and holds on for the ride.
To absolutely no-one’s surprise, Molly stays over that night. He and Caleb slink out of Caleb’s room when Nott loudly and clearly announces that it’s probably going to be time for dinner soon, her voice reaching through the bedroom door to where Caleb is contentedly reading a book, his head cushioned on Molly’s lap as Molly scrolls through his phone. The three of them make and eat dinner together, finishing it with slices of the lemon drizzle cake that Frumpkin had, thankfully, left alone on the kitchen counter, and then they spend the rest of the evening hanging out and chatting. Nott and Molly quickly end up in some heated discussion about the merits and crimes of pineapple on pizza, and Caleb is hard pressed not to laugh out loud throughout the entire thing.

All in all, it’s possibly one of the best days that Caleb can remember having. He is content, and happy, and he has his best friend and his boyfriend and his cat all under the same roof, interacting as if they have always known and had each other, and everything is wonderful.

Which just makes that night’s nightmare all the more unpleasant.

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Caleb has had enough nightmares in his life to recognise one when it starts. The details change from night to night but the story is always the same, like it was etched into the very pathways of his brain years upon years ago. He knows what will happen, and he knows what he will see, and he is powerless to stop it – a passenger in his own mind, watching the now-familiar path and waiting for what he knows will come next.

Molly stands before him, clad in some indeterminable clothes, and Caleb has his hand tangled with Molly’s, their fingers intertwining like lovers. The room they stand in is the living room of Caleb’s childhood home – he would recognise it anywhere, even after all the years that have passed. He knows the simple, time-worn furniture. He knows the photos that adorn the mantlepiece. He knows the framed letter that hangs above the fireplace, proclaiming Caleb’s acceptance into Ikathon’s academy.

He knows every inch of this space. Faintly he can hear the old grandfather clock ticking away like a metronome, with the slight mistiming between the *tick* and the *tock* that came from his father’s imperfect repair of it many years ago. He can hear the kettle singing in the other room, and the soft sounds of Frumpkin – the original Frumpkin, the first Frumpkin – padding around the kitchen one room over.

Caleb knows every inch of this room and every second of time that passes.

He knows exactly which day he is remembering.

Caleb feels Molly squeeze his hand gently and he looks down to where purple skin meets his own. The head of the snake inked around Molly’s arm looks to be kissing Caleb’s fingertips, the flowers
that surround it blooming bright and colourful, and then Caleb feels his magic shift beneath his skin, made sharp and angry by something that he pushed to a locked room in his mind many, many years ago, and suddenly the flowers are blooming red.

He cannot see them, but Caleb can feel sparks falling from his other hand. In his mind's eye he sees them hit the battered wooden floor, so immaculately swept by his mother only the previous day, and sink tongues of flame into the planks, gorging themselves on the wood until they are burning bright and livid. He can see no sparks from the hand that is wrapped around Molly’s, but he knows they are there all the same.

He can feel the fire that he is pressing to Molly’s skin.

“I’m sorry,” Caleb hears himself whisper. Molly doesn’t flinch beneath his touch, doesn’t pull away or cry out as the fire crosses from Caleb’s palms to Molly’s skin, feasting on the ink inlaid in it. The fire tears over Molly’s body, stealing away his colour – his tattoos vanish, consumed in flame, and the skin the fire leaves behind is soot-black, charred and coarse beneath Caleb’s touch. He tries to pull his hand from Molly’s skin but he can’t, he can’t move at all, he can’t do anything but watch as lavender and gold and green and blue become soot and ash beneath his fingers.

Molly turns his head to look at him, and his red eyes have turned gold in the light of the fire.

“I’m sorry,” Caleb whispers again. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” He can hear wood cracking and splintering around him, and he knows what comes next. He knows how the rafters shatter and fall. He knows how the floorboards come tumbling down, engulfed in flame, and knock him to the floor. He knows how this fire, this new, wild fire that is not the magic he holds in his hands, sears through his shirt and takes hold of his skin and flesh.

He knows all of it. He remembers all of it. He remembers the fire, and the pain, and the spark that caused it all.

He remembers what he did.

From above there comes to awful sound of tearing, rendering wood. Caleb squeezes his eyes shut but the image of Molly is still burned into the back of them, dancing across his shut eyelids as the house comes tumbling down around him.

And then Caleb wakes up, and he is no longer himself.

The room around him is dark and still, only the soft sounds of Molly’s sleep-slow breathing beside him breaking the otherwise silent space, and Caleb is sitting upright, feeling sweat cooling on his skin. He blinks in the darkness, feeling his heart start to settle in his chest, but there’s no fear chasing along his nerves, no anxiety.

There’s no anything.

I’ve dissociated, he says to himself, and does nothing at all. He knows that he should lie back down and try to go to sleep, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t feel any need to, any urge to. He’s content to sit in the dark, faintly feeling the warmth of Molly’s body against his thigh, and wait in the silence of his own head. He can hear himself breathing, can hear Molly breathing, and he soon finds himself matching his breaths to Molly’s, until there is only one sound ruling the room again.

Caleb sits in the moonlight for what could be hours. He doesn’t know – the perfect sense of time that he has had for all of his life is gone now, silenced in his mind by the fire that coils around the inside of his skull. He doesn’t know how long he sits and stares, unseeing, at the far wall. He doesn’t know
how long it is until he hears Molly stir besides him.

“Caleb?” he hears Molly murmur sleepily. There’s a rustle of sheets beside him and a few moments later he feels fingers skim over his shoulder, pressing faint warmth into his skin through the thin fabric of his pyjama top. “You alright, dear heart?”

Caleb hums softly. He doesn’t want to say the wrong thing and concern Molly. He doesn’t really want to do much of anything. In the shadows of his skull the brambles are held back by soot and smoke and furious, crackling fire.

He hears more than he sees Molly gradually sit up next to him, his actions slow and made heavy by sleep, and a moment later he feels one of Molly’s arms wrap around his waist, Molly’s hand pressing to the small of his back and starting to rub in small, regular circles. “Caleb,” Molly says again, sounding a little more awake and a little more uncertain. He stifles a yawn, turning his head to hide it in the crook of his elbow, but when he speaks again he sounds even more alert. “What woke you up? Are you okay?”

*I’m fine*, Caleb means to say, but what comes out is something entirely different.

“I saw you burning,” he says. The words are flat, practically inflectionless beneath his accent, and there’s no emotion to them, no weight. Molly grows still against his side, his hand faltering on Caleb’s back, but now that Caleb’s started speaking it’s so, so easy for him to continue. “I held fire in my hands, and I killed you with it.”

He hears Molly shocked inhale and only continues to stare directly ahead. He’s not there. He’s not present. He’s still lost somewhere in his past, watching the walls of his home turn red and orange and gold in the light of the fire that continues to consume Molly. In the light of *his* fire. He can still feel it now, coiled close and lovingly around his hands; beneath his skin his magic sings in a chorus of crackling flames.

“Caleb,” Molly says quietly. He sounds concerned and slightly unsettled, but Caleb can’t focus on that. He hears it, and he knows it, and he knows that he is worrying Molly, and it slides right across his mind. “Caleb, love, it’s alright. It was just a dream-”

*Nein,* Caleb interrupts. “I- I killed you.”

“You didn’t kill me, Caleb.” Caleb feels Molly reaching below the duvet and a moment later Molly’s hand wraps warm around Caleb’s, lifting it and pressing it to Molly’s chest. “See? I’m fine, and you’re fine, and you just had a nightmare. It’s alright. Come back to bed.”

“It was my fire.”

“It was just a dream, love. You don’t have fire.”

That’s… that’s not right.

He has fire. More than that; he has fire, and the fire has him. It’s pressed into his bones, sunk deep into the marrow, and the marks it has left on his soul and body are permanent. Caleb will have fire for as long as he lives whether he wants it or not, and he knows this.

Molly does not.

“Nothing is as destructive as fire is, Mollymauk,” Caleb says quietly, and he lifts his hand to hold it before his face. He pulls in a breath, holds it, releases it, and watches as a tiny flame flickers to life in his palm.
From beside him he hears Molly pull in a short, surprised breath. Caleb knows that he has never performed magic around Molly, knows that he has never even told Molly that he has magic. There had never been any cause to, any reason to, but in his post-nightmare state, his mind disconnected and his body numb, he can equally find no reason not to.

Caleb twists his hand and watches as the flame moves with it. Behind his eyes, he sees his childhood home engulfed and burning.

"Nothing is as destructive as fire is," he says again, quieter. "Nothing. All other types of magic, whatever they are; none of them come close to fire. It is too wild, too uncontrollable. It has one purpose and that purpose is to destroy, and burn, and consume." He flicks his fingers and the flames spread to devour his hand. In the corner of his vision he can see Molly’s purple skin turning dusky in the light of the fire; a horrific mirror of his nightmare.

In his blank, barely-there state, Caleb hardly dwells on it.

"Fire will consume anything.” He’s not talking to Molly anymore. “It will consume anything, and once it starts to consume you cannot stop it. It does not matter if it was an accident, if you did not mean it – the fire will feast anyway.” Through the wool in his ears he hears his parents screams.

"Maybe that is why fire likes me," he muses softly. "Because I, like fire, am a destructive thing."

"Caleb-"

"I killed them, Mollymauk," Caleb says softly. He doesn’t look at Molly, still staring at the flames dancing over his fingers. He twists his hand, watching as the firelight casts long, reaching shadows along his arm. It has been many, many years since Caleb last called fire to his palm, but it is familiar all the same. His magic, which has spent so long lying dormant beneath his skin, has finally been given the chance to stretch itself again and it is delighting in it. Caleb can feel his magic twisting along his veins, settling into place inside his arteries and breathing like a living thing, matching the flicker-twist of its arcane nature to the slow, steady beat of his heart.

This is his fire, his weapon.

This is who he is.

Caleb doesn’t notice as Molly grows still next to him. He doesn’t notice Molly’s hand tighten briefly on his arm, still so caught up in observing the flames he holds. "I killed them," he says again, quieter. There’s no emotion to the words, no weight – it is a fact, true and simple, and Caleb’s half-present mind can see no reason not to present it as such. It is a fact. It is true. Therefore, Caleb should say it how it is.

"Caleb," Molly says softly. There’s worry in his voice now, true and genuine concern, but Caleb doesn’t blink. He doesn’t care. "Who did- who did you kill?"

"My parents," Caleb replies. The fire in his hand flickers but his eyes never leave it, never seeing the monstrous shadows it casts around the edges of the room and at the periphery of his mind. “It was my fault.” It was his fault, and the scars around his shoulders are his brand to bear. “It happened because of me.”

He hears Molly draw in a long breath, hold it, and then slowly exhale.

“Alright,” Molly says quietly. “Alright. Okay. This is- this is fine. Okay.” He repeats the slow inhale-exhale process again, and Caleb follows along unthinkingly, still matching his breathing to Molly’s. “Alright. Caleb?”
“Mm?”

“It’s time for you to go back to sleep.”

“Mm.” Caleb hums again and closes his hand around the fire in his palm. It blinks out of existence immediately, his magic following his wishes like it’s a part of him because it is a part of him. Because it is his magic, and his fire, and he is it as much as it is him.

Caleb extinguishes his flame and stares out into the darkness. At the back of his skull, in a space hung about with smoke and soot and dying, smouldering embers, he remembers watching the ash fall like snow. Distantly he feels Molly’s hand settle on his shoulder and tug gently, but he doesn’t react. He’ll go to sleep eventually. He’ll go to sleep when it’s dark inside his head as well as outside it.

“Come on, Caleb,” Molly says softly. “Come on, love. You need your sleep.” He tugs gently at Caleb’s shoulder again and this time Caleb lets himself be moved, following Molly’s hand until he’s lying down in bed again. Molly takes a moment to throw the blankets back over them before snuggling back in, and he seems to fall asleep within seconds.

Caleb doesn’t know how long it takes for him to fall asleep. He doesn’t know how long he spends staring up at the ceiling listening to Molly’s soft, quiet breathing and watching the ash drift behind his eyes before sleep finally steals into his skull and takes him too.

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When Caleb wakes up he knows that it is nearly midday. The knowledge settles in his mind with the same certainty that it always has, telling him the hours from sunrise and the hours until sunset in the way that it has his entire life like nothing has changed at all.

But things have changed.

“Good morning,” says a voice. Caleb rolls over, following the warmth he can feel to one side, and blinks up at Mollymauk. Molly’s smiling at him softly, sitting up in bed with his phone held loosely in his hands, his chest nude save for the ink that adorns his skin. “Are you alright?”

Caleb blinks. “Ja,” he says. His voice sounds hoarse even to his own ears, and he clears his throat as he sits upright, leaning into Molly’s side without a moment’s thought. “I am- ja.”

“Are you sure?” Molly asks softly. He lifts an arm, looping it around Caleb’s shoulders, and draws him in closer, his nails running absently through Caleb’s sleep-mussed hair. “Just because, well…”

“I know,” Caleb says quietly. “I know. I remember.” He can’t remember how much exactly he told Molly, though, and it upsets him more than he thought it would. He’s not accustomed to this; to forgetting something so quickly. He’s aware that he told Molly something, that he said some words, but the exact nature of it escapes him, and the knowledge of that makes him feel itchy right down to his bones.

It feels like his mind has betrayed him, and he hates it.

“What- what time is it?” he asks. He thinks he knows, but now that he knows that he can’t even remember what happened last night he feels nervous again, starting to doubt this one skill that he’s had his entire life. “What time is it, Mollymauk?”

He hears a soft click as Molly wakes up his phone. “It’s about ten to twelve.”

That’s good. That’s very good. Even if he can’t remember exactly what he told Molly last night, the
bit of his brain that tells him what time it is is still functioning. He’s still himself. He’s alright. Caleb
breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth, and feels a little less nervous.

Next to him, Molly is still talking.

“I didn’t want to wake you up,” he’s saying quietly. His hand is still running through Caleb’s hair
slow and gentle, his nails scratching softly against Caleb’s scalp, and Caleb tilts his head into the
touch without a second thought. “You looked like you needed the sleep, after- yeah.”

Yeah.

“How much-” Caleb breaks off, taking a breath in an attempt to stop his voice from wavering any
more than it already is. “How much did I- how much did I say?” How much do you know?

“Not much,” Molly says, and Caleb turns his head to squint at him. He knows that Molly wouldn’t
lie to him but the worry that he said more, that he told Molly more than he was ready to, still clings
close around his mind. Molly catches his eye. “Really,” he says. “You- forgive me for saying this,
love, but you weren’t yourself. I didn’t want to ask too much. I didn’t want you telling me anything
that you wouldn’t normally.”

“Oh,” Caleb says quietly and he looks away. “Oh. That is- thank you.”

Molly shrugs, dropping his hand to start rubbing up and down along Caleb’s back. “It wouldn’t have
been right,” he says softly. “It- it wasn’t my place to ask. I told you a while ago that you never have
to tell me anything unless you want to, and the same is still true now. It wouldn’t have been right for
me to ask you then.”

Molly may not have asked anything, Caleb realises, but he saw. Caleb flexes his hand against his
thigh and his palm remembers the shape of the fire that it held.

“You saw my magic,” Caleb says, his voice little more than a whisper. “You- I- I remember that,
Mollymauk. You saw my magic.”

“Yeah,” Molly replies. His voice is just as quiet as Caleb’s and if anything it’s even more uncertain,
but despite the slight waver to it he never stops running his hand along Caleb’s back. “Yeah. I saw
it.”

“I’m- I’m sorry.”

“For what? For me seeing it?”

“No. For hiding it.”

“Oh.” Molly doesn’t say anything for a while and Caleb shuts his eyes, blotting out the world. He
doesn’t want to know what Molly is thinking. He doesn’t want to know how badly he fucked this
up. He doesn’t want to hear Molly chastise him for keeping secrets, and he doesn’t want to hear the
disappointment and distrust in Molly’s voice.

I don’t want to lose him, he thinks, and turns to press his face to Molly’s shoulder.

And then, from above him, he hears Molly speak.

“You don’t have to apologise for that, Caleb.”

Caleb frowns. “…Was?”
“You don’t have to apologise for not telling me about your magic, Caleb,” Molly repeats. He doesn’t sound angry. He doesn’t even sound annoyed. He sounds understanding, like he’s trying to comfort Caleb. “Especially – and forgive me if I’m making assumptions here, darling – especially not if you don’t use your magic because you react like- well, like what happened last night. It’s just a skill you happen to have. It’s like if you never told me that you could play piano.”

“…I cannot play the piano.”

Molly laughs softly. In the soft stillness of his bedroom the sound seems to hang like sunlight, briefly brightening the space in Caleb’s head. “Exactly!” Molly says. “That’s exactly what I mean! I didn’t know that before, and now I do. It doesn’t change who you are.”

“This is a little bit more than a musical instrument, Mollymauk…”

“Is it?”

“Ja. This is magic. My magic. My magic that I- I-” He cuts himself off, swallowing. He can’t remember what he said last night. He can’t remember how much Molly heard.

“Caleb?” Molly asks quietly. “Can I ask you something?”

That in itself is an unpleasant question. Caleb feels himself freeze, torn between turning Molly’s questions away and embracing the safety that he knows will exist in their absence, and trusting Molly enough to let him ask in the first place. Because he does trust Molly. He does. He knows from experience now that Molly never, ever, demands that Caleb answer. He knows that if Molly were to ask something that he didn’t want to answer then he wouldn’t have to, and that Molly would be fine with that.

He knows all of this, and so, after a few moments thought, he answers. “Ja.”

“Thank you,” Molly murmurs. “How much - you don’t have to answer this, love - how much magic can you do?”

There’s a long pause.

“I don’t know,” Caleb says eventually. His voice is small, soft and quiet, but he knows that Molly hears him all the same. “I don’t- I don’t know anymore, Mollymauk. It, um… it has been a long time.”

Molly clears his throat softly. “What you did last night…”

“I used to be able to do much more than that,” Caleb replies, answering Molly’s unasked question. “That was- that was minor, for me. A cantrip.” Cantrips can still kill, Caleb. “But since I- since-… I have not used magic in a long time, Mollymauk. Not in- not in a very long time.”

“Not since whatever you had the nightmare about?” It’s posed as a question but it doesn’t feel like one. Caleb’s memory of last night is fuzzy, the way it always is when he snaps out of disassociation, and he hates it. He hates not being able to rely on his memory, which is normally so good and so accurate. He hates not knowing what happened, and what he did, and what he said.

He hates not knowing how much Molly knows.

“I know I said something,” Caleb says quietly. With his face pressed to Molly’s neck he can’t see Molly’s reaction, and he’s fine with that. “Last night. I know I said something, but I can’t remember what. What did I say, Mollymauk?”
He feels Molly breathe slowly, and he tries to match his own breathing to it. Molly is so calm, so sure of himself. He was calm the first time Caleb dissociated, and he was calm last night, and he’s calm now. Caleb doesn’t know how he does it, but he wants to learn. He desperately wants to learn, if only so that he can keep his own mind calm for once in his life.

For a while, Molly is silent. Caleb continues to follow his breathing, losing track of time as he tracks Molly’s soft, steady inhales and exhales.

Eventually, Molly speaks.

“You told me that you killed your parents,” he says quietly. “And I- I didn’t want to push, or press, because it wasn’t my place and you weren’t yourself.” He pauses and then continues. “Admittedly, you did also say that you killed me, but that was in your dream.”

Caleb can hear the implication that Molly is leaving open for him to take. He can hear how Molly wants him to continue the sentence; he can hear Molly’s quiet ask for confirmation that it was only in his dream that Caleb killed his parents.

But Molly has never lied to Caleb. And so, Caleb will not lie to Molly.

“It wasn’t in my dream,” he whispers. “I- I didn’t kill them in my dream, Mollymauk. It was- that was real.”

Caleb only realises that Molly has stopped breathing when his own lungs start to ache. He pulls in a breath, hearing Molly do the same a split second later, and feels the brambles start to constrict around his mind. He can’t imagine what’s going on in Molly’s head, and he doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to know what Molly’s thinking.

Minutes pass before Molly speaks again. When he does, what he says catches Caleb completely off guard.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Molly asks quietly. There’s no judgement in his tone, but there is wariness. There’s wariness and concern and worry all jumbled up together, like Molly can’t quite decide if he wants to comfort Caleb or question him. “Do you- I mean, you know what I always say, there’s no pressure to answer, but do you want to talk about it? Because this is-” Molly draws in a breath, and as Caleb follows it he realises that he’s shaking. “This is important stuff, Caleb. This is- I care about you, a lot. You’re very important and dear to me, and I don’t want to pry where I shouldn’t. But this- this is…”

Caleb says nothing. Molly draws in a long breath, exhaling it in a trembling sigh.

“This I need to know about,” he says quietly. “You don’t have to tell me now, love, but… one day. I just- I need that promise from you, Caleb. That you’ll tell me.”

“I promise,” Caleb whispers. “I- I have wanted to tell you, Mollymauk, I promise, but I- I am-”

“You’re not ready,” Molly finishes for him, his words soft and understanding, and Caleb nods shamefully.


“That’s alright.” There’s a brief rustle of motion before Molly’s lips press to Caleb’s cheek, and Caleb thinks he can feel the touch of them right down to his marrow, drawing lightness into his
bones. It’s alright, he repeats to himself, and he lifts a hand to cover the touch of Molly’s lips, holding the kiss close against his skin. It’s alright. “That’s alright,” Molly murmurs again, an echo to Caleb’s thoughts. “It’s more than enough to know that you want to tell me, Caleb. I can wait. However long you need.”

Molly’s words are soft, and understanding, and gentle, and Caleb doesn’t know what to do. This is-it’s not- it’s not right. It’s not right. None of this is right. Molly shouldn’t be doing this.

He shouldn’t be giving Caleb this kindness.

“How do you not hate me?” Caleb whispers. He’s not crying – he’s too numb for that, too shocked, too encased in brambles to have space for crying. “How do you not hate me? I have told you nothing, Mollymauk. Nothing at all. And you are alright with that. I- I dissociated, and I told you that I killed-thought I killed my parents, and you are alright with that, with all of that, and I don’t understand how. I don’t understand how you do not hate me for this. For not- for not telling you.”

Molly’s response is instantaneous. “Because I care about you, Caleb,” he says quietly. His fingers are still running through Caleb’s hair, tucking loose strands behind his ears and playing with them gently like Caleb is something important and precious. “Because I care about you, and I trust you. If you say that you will tell me I know that you will.”

Caleb swallows damply. “But…”

“But what?”

Caleb presses his face closer to Molly’s neck. He shouldn’t have this. He knows that he shouldn’t have this. He shouldn’t have this affection, and this kindness. He shouldn’t have Molly’s hands in his hair and Molly’s shoulder beneath his cheek and he absolutely should not have any of Molly’s care and attention and comfort. It is not his. He has done nothing to deserve it, and he is only staining Molly’s soul with his own by being so close to him.

He presses in closer all the same.

“I am a garbage person,” he whispers quietly. “I am- I am a garbage person, Mollymauk. I deserve to be hated.”

Molly’s hand tightens in his hair, just for a moment. “Caleb…”

“I deserve to be hated, Mollymauk, for what I have done.”

For a long few moments Molly is entirely silent. Caleb feels the years-old guilt and shame curdling in his gut, staining him from the inside out, and for all its unpleasantness it is still a deeply, almost comfortingly familiar feeling. Caleb knows where he stands with it. He knows how it fits into his mind; he knows what the brambles feel like.

“Caleb?” Molly says abruptly. “Do you trust me?”

“Ja,” Caleb answers immediately. Of course I do.

“Will you trust me to judge if you’re garbage or not?”

I would trust you with anything, Caleb thinks, but does not say. He would trust Molly with anything, anything at all, but that’s not the problem here. If Molly says that he doesn’t think that Caleb is garbage then Caleb will believe him. He will believe that Molly does not think that he is garbage.
He will not believe it for himself. He cannot believe it for himself. Molly may know now that Caleb killed his parents, and that he has magic, but he does not know all the details of Caleb’s past.

*He is not an impartial party*, his mind whispers. *He does not know everything.* Molly doesn’t know how Caleb’s parents died, and he doesn’t know what Caleb is capable of, and he doesn’t know that Caleb never should have let himself get close to Molly in the first place.

But maybe, just maybe, Molly’s words will help anyway.

“I trust you,” Caleb says quietly. “But I- you don’t know what I did, Mollymauk. You don’t know how- how I killed them.”

“I don’t have to,” Molly replies immediately. “I know you, Caleb. I know the man you are. Whatever you did, however it happened – I don’t think it was on purpose. I don’t think it was intentional. And if, for whatever reason, it was-” Molly breaks off, swallowing audibly. “If it was intentional, I really, really hope that you had good reason.”

“It wasn’t intentional.” It wasn’t. Gods above, but the fire was the furthest thing from intentional that Caleb had ever done. “I promise you, Molly – the fire- the- my parents- it was an *accident*, it was-”

“Breathe,” Molly says softly, and it’s only then that Caleb realises that he’s on the edge of hyperventilating. “Breathe, Caleb. You’re alright, you’re okay…” Molly breathes in slowly, his chest shifting beneath Caleb’s body, and Caleb does his best to copy him as he exhales one long, steady breath and then repeats the process. It’s not quite the same as Caleb’s usual ‘inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth’ technique, but it still works. He can feel himself calming a little as his heart stops racing, the physical feeling feeding back into his mental state. “You’re alright,” Molly says again. “You’re alright.”

Caleb swallows. “I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I’m sorry, I- it was an accident, Molly, I promise.”

“It’s alright, dear heart,” Molly says. He shifts a little, pressing a scattering of kisses across Caleb’s face, to his cheeks and forehead and the corners of his lips. “You don’t have to defend yourself. I trust you. I know you. And the Caleb that I know, the Caleb that I- that I care about… he couldn’t have done something like that on purpose. The Caleb I know, who talks to Frumpkin when he doesn’t think anyone can hear him, and gets adorably excited about ancient languages, and likes to try and steal my body heat… that Caleb, *my* Caleb – he couldn’t have done something like that. If it had been intentional you wouldn’t be *you*, love.”

*I don’t deserve this*, Caleb thinks to himself even as he feels Molly’s words settle around his heart and head, wrapping light and warmth around the brambles that cling like oil to his thoughts. Molly turns his head, kissing Caleb on the forehead again.

“You wouldn’t be you,” he murmurs again. “I know you, dear heart. I know you, and Nott knows you, and Jester knows you, and Bryce knows you. We all know you. We all know who you are, and what kind of person you are. We don’t need to know your past to know that you’re a good man, Caleb.”

Caleb clears his throat. “Nott knows my past,” he says quietly. “She knows what I did.”

“And does Nott think that you’re a good person?”

“…”

“Caleb. You trust me, right?”
"Ja."

"You trust Nott?"

"Ja."

"Does Nott think that you’re a good person?"

Caleb swallows. "She does," he whispers, and feels the brambles withdraw slightly. "She- she knows everything."

"Do you believe Nott?"

That’s a much, much harder question for Caleb to answer. "I don’t- I don’t know."

"Would Nott lie to you?"

"Nein. Not about- not about this."

"So why do you not believe her?" The question is presented simply, quiet and gentle with no indication of any annoyance or frustration lying behind it. Caleb gives a soft sigh, feeling his lips brush against Molly’s skin, and slowly turns his head until he’s looking up at Molly.

"Because it doesn’t make sense," he says quietly. "Because I cannot have done what I have done and still be a good person. It doesn’t make any sense. So I cannot believe her. I should not be alive while my parents are dead, Molly. I should not be alive right now."

"Caleb," Molly says quietly, concern hanging on every syllable. Caleb presses his face to Molly’s shoulder again, not wanting to see the worry in his eyes. "Caleb, that’s… are you…?"

"I am fine," Caleb mutters. "I am- I am very happy to be alive, Mollymauk, I promise you that. I do not want to stop being alive."

"You just want your parents to also be alive?"

Caleb nods. "Ja," he says. "We should- it should be the other way around. I do not want to stop being here, but I should not have survived the fire. It was my fault."

"That’s survivor’s guilt, Caleb."


"You’re not a murderer."

"I am. I killed them, Mollymauk. That was me."

"You didn’t mean to. You didn’t intend to, love."

"But it happened anyway."

"Caleb," Molly says softly. Caleb raises his head and Molly tucks a finger under his chin, light enough and gentle enough that Caleb could pull away immediately if he wanted to. He doesn’t.

"Caleb," Molly repeats. "You’re a good man. You’re one of the best people that I know, and I adore
you. You’re not a murderer.” He leans in, pressing his lips to Caleb’s cheek in a kiss. “You deserve to have nice things,” he murmurs softly, and Caleb barely stops his breath from catching on a sob. “You deserve to have nice things.” Molly lets go of Caleb’s chin and Caleb immediately ducks his head again, tucking it against Molly’s shoulder.

*I love you*, he thinks absently, and immediately freezes.

This is no shocking revelation. Caleb turns the words over in his head, inspecting them from every angle, but there is nothing about them that feels new – they feel like they’ve always been in his head the same way it feels like Molly has always been in his life. He can feel them waiting on his tongue for him to say, entirely ready and entirely natural.

Caleb swallows the words down.

*I love you*, he wants to say. He squeezes his eyes tighter shut, winds his arms around Molly and holds on like he’s afraid that Molly might vanish if he hears the words in Caleb’s head. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

He can’t say that. He *can’t*. To say it now would be to finally admit to himself just how much Molly means to him, and how much it would hurt if Molly were to go. Caleb can’t tell Molly the three words waiting in his head. Not now. Not when Molly still doesn’t know everything. Not when there’s still the possibility that Caleb will tell him, and Molly will listen, and Molly will look at Caleb and see the awful, broken, shattered creature lying beneath his skin, and leave.

Caleb cannot risk that. He shouldn’t be allowed to love Molly. He shouldn’t be allowed any of this.

He takes the words, bundles them up nice and small, and sets them aside in his head. They are not his to have and to carry. They are not what he is allowed.

He is not allowed to love Mollymauk Tealeaf.

Not yet.

He breathes out a soft, quiet sigh, and after a moment he feels Molly’s hand settle in his hair again, running softly through the strands.

“Caleb?” Molly asks quietly.

Caleb tilts his head slightly. “Mm?”

“What do you want to do?”

Caleb frowns. He knows that he cannot mope around in bed all day, no matter how much he may want to. “I should- I should get up…”

“You should,” Molly agrees. “But do you *want* to?”

“… *Nein.*” Not even slightly. He doesn’t want to leave the warmth of Molly’s side and he doesn’t want to face the world in general. He feels safe next to Molly, in the security and comfort of his own room, and he knows that he has chores to do and tasks that need to be done, but he desperately doesn’t want to. Not now. Not for a while.

Molly gives a small, understanding hum. “Do you want to stay here and cuddle for a bit?”

“*Bitte.*”
“Alright,” Molly says quietly, briefly squeezing Caleb tighter. “We can definitely do that, love. You know I’m always up for cuddles. Do you want to read or do anything like that while we cuddle, though?”

Caleb clears his throat quietly. “Can you- can we just… talk? About anything?” *Not my nightmare. Not my past. Distract me.*

Molly seems to hear the unspoken words. “Sure,” he says easily. He shifts a little, half-turning to better face Caleb. “Did I ever tell you about the videos I found of a guy who makes knives out of things that would not normally be knives?”

Molly’s words are sufficiently bizarre that they cut through the remaining fog that still hangs around Caleb’s mind. He blinks, reaching for Molly’s hands without thinking as he processes the words. “He… what?”

“He makes knives out of things that probably shouldn’t be knives.”

“…Like what?”


“*Fish*?”

“Yeah! It’s a great video. He stabs a water bottle with it. Or it might have been a tin can.”

“Do you mean fish *bones*?” Caleb asks, wondering if he just misunderstood Molly’s Common despite being perfectly fluent in it. Molly grins and shakes his head.

“Nope,” he says, popping the ‘p’. “Just fish. He sharpens a fish.”

“…How do you sharpen a *fish*?”

Molly’s grin widens and he holds up his phone. “Want to see?”

“Of course I want to see.” Caleb would want to see the video under normal circumstances. Today, when his mind is still hanging in its post-nightmare state, desperate for anything that might stop him from thinking about his past and the fire and the magic that still murmurs beneath his skin, the video that Molly is suggesting sounds nothing short of marvellous.

“Excellent,” Molly says. “Give me a second.” He leans forwards and half-twists, grabbing up pillows from the bed and stacking them behind himself and Caleb to provide a comfortable backrest. It’s only once it’s done to his satisfaction that he holds an arm out to Caleb. “Cuddle in.”

Caleb doesn’t have to be told twice.

He settles into Molly’s side, tucked under his arm, and watches as, over the course of ten minutes, a man sharpens a fish into a knife and then stabs a tin can with it. It’s the perfect distraction. Molly is warm against his side, his hand curled protectively around Caleb’s hip, and the video is, despite its lack of music or narration, surprisingly engaging. It’s just enough for him to be able to pull his brain away from thoughts of fire without it being overwhelming, and by the time the video ends and they move onto the next one Caleb is feeling distinctly calmer.

“Molly?” he whispers, as on-screen the same man sets about creating a knife out of cardboard.
“Mm?”

“Thank you,” Caleb says, and he captures Molly’s lips in a kiss.
Chapter 19

The rest of the day is easier, somewhat. Molly has to leave eventually, responsibilities and prior commitments pulling him away from Caleb’s side, but he seems just as reluctant to leave as Caleb is to let him go. He wraps his jacket around Caleb’s shoulders before he departs, draping the pink satin around Caleb’s body and pressing a kiss to Caleb’s forehead as they stand at the door of Caleb’s bedroom.

“So you know that I’m close,” he says by way of explanation, his cheeks darkening. “So that- yeah.”

Caleb smiles a little. His head still doesn’t feel great, still hung about with lingering soot and smoke, but the jacket is warm and it smells like Molly. “Thank you,” he says quietly. He doesn’t put the jacket on properly, instead drawing it close about himself like a cloak and burrowing down into the soft lining, where the smell of lavender and incense is strongest. “You can borrow one of my cardigans to wear home, if you would like.”

Molly smiles back at him. “I would like that,” he says. “Can I borrow your blue one?”

“The one that I was wearing yesterday?”

“Yeah, that one. I like it. It’s very soft.”

“You only know that because you were using me as a pillow yesterday,” Caleb mutters, but there’s no venom in his voice as he crosses his room to grab the cardigan in question off the back of his chair. He shakes it out, holding it open for Molly, and Molly stares at Caleb for a bit before he catches on.

“Oh!” he says, the word morphing into a laugh. “Oh, alright.” He steps in, turning around to let Caleb slip the sleeves over his arms and smooth the fabric down over his back. The cardigan is a little too big on Molly but he doesn’t seem to mind in the slightest, pressing another kiss to Caleb’s lips when Caleb is satisfied with the drape of the fabric.

“Getting handsy, Mr. Caleb?” Molly asks teasingly as Caleb’s hands settle on his hips in the wake of the kiss. Caleb flushes, looking away.

“You know I like you in my clothes, Mollymauk…”


“No?”

“Not at all. I like you in mine too.”

Caleb smiles a little. “I am not sure that this jacket is quite my style, Molly.”

“Hmm, no, I suppose not,” Molly agrees, pressing a quick kiss to Caleb’s lips before he steps away to start moving towards the door. “But I like it on you all the same. It’s… call it a possessive streak.”

“Like the hickeys you like to give me?” Caleb asks, following after him and tugging the jacket on properly. It’s a surprisingly decent fit, considering the height difference between them, but he remembers it looking a little loose on Molly’s slender frame.

Molly snorts. “More like the hickeys you like to give me, love,” he replies, making Caleb flush a
little. “But, yes, I suppose so. Consider the jacket a socially-acceptable hickey.”

“I am sure that it will illicit less of a, ah, lewd reaction from Jester,” Caleb comments, watching as Molly bends down to start lacing up his boots. The cardigan he lent Molly doesn’t really go with the rest of his outfit, but, Molly being Molly, it seems to work all the same. It’s oversized on him, the age-softened fabric hanging loose around his frame, but it still looks entirely intentional, like Molly deliberately picked it out of his wardrobe to add to the rest of his outfit.

And it looks good.

Caleb has known that he likes seeing Molly in his clothes ever since Molly first borrowed some the night that he brought Frumpkin to the flat. Seeing Molly now, carefully rolling up the sleeves of Caleb’s cardigan before checking he has everything he needs in his pockets and bag, only reinforces that. Caleb likes Molly in his clothes. He really likes Molly in his clothes. He likes knowing that Molly is going to be walking around, going about his life, in something that belongs to Caleb.

Caleb smiles to himself. When Molly straightens up and opens the door, turning around on the doorstep to say goodbye to Caleb, Caleb doesn’t hesitate to lean in for a quick kiss, wrapping his arms around Molly in a tight hug.

“Hey,” Molly murmurs against his neck.

“Hallo,” Caleb murmurs back.

“…You going to let go so I can leave, love?”

Caleb pretends to think for a moment. “Hmm… no. I think not.” Not for a while. He feels so much better than he did that morning but there’s still anxiety settled deep in his bones. Molly helps with that. Molly helps with everything.

Against his neck, Molly gives a quiet laugh. “Fair enough,” he says, and holds Caleb tighter.

Molly holds Caleb for a long time at the door, his arms warm and solid around Caleb’s back and his face tucked against Caleb’s neck, making Caleb feel safe and encompassed for all that Molly is smaller than he is. It’s nice. It’s really nice. Caleb has long since calmed down from his nightmare and the morning’s aftermath of it, many hours having passed since then, but there’s still some remaining anxiety and worry murmuring at the back of his mind, snaking thorn-edged brambles around his brain for all that he feels entirely safe and comfortable in Molly’s arms.

Caleb takes a breath, feels the lavender and incense settle in his lungs, and pushes those thoughts back. He’s okay. He alright. He’s alright, and Molly is alright, and their relationship is alright. Their relationship is absolutely fine. Molly has expressed no annoyance at any of this, at any point – he’s only been gentle and caring and as loving as always, giving Caleb whatever attention and affection he needed over the course of the day to feel better.

It’s alright, Caleb tells himself, and he gently starts to lean out of the hug, pressing a kiss to Molly’s cheek almost without realising it. We’re alright.

He leans back entirely, his hands resting on Molly’s waist, and Molly smiles up at him. “You good?” Molly asks, and Caleb finds himself smiling back.

“Ja,” he says. “Ja, I am good.”

“Good.” Molly smiles wider, leaning up for a kiss that Caleb happily gives. “Bye, Caleb.”
“Goodbye, Molly. I will see you tomorrow?”

“You’ll see me tomorrow,” Molly promises, and he kisses Caleb one more time before leaving with a smile. Caleb watches him go, enjoying the way the light of the corridor shines off the gold bands on Molly’s tail, and shuts the door before heading back into the living room. He takes a seat on the couch, drawing the collar of Molly’s jacket up and smiling at the memory of what Molly said to him.

“Gods,” he mutters to himself, trying and failing to hide his love-struck smile. *I do not deserve Molly.*

He doesn’t deserve him, but he knows that he has him all the same. He has Molly, and Molly’s affection, and Molly’s jacket sitting warm around his shoulders, and Molly has every part of Caleb in return. Caleb hopes he knows that. He *wants* Molly to know that.

He spends a few more minutes on the couch, smiling to himself and generally acting like a smitten fool, before he hears the door of Nott’s room quietly creak open, followed by the sound of her softly padding footsteps.

“That jacket looks awful on you,” Nott says by way of greeting, flopping down on the couch next to Caleb and giving him a look. “I mean, *really* awful.”

“It’s Mollymauk’s,” Caleb protests quietly, still smiling.

Nott rolls her eyes. “*Of course* it’s Mollymauk’s,” she replies. “Caleb, I don’t think I’ve seen you wear anything that *wasn’t* a neutral colour in- well, in ever, honestly.”

“Hey!”

“I’m not saying that’s a bad thing!” Nott says quickly. “It’s a *good* thing! Neutral colours suit you! This-” she waves a hand at the jacket, encompassing every inch of its pink satin, silver embroidered surface, “-does *not* suit you. Not at all. It clashes *awfully* with your hair.”

“I know,” Caleb mutters. He *does* know. He has eyes, after all, and there’s a reason that he primarily wears neutral colours, beyond wanting to look bland enough to be unnoticeable. This jacket is the exact opposite of his style and it *really* doesn’t suit him at all. But it smells of Molly, and Molly gave it to him so that Caleb could feel close to him even when he isn’t at the flat, and as such Caleb doesn’t care one bit that the jacket looks terrible on him.

He likes it, and so he’s going to wear it.

“I know,” he says again. “But Molly- Molly let me borrow it.”

“Did you ask for it?” Nott asks cautiously, raising an eyebrow.

“*Nein.* He just gave it to me. After, um. After what happened last night. He thought it might help.”

“What happened last night?”

Caleb deliberates for a moment before answering. It would be so easy to lie, to tell Nott that she doesn’t want to know what happened last night, summoning his inner Jester to imply that something entirely different went down, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t enjoy lying to Nott. Nott deserves to know.

Caleb takes a breath and answers. “I had a nightmare again.”

“Oh?” Nott asks, and Caleb can tell the moment she realises the importance of that statement. “*Oh.*”

“Yeah.”
“Was Molly-”

“Mollymauk saw it, ja,” Caleb says. From next to him, he hears Nott draw in a quiet breath.

“Does he-” she starts, “Did- did you… did you tell him anything?”

Caleb nods. “Ja,” he says quietly. “I, um… I dissociated a bit, and I told him that I- that I killed my parents.” Even now, it feels strange to say it. There’s no doubt in Caleb’s head that Molly knows what he did, and that he understands it, but even after all the comfort, and care, and the day spent together that should surely prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Molly doesn’t think any differently of him in light of it, Caleb is still struggling to understand it. He’s still struggling to understand that Molly knows that he killed his parents, and that he doesn’t hate him for it.

It doesn’t make any sense. Molly should hate him. He should hate Caleb the same way that Nott should hate Caleb; the same way that Bryce should hate him, that Jester should hate him. The same way that *everyone* should hate Caleb.

And he doesn’t.

He knows what Caleb did, and he doesn’t hate him at all.

And Caleb doesn’t get it.

“Molly *knows*,” Caleb says softly, his voice cracking just a little. Nott scurries across the couch to him, clambering up into his lap without a moment’s thought and wrapping her small arms around him in a hug. “He knows now, Nott. He knows what I- what I did.”

Nott hugs him for a moment longer before sitting back. She reaches out, taking his hands in hers, and squeezes them gently. “And what did he say?” she asks, her tone carefully neutral.

Caleb takes a breath before replying. “He said- he said that I do not have to tell him any more now,” he says quietly, looking down into his lap at where his and Nott’s hands rest intertwined; a medley of pale and green skin. “I did not tell him- I did not tell him everything. Only that I- I…” He shuts his eyes, takes a breath, and then continues. “That I killed my parents,” he says softly. “And that is was an- an accident.”

“Does he know what the accident was?” Nott asks, her voice just as quiet.

Caleb shakes his head. “He doesn’t,” he says. “But he knows that I have magic, now.”

Nott, wisely, says nothing. She knows how Caleb is about his magic – she knows how significant it is that Molly now knows about it too. She knows that there are no questions she can ask.

Caleb breathes slowly, squeezes Nott’s hands, and then continues. “Molly- he woke up after I woke up from my nightmare,” he says quietly. “And I- I called fire to my hand. And Molly saw.”

“Did he do anything?”

Caleb shakes his head. “Nein,” he replies, and he can hear the wonder in his own voice. “He didn’t say or do anything. He just- he made sure I went back to bed, and in the morning, he let me bring it up first. He didn’t- he didn’t ask much at all, really. He didn’t mind that I didn’t tell him…”

“That’s good.”

“It is,” Caleb agrees. “It is- it is much more than I expected. He, um… he was very okay, actually.
About all of it.”

Almost too okay. Caleb knows that he is bad at reading people – he just doesn’t get social cues, and he doesn’t understand body language, and he’s suddenly struck by the realisation that, for all he knows, Molly could have been pretending.

Molly doesn’t lie to him; he knows that.

But that doesn’t mean he can’t act.

“Nott,” Caleb asks, suddenly overwhelmed with worry again. “Do you think- do you- does Molly still like me? After all that? It was- I know I am a garbage human, and Molly told me he disagrees, but-”

“Caleb,” Nott interrupts, leaning forwards and grabbing his face between her hands. “He just left an hour ago. He stayed with you all day, and he even gave you his jacket which, frankly, is disgusting and doesn’t suit you at all, and he told you that he’s okay with you not telling him everything yet. He’s okay with it, Caleb.”

“But what if-”

“Caleb,” Nott says again, her voice firmer. “He likes you. Trust me. He really does, Caleb. Even I can see that. Even Fjord can see that, and he knows nothing most of the time. It’s really incredible. He’s really smart but also so dumb at the same time, but even he can see this. It’s that obvious.”

“Molly liked me yesterday,” Caleb points out quietly. “Before- before this. He might not like me now.”

“Caleb,” Nott says flatly. “That’s ridiculous. That’s the brambles talking. You two were disgusting together yesterday, and you were disgusting together today. It’s gross. You are literally sitting here wearing his jacket, which he just gave to you without you asking, and he left the flat in one of your cardigans. That’s gross. That’s Jester-levels of romantic disgusting-ness. It’s going to give me cavities. And it clearly means that he likes you, a lot.”

Caleb feels a tiny smile start crawling across his face. Nott’s right. He knows that Nott is right. It’s just the brambles talking. You two were disgusting together yesterday, and you were disgusting together today. It’s gross. You are literally sitting here wearing his jacket, which he just gave to you without you asking, and he left the flat in one of your cardigans. That’s gross. That’s Jester-levels of romantic disgusting-ness. It’s going to give me cavities. And it clearly means that he likes you, a lot.”

“I think it’s a bit more than ‘care’, Caleb,” Nott replies knowingly.

Caleb frowns. “What do you mean?”

“He does more than just care about you, Caleb.”

“I know, we were just discussing that he likes me-”

“More than that, Caleb.”

“…What else is there?” Caleb asks. Nott shrugs, dropping her hands from his face and looking a little awkward.

“Well,” she says slowly. “There’s, y’know, there’s… well, there’s caring about someone, and then there’s caring about someone. And I think Molly is the second caring about you, and you’re the second caring about him.”
Caleb blinks. “…You just said the same word twice.”

“They’re different things.”

“But they are the same word-”

“Look, Caleb, if you don’t know then I can’t tell you what they mean,” Nott says, making Caleb frown a little. He feels that that’s hardly fair.

“Why not?”

“Because Molly should be the one to tell you,” she says with a shrug. “And you should be the one to tell him.”

“Tell him what?”

Nott gives him a small smile, and gently pats him on the knee before starting to climb off the sofa. “You’ll figure it out soon enough,” she says cryptically. “Now, I have to go text Jester.”

“Nott,” Caleb says, watching as Nott starts to leave the room. “Nott! What does ‘caring’ mean other than caring?”

“I can’t tell you!” Nott calls back. “But you’ll find out! Or you’d better – I have a bet going on!”

“With who?”

“You’ll find out!” Nott tells him again, and with that she disappears into her room, closing the door behind her.

Well. That’s just great.

Caleb glares at Nott’s shut door for a few moments longer before flopping back against the sofa, dropping his head back with a sigh. He hears the soft step of paws and feels the sofa dip suddenly as Frumpkin jumps up besides him, stepping onto his lap.

“Hallo, Frumpkin,” Caleb says absently. He reaches out, scratching the cat gently under the chin, and Frumpkin immediately starts purring. “I don’t suppose you know what ‘cares’ means?”

Frumpkin purrs louder.

“No,” Caleb sighs, “I thought not. I don’t know either.” He pauses. “…Do you think Molly will know what Nott means?”

There’s no response from the cat in his lap. Caleb takes his hand away, hoping that it will elicit some sort of reaction from Frumpkin, but all Frumpkin does is give Caleb such a look that Caleb immediately starts petting him again.

“Maybe Nott is right,” he mutters, starting to fish his phone out of his pocket. “Maybe you are a fey cat.”

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Nott is being very cryptic today. She says that you ‘care’ about me, but she does not mean ‘care’. [unsent]

Caleb stares down at his phone, chewing his lip. He feels like that might be too much, somehow. He doesn’t know what Nott means about Molly ‘caring’ about him, not in the slightest, but something about her tone makes him think that if he were to discuss this with Molly, he shouldn’t mention Nott
in his message. Nott said that Molly should be the one to tell him.

Caleb deletes the text. He still wants to text Molly, though, and after a moment’s thought he sends a different message. Molly’s reply is almost instantaneous.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I don’t think I ever properly did this earlier, but thank you, Mollymauk.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] what for?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] For comforting me. You helped a lot.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I do not normally calm down so fast.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] So, thank you.

After a moment’s contemplation Caleb sends another text.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] x -blue heart emoji-

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] -purple heart emoji- -purple heart emoji- -cat emoji-
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] of course, Caleb
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I wanted to make sure you were ok. I was really worried about you
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I’m glad you’re okay now <3 xxx

Caleb feels something in his heart squeeze. He wants to type something. He wants to send Molly something – a little text of three short words.

He wants Molly to know.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I love you [unsent]

Caleb looks down at the phone in his hands, and slowly deletes the last message. He can’t send that. Not yet.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I really appreciate it, Mollymauk.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Caleb?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Ja?

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] why do you still call me Mollymauk sometimes?

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] …I don’t know.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I like how it sounds. It sounds nice.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I like calling you ‘Mollymauk’ over text.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I can stop calling you ‘Mollymauk’ if you prefer, though.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] no! no, you can absolutely keep calling me Mollymauk whenever you like
[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] I was just curious <3

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Very well, Mollymauk.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] <3

Caleb smiles to himself. He’s alright, and Molly is alright, and they’re fine. Their relationship is fine.
Hell, scratch that – their relationship is stronger than ever. Caleb feels so close now to actually telling Molly everything, every last bit of his past. He doesn’t feel afraid about it, doesn’t feel uncertain – he just feels like he’s waiting for something, for some good opportunity to arise for him to tell Molly everything.

In his hand, his phone buzzes one more time.

[From: Mollymauk Tealeaf] x

Caleb smiles a little wider and sends his reply without even thinking.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] x

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The week passes in a blur of meetings, research, texts with Molly, countless emails, and putting together a revision pack for a group of very keen, but extraordinarily stressed students. Caleb barely even realises when the weekend rolls around again – it’s only when he catches himself halfway out of the front door, rubbing sleep from his eyes, that he realises that his phone alarm telling him stop texting Molly and leave now or risk missing the bus hasn’t gone off, and isn’t due to go off for another two days.

Really, Caleb thinks as he steps back inside the flat, it was only thanks to Molly’s lack of a response to his now-normal ‘good morning’ text that he even left the flat on time, or what would be on time if it wasn’t Saturday. The lack of a response is a clue in and of itself that it’s the weekend; as Caleb knows by now, Molly very much considers weekend mornings to be a sacred time for lie-ins and extra sleep. He’s not as early a riser as Caleb is, but he still gets up at around 7am-ish on most weekdays. On the weekends, though, it’s an entirely different story. The weekends are the days that Caleb occasionally gets morning selfies from Molly, showing him soft and relaxed and sleep-mussed and comfortable, his hair messed up and his horns jewellery-free. The selfies are, quite possibly, one of Caleb’s favourite parts of the weekend.

And, now that he knows it’s Saturday, Caleb knows that he might just get another sleepy selfie from Molly.

He smiles to himself, returns to his bedroom, and goes about his day.

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Caleb texts Molly again when he has lunch. He sees when he opens their conversation that Molly hasn’t yet seen his earlier message, but he doesn’t think anything of it. Molly has a job and life as well. He has friends to hang out with and things to do. This silence is a little uncommon, but it’s happened before. For all Caleb knows, Molly could just be having a very long lie-in.

And if that’s the case, then Caleb very much hopes that Molly enjoys his next few texts when he wakes up.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] [image attached]
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Look!
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] Nott told me that this is called a ‘blep’. Frumpkin is doing a blep.
[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] :p Like that!

From the other end of the dining table, Frumpkin gives Caleb an extremely unimpressed look.
Caleb, in return, takes another picture of Frumpkin, and sends that too.

**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] [image attached]**
**[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf]** Frumpkin does not approve of me showing you his blep. He is very disapproving.

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Molly doesn’t reply.

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That afternoon, Caleb texts Molly a particularly amusing typo that he found in a journal he’s reading. He knows it’s silly, and he knows that it’s a particular branch of etymology-based humour that Molly probably won’t get in the slightest, but he sends it anyway. It’s funny, and Molly seems to really enjoy Caleb teaching him more about his subject and field of expertise, and the last time that Caleb had sent Molly something like this, Molly had been delighted to learn exactly *why* Caleb found it so amusing.

Molly doesn’t see the picture.

Molly doesn’t reply.

Molly doesn’t see any of Caleb’s messages as the day goes on. He doesn’t see the small, absent-minded messages that Caleb sends his way, and he doesn’t see the picture Caleb sends him of a cake decorated to look like a peacock that reminded him of Molly, and Molly doesn’t send any messages of his own back. Caleb would be lying if he said that it didn’t worry him. Molly always replies to his texts. He might reply slowly, or he might reply late, or he might not reply for half a day at a time, but he always lets Caleb know *why*. If he has an upcoming rehearsal or performance that means that he’ll be out of contact all day, he lets Caleb know in advance. If something comes up that means that he won’t be able to reply until much later, he lets Caleb know as soon as possible.

Molly knows how much of a worrier Caleb is, and he does what he can to help.

He doesn’t do something like this.

By the time that Nott calls Caleb out of his room for dinner, Caleb has entirely given up on trying to work on his thesis. He’s stressed, and anxious, and the moment he sits down his leg starts jittering, bouncing beneath the table in a subconscious attempt to get rid of some of the nervous energy that’s playing along his nerves. Caleb eats dinner distractedly, checking his phone the whole time. He’s given up on messaging Molly by now, knowing that he’s sent more than enough texts to let Molly know that he’s been thinking of him. The itch to text Molly again, to see if *this* message will finally be the one that makes him reply is still persistent at the back of his head, but Caleb does his best to ignore it. There’s no point in texting Molly again. There’s no point. All he can do is check, and wait, and hope that, at the very least, Molly sees his messages. He tries to be subtle as he eats dinner across from Nott, discreetly checking his phone under the table, but he’s barely halfway through his plate before Nott sighs loudly, drops her handful of food, and speaks up.

“Caleb,” she says, “Caleb.”

“Mm?”

“Caleb. Look at me.”

Caleb does. He regretfully turns his phone screen off again but he doesn’t put it away, fidgeting with
“Are you alright?” she asks quietly. “You seem distracted.”

“I’m— I’m fine,” Caleb wants to say, but doesn’t. He wants to say that more out of habit than because it’s actually the case, and he knows that Nott will see through it in moments. “I am- I am waiting for Mollymauk to reply. That is all.”

“Oh. Did you text him a while ago?”

Caleb nods mutely.


“Ja,” Caleb mutters. He doesn’t stop spinning his phone in his hand beneath the table, feeling the soft leather case beneath his fingertips; a gift from Molly wrapped around a gift from Nott. The two people closest to him, neatly summed up in one pocket-sized object. “I know,” he says again. “But I- I do not know why he has not replied. This doesn’t happen, Nott. We text every day, and Molly always replies, even if it takes him a few hours.”

Nott frowns. “You text every day?”

“Ja.”

“Wow,” Nott mutters. “You two really are disgustingly sappy.”

“Nott.”

“I’m just saying!” Nott says defensively. “That’s a lot of texting, Caleb. Especially for you. You don’t even text me that much and I’m your best friend.”

“We live together,” Caleb points out, and Nott frowns at him.

“You know what I mean, Caleb. You’re not a big texter. So you texting this much means something.”

“I haven’t texted him much today,” Caleb mutters. “Mollymauk has- he has not seen my messages.”

“Oh.”

“Mm.”

“Does he- did he say he was going to be busy today?” Nott asks. Caleb recognised her tone of voice – it’s the one she uses when she can see him starting to get twitchy and nervous, when she’s preemptively trying to help him find the most logical explanation to a situation to help calm him down.

Caleb shakes his head. “Nein,” he says. “He didn’t say anything about today.”

“Hmm,” Nott hums thoughtfully. “Have you texted him much?”

“A bit. I have sent him a few texts.”

“What did you send him?”

“I sent him a picture of Frumpkin earlier,” Caleb says. “He always replies to those. He thinks that
Frumpkin is cute.”

“Frumpkin is evil,” Nott replies immediately.

“Nott, Frumpkin still does not have thumbs, and he still is not trying to steal your tuna.”

“That’s what you think,” Nott fires back. “Anyway, what else did you send him? Because if you text every single day then I’m assuming that you sent him more than just a picture of your cat.”

Caleb nods. “I texted him ‘good morning’, but I always do that- don’t pull that face, Nott—”

“Gross,” Nott mutters under her breath, making Caleb sigh.

“I texted him ‘good morning’,,” he repeats, “and I sent him a typo that I found.”

“…You sent him a typo?” Nott asks blankly.

“It was a very funny typo. They wrote ‘entomology’ instead of ‘etymology’ in an etymology paper. I have no idea how it got past peer review.”

“…Aren’t those the same thing?”

Caleb freezes, and then slowly turns his head to glare at Nott.

“Kidding!” she says, holding her hands up. “Entomology is bugs! I know that! You’ve told me before! It’s a very funny typo, Caleb. And I’m sure Molly will think so too, as soon as he sees it.”

Caleb tries to smile. “You think?”

“He seems to like all your other nerdy stuff, so I’m sure he’ll like this too,” Nott replies placatingly, and Caleb nods to himself, looking down at the phone still in his hands. Nott is right. Molly will see Caleb’s text, and he’ll reply, and it will all be fine.

It will all be fine.

Caleb chews at his lip. “…Nott?”

“Yeah?”

“Is it… is it weird how much I text Molly? Do I text him too much? Do you think I am- do you think I am overwhelming him?”

Nott quickly shakes her head, her ears flapping a little. “Nope,” she says. “Not at all. I know I keep telling you it’s disgusting, and gross, and all that, and that might be true, but it’s only true to me. If I’m being honest – and if you tell anyone that I said this I will steal all of your left socks – it’s actually… sweet.”

Caleb blinks. “…What?”

“You heard me!” Nott says quickly, making Caleb smile a little. “I’m not saying it again! It’s still gross and disgusting. I mean, I’m very happy that you’re happy, Caleb, but it’s still… yuck.”

“Alright,” Caleb says, fighting to stop his smile from growing any wider. “If you say so.”

“I do say so. And I also say that if Molly is replying to all of your texts and you’re replying to all of his, it’s probably not too much. It would be too much if he never replied to any of them ever – not
including today – so I don’t think you’re overwhelming him. He’s probably just very busy.”

Caleb nods. He’s been telling himself that all day, but it’s still reassuring to hear Nott come to the same conclusion. “He is probably just busy,” he repeats, and Nott nods and smiles.

“Exactly. Text him again if you really want to, but I wouldn’t bother texting anymore after that. He’ll reply when he replies. There’s no point in stressing yourself out.”

“Sometimes,” Caleb says, “I cannot believe that I am older than you.”

Nott gives him a wide, snaggle-toothed grin. “You might be smart, Caleb, but I am wise at heart. I know many things.”

“I know you do, Nott.”

“Do you feel better now?”


“Of course,” Nott replies. She pushes her plate to one side and climbs up on the table, crossing to Caleb and pressing a kiss to his forehead. “Text him again if you really want to, but just be patient after that. It’s all you can do.”

Caleb nods and Nott steps away, smiling at him. “Alright,” he says quietly. “I’ll do that.”

“Good,” Nott replies. “Now finish your dinner.”

Caleb sighs, feeling himself smile. “Very well,” he mutters, but there’s no annoyance to the words. He doesn’t see Nott climb off the table and grab her plate but he hears the soft thuds of her feet hitting the ground and the quiet scrape of ceramic and metal, and then there’s only silence as she walks away. Following Nott’s instructions Caleb finishes his meal, and the moment he’s done he places his phone down on the table before him.

He can text Molly again. That’s okay. That’s fine. He can text Molly again, and then he can go about his evening knowing that he has done everything he can, and that, whatever is going on, it’s not his fault. Molly likes him. Molly cares about him. Molly will certainly explain all of this as soon as he has enough free time to reply.

Caleb opens his phone case and sends one final text.

[To: Mollymauk Tealeaf] From your silence I am assuming that you are very busy today, so I would like to say that I hope your day is going well. x

He stares at the screen, watching it grow dark, and then he puts his phone away. No more texts, he tells himself. No more texts.

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At 7pm, Caleb rings Molly.

The nerves and anxiety inside him have been growing steadily all day, settling heavy in his stomach and around his mind. He knows it’s silly. He knows that Molly is probably fine, knows that Molly is most likely just having a busy day that’s stopping him from getting to his phone, but he’s worried all the same. He’s very worried. Caleb likes order, and he likes pattern, and he likes routine. He has a routine with Molly, now. Every day, Caleb texts Molly good morning when he wakes up, and every
day Molly replies about when Caleb is drinking his tea. They then trade a few more texts, kiss each other good morning outside Caleb’s office if it’s a weekday, and continue to text periodically throughout the day. That’s their routine. That’s their normal.

This isn’t their normal, and Caleb hates it.

It takes half an hour of staring at his phone for him to finally pick it up. He’s been checking it periodically all day, hoping that he had just missed the small vibration from it that meant that he received a message, but every time his phone had buzzed it had just been a message from Nott, or Jester, or Bryce. Molly hasn’t messaged him all day, and, more concerningly, he hasn’t seen any of Caleb’s messages either.

*Molly could just be busy*, Caleb tells himself again, his leg twitching restlessly beneath him. *He could just be busy, or preoccupied, or something unexpected could have happened. He is fine. He is fine.*

*He has to be fine.*

Caleb continues to stare at his phone. He wants to ring Molly. He wants to hear Molly’s voice, and know that he’s alright. He’s waited all day for a reply from Molly, for any indication that Molly is even alive – and honestly, Caleb would take knowing that his messages have been read at this point – and he’s tired, and he’s nervous, and he’s stressed, and he wants to know that his boyfriend is alright. He knows that Molly is almost certainly fine. He knows that he’s just overreacting. He knows that it’s just the brambles, and that everything is almost certainly completely fine, but that doesn’t stop his heart from beating faster in his chest.

The clock ticks onto seven, and Caleb decides that he’s waited long enough.

He snatches up his phone, unlocking it and calling Molly with fingers that are shaking far more than he realised, and presses it hard against his ear.

“Come on,” he mutters into the phone, pacing circles around his phone as the ringtone sings out.

“Come on, come on, come on…”

Long, drawn-out seconds pass, and the ringtone falls silent.

Molly hasn’t picked up.

Caleb comes to a stop in the middle of his bedroom, his phone still pressed to his ear as a polite, automated voice on the other end asks that he leave a message. The tone rings out and, for a few long seconds, Caleb is silent. He doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know what to do. But he knows that the voicemail will only wait so long and so, after another second or so, he swallows, clears his throat, and speaks.

“Ah, hallo,” he says quietly. “It is, um, it is me. Caleb Widogast. Um. I just wanted to make sure that you are- that you are okay, and that- well, if you are just busy you can ignore this, I am just being silly, but I am-”

“Thank you for leaving a message,”’ the voice says, as the word ‘worried’ leaves Caleb’s lips. The phone line falls silent, leaving emptiness ringing in Caleb’s ears, and he feels himself slowly lower his phone to his side.

*Molly is fine*, he tells himself, sitting down hard on his bed as his heart picks up at double-speed inside his ribcage, dropping his phone to one side. *Molly is fine. Molly is fine. Molly is-*

Next to him on the bed, his phone buzzes. And then it buzzes again.
Incoming call from: Mollymauk Tealeaf.

Caleb can’t pick his phone up quickly enough. He fumbles a bit as he accepts the call, smushing his phone up against his ear and quickly standing up.

“Molly!” he says delightedly. He can feel the worry and tension into his chest that came from Molly’s day of radio silence easing just from the knowledge the Molly is calling him - that Molly is on the other end of the phone. “Molly, hallo.”

“Uh, hey there, Caleb.”

… That’s not Molly’s voice.

Caleb swallows. “Fjord?” he asks quietly. The anxiety that had been slowly dissipating returns in full force, sinking into his nerves like needles. He feels his lungs squeeze, every passing breath feeling smaller and shallower than the one before it. This has never happened before. This has never happened before, and Caleb doesn’t know what’s going on, and he doesn’t know why Fjord is calling him from Molly’s number, and he’s starting to feel just a little bit like he can’t breathe. “Why are- why are you calling me from Molly’s number?”

“Because I’m calling you from his phone.”

“Why are you calling me from his phone, Fjord?”

From the other end of the line Fjord sighs, and the connection turns it into a rush of static. “Molly-” he starts, immediately cutting himself off and trying again. “It’s- he’s- he asked me to call you. Kinda.”

“Warum- Scheisse- why?”

“He’s not… he’s not doing so good.”

Inside his veins, Caleb’s blood turns to ice. “What’s wrong? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine!” Fjord says quickly, and Caleb frowns.

“You just said he wasn’t doing so good, Fjord. Is he alright, or isn’t he?”

There’s a long, drawn-out silence. The ice in Caleb’s blood feels like it crystallises, stabbing through his skin and running freezing cold down into the chambers of his heart. Gods, he thinks quietly. Gods, no.

There’s a soft crackle from the other end of the line, and then Fjord speaks again.

“He’s… he’s alright,” Fjord says slowly. “He’s not hurt. He’s just-” There’s another long, uncertain pause. Caleb can feel himself holding his breath.

Eventually, Fjord continues.

“How much do you know about Molly’s past?” he asks quietly. “Before he joined the carnival?”

“Very little,” Caleb admits. “Um. Nothing, actually.” It’s alright, though. It’s fair. He doesn’t know Molly’s past, and Molly doesn’t know his, and neither of them mind. “Is it- does this relate to his past?”

“Kinda?” Fjord replies. Caleb can practically hear himshrugging. “It’s… ah, fuck, it’s not my place
“Can you- can you put him on the phone?” Caleb asks immediately.

“Uh,” Fjord replies, sounding horribly uncertain. “Uh, no?”

“Why not?”

“He doesn’t- it’s-…” There’s another one of those long, horrible pauses. “It’d be easier to just show you,” Fjord says. “Can you come over to the flat?” Caleb nods, forgetting that Fjord can’t see him, and stands up, quickly crossing to the door of his room. “I mean, you don’t have to, but-”

“Fjord,” Caleb snaps. He doesn’t have the patience, doesn’t have the energy or concern for niceties and politeness right now. “I will be there. Tell me where I need to go.”

Fjord tells him the address. Caleb doesn’t write it down, listening so intently that he feels sure that it would be burned into his brain even if his memory wasn’t what it is. The moment he can he hangs up, finding just enough politeness in him to say goodbye to Fjord before he does so, and then he’s grabbing a sweater from his closet, jamming it over his head as he walks hurriedly out into the living room.

“Nott!” Caleb calls out. Nott peeks up at him over the back of the couch, and she must see something frantic in his eyes because she’s on her feet immediately, running over to him.

“Caleb?” she asks, jogging along beside him as he crosses to the front door in hurried strides and starts pulling on his coat. “What’s happening? Are you alright? Are you injured?”

“I’m fine,” he says. The common feels heavy on his tongue, ungainly and clunky and he hates how much effort he has to put into it now, hates how it’s suddenly become so much harder to talk to Nott in their only common language because all he can think about is Molly. “I’m- I need to-”

“What is it? What’s happening?”

“Molly,” Caleb says succinctly. “I need to- I have to go, Nott- I have to- Ich muss ihn sehen-”

“Alright,” Nott interrupts, reaching out and capturing one of Caleb’s flailing hands. Her own hand is small around it, the contact light and barely there, but it’s enough. It’s enough to ground Caleb just a little bit, to make him pause in his growing panic and remind himself to breathe again. “Alright,” Nott soothes again. “Go do whatever you have to do, Caleb.”

Caleb swallows. “I’m-” he says. “Can you- Frumpkin?”


“You promise?”

“Yes. He’ll be fine.”

Caleb sighs quietly and lets go of Nott’s hand to bend down and finish doing up his shoes. “Thank you, Nott.”

Nott waves a hand. “You can thank me by replenishing my tuna stock.”

“It is the flat’s tuna,” Caleb mutters absently, straightening up.
“Well, this can be my tuna. As a payment for looking after the fey cat.”

“He is not fey, Nott.”

Nott smiles. “Go on, Caleb,” she says quietly. “Go do whatever you have to do. Tell Molly I say hi.”

Caleb bends down, pressing a kiss to the top of Nott’s head. “Thank you,” he mutters. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Nott says softly. She reaches out to grab his hand, giving it a quick squeeze, and then drops it again to push him towards the door. “Now shoo! Go see your boyfriend!”

Caleb does.

He leaves the flat in a hurry, taking the steps down two at a time instead of waiting for the ancient, impossibly slow elevator. He knows exactly where the bus stop is, knows exactly which bus will get him to Molly’s flat in the shortest length of time, and he speed-walks to it despite knowing that the next bus won’t be for a while. The five minutes he spends waiting at the bus stop are quite possibly the longest of his entire life, dragging on like treacle as though time itself has been slowed.

And then the bus arrives, and Caleb tries to remind himself that he is not the only person who has places to go when the short queue of people slowly make their way onto the bus. He takes a seat as soon as he can, tugging his phone free from his pocket and checking it again before he’s even entirely sat down.

This time, something has changed.

Molly has seen his messages, and he still has not replied.
Chapter 20

The bus ride to Fjord and Molly’s flat is nothing short of torturous. With every second that passes, Caleb feels himself grow tenser, his nerves gradually winding to breaking point. Every time the bus stops to let passengers on or off, or gets held up at a red light, or crawls along at just *exactly* the speed limit, Caleb feels another second closer to screaming, or panicking, or hyperventilating in his tiny, uncomfortable seat. His leg jitters for the entire length of the journey and when he finally, *finally* gets to leave the bus and speed-walk the distance between the bus stop and Molly’s building, he feels like he’s vibrating with pent-up, nervous energy. Even waiting outside the building for Fjord to let him in is awful enough and he takes the stairs up two at a time, arriving at the front door sooner than expected, if Fjord’s expression when he opens it is anything to go by.

“Caleb!” Fjord says, sounding surprised. “I didn’t think you’d be up so soon. Most people take longer with the stairs.”

Caleb bites back the harshness on his tongue, forcing himself to be polite. “*Hallo*, Fjord.” He can hear the Zemnian in his own voice and knows that it is coming through stronger, thickened by his worry and fear and absolute impatience for anything that lengthens the time until he can see Molly. “Where- how is Molly?”

Fjord shrugs, stepping aside and letting Caleb in. “I mean… he’s doing alright? ‘Bout the best he can be right now, honestly.”

“That’s good. Where is he?” Caleb asks, kicking off his shoes and shrugging out of his coat as quickly as he can. He can feel his leg wanting to twitch again and forces the movement away.

Fjord tilts his head. “He’s in his room,” he replies, and he seems to notice the impatience that is written all across Caleb’s body because he immediately starts leading Caleb over to the shut door, knocking twice on the one small patch of wood that isn’t covered by a large, colourful hanging. “Molly?” he asks through the door. “Caleb’s here.”

From inside the room there’s a small, muffled sound. Caleb can’t quite make it out or decipher it but Fjord seems to understand what it means. He steps back from the door, nodding towards it.

“Go on in,” he says. Caleb glances at him, still painfully worried and unsure for all that he wants nothing more than to see Molly as soon as physically possible, and Fjord gives him a small, reassuring smile. “That was Molly’s agreeing sound. You’re good. He asked me to call you, remember? Head on in.”

It’s enough for Caleb. It may not have been Molly on the phone, and Caleb may not trust Fjord as much as he trusts Molly, but right now he is worried, and nervous, and horrifically anxious, and all he wants to do is see Molly as soon as possible. And, he reasons, if Molly doesn’t like his presence then he can always leave.

“Okay.” Caleb says quietly. He steps forwards, places his hand on the doorknob, and then pauses. “…Fjord?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For calling me.”
“Oh! No problem, Caleb.”

Caleb nods to himself. Politeness adequately satisfied, he turns the handle and steps inside.

Molly’s room is a riot of colour. Caleb knows this, has seen it in pictures and video calls with Molly before, but being there in person is entirely different. It’s almost overwhelming, with fabric hanging from the walls and tiny twinkly lights wrapped around the headboard of Molly’s bed, but today, Caleb doesn’t bother taking the time to process it all. He doesn’t start inspecting it how he would normally want to, trying to glean what he can about Molly just from the items in his room, the same way Molly had in Caleb’s office. Molly’s room isn’t important right now. 

*Molly* is all that is important.

There’s a stirring of movement from the bed and Caleb feels his eyes snap to it immediately. The brightly patterned blankets are in disarray, pillows and decorative cushions scattered to the floor around the bed and the blankets themselves piled up in the middle, wrapped around a familiar tiefling form. Caleb can see little more than a small sliver of purple skin and a single red eye staring back at him, but it’s enough. He can feel his heart starting to slow already, his anxiety lessening now that he can see for himself that Molly is alive, and safe, and alright physically, if not mentally.

*Molly is okay,* Caleb thinks to himself, and he steps a little further into Molly’s room, socked feet scuffing gently over the carpet. Behind him, the door swings shut with a soft *click*.

And, for a while, there is only silence.

Caleb is the first to break it. He wants to hear Molly’s voice. He wants to hear Molly’s voice and the soft accent that coats his words, and although he knows that Molly being able to speak is no indication that Molly is actually fine in the slightest he wants to hear Molly all the same. However, as the silence drags on, it becomes increasingly apparent that Molly is not going to speak first. But that’s fine. Caleb doesn’t mind speaking where Molly cannot.

He moves in a little closer, still keeping some degree of distance between them in case Molly only wants his company but not his closeness, and does his best to give a tiny smile.

“*Hallo,*” he says quietly.

Beneath the blankets, Molly smiles back weakly. “Hi, Caleb.”

Caleb gestures at the space between them. “Would you like me to…?” he asks, trailing off quickly, and Molly nods immediately.

“Yeah,” he says. His voice sounds a little hoarse, like he’s been crying, and as Caleb steps closer he can see the evidence of tears on Molly’s face, in the puffiness around his eyes. “Yeah, please.”

“What do you, um… what would you like me to do?” Caleb asks awkwardly. He has never been good at offering comfort; he does not have the natural, intrinsic ability that Molly has to just *know* what the other person needs. He doesn’t have that and he wishes that he did, but he also knows that Molly knows him well enough to tell or show him exactly what he needs to do.

Wordlessly, Molly holds out his arms to Caleb. The blankets shift, and beneath them Caleb can see that Molly is wearing his cardigan.

It’s all the instruction Caleb needs.

It takes no thought at all for him to finish crossing the room to Molly. Caleb climbs up into Molly’s bed without a moment’s hesitation, slipping under the covers and wrapping his arms around Molly in the tightest hug he possibly can. Molly burrows into the contact immediately, tucking his head under Caleb’s chin and winding his arms around Caleb’s back, holding him close and tight against his chest. Caleb can feel Molly’s heart drumming away beneath his ribcage, can feel the way Molly’s fingers grab and twist tightly in the fabric of his shirt, and he only holds Molly tighter, pressing kiss after kiss to the crown of his head.

“Liebling,” Caleb murmurs. “Liebling, Mollymauk…”

_I love you_ hangs on the tip of his tongue, and Caleb forces it back. Not now, he tells himself. _This is not the time_. Telling Molly that he loves him will not fix this. Telling Molly that he loves him will not make this better. It is not reciprocated, and it is not what Molly needs to hear right now.

Caleb holds the words back, swallows them down, and kisses Molly’s forehead. For once, Molly doesn’t smell like his usual self – the lavender and incense scent still clings to his skin but it is old and faded, clearly the remnants of yesterday. Molly smells of… well, he doesn’t really smell of much at all, and it unsettles Caleb more than he thought it would. He doesn’t smell like himself, and there’s none of the faint jingling that comes from the jewellery that is so normally strung about Molly’s horns. It is the softest and plainest that Caleb has ever seen Molly, and it doesn’t feel right. There is no makeup on Molly’s face and no perfume on his skin and no jewellery on his horns, and now that he is holding Molly, Caleb can tell that beneath the cardigan Molly is wearing a t-shirt and pair of pyjama shorts that are so plain he almost doubts that they’re Molly’s at all. It’s a far cry from how Molly normally dresses and looks, and Caleb hates it.

He hates it because it means that Molly isn’t himself.

It means that Molly isn’t alright.

Caleb knows that he cannot fix this. He knows that he doesn’t know enough about the situation, that he doesn’t have the skills to aid as an expert would be able to. He knows that his love is not a cure, and that, whatever happened to Molly, he and his presence alone will not be able to magically make it all better.

Still, that isn’t going to stop him from trying.

Caleb squeezes Molly impossibly closer and kisses his forehead again. He doesn’t know what to say. Molly has always been so good at caring for Caleb, helping him out of the shadows of his mind both times that it has happened in his presence, and Caleb wishes that he had Molly’s skill now. He wishes that the words that came so easily to Molly came easily to him, letting him comfort, and help, and aid as he wishes so strongly that he could.

But the words don’t come, so Caleb says what he can instead.

“Mollymauk,” he murmurs. At the sound of his name Molly stiffens and then relaxes, his body losing some of the tension that it had been holding. Caleb strokes Molly’s hair back from his face, kissing the exposed head of the peacock on Molly’s cheek, and murmurs his name again. “Mollymauk. Mein Liebling, my Molly…”

Somehow, for some reason that Caleb cannot see, hearing his name makes Molly relax further. Caleb keeps on murmuring it, petting Molly’s hair and kissing his head and running a hand along his back in slow, gentle strokes, feeling the familiar texture of his own cardigan beneath his fingertips. He doesn’t know for how long he does this, feeling Molly breathe against his chest. Time doesn’t matter here. Caleb knows approximately when it is, and he doesn’t care at all. Time isn’t important. Only
Molly is important.

“My Molly,” Caleb says softly again, and then, beneath his hands, Molly’s body starts to shake with tiny, barely-there tremors. At first Caleb doesn’t quite realise what’s happening, but barely a moment passes before, in the soft silence of Molly’s room, Caleb hears a small, muffled sob.

Oh, Gods.

*Molly is crying,* Caleb realises, and he feels his heart shatter in his chest.

Molly does not cry loudly. He cries quietly, stifling his gasps and snifflies and sobs as best he can, and he barely moves in Caleb’s arms, only shifting to press himself closer to Caleb’s front. Caleb reacts without even thinking, tangling his legs with Molly’s and wrapping him up in his arms and doing absolutely everything he can to hold Molly close and tight, murmuring soft words of comfort to him. He doesn’t even know *what* he’s comforting but he tries all the same. He wants Molly to be okay. He wants Molly not to be crying anymore.

And he may not know how to achieve that, but he’s still going to do everything he can.

“Mollymauk,” he says quietly. Molly tightens his hands in Caleb’s shirt again, still sniffing. “Oh, Molly, *Liebling*… I have you, love. I’m here.”

“I’m sorry,” Molly hicups, shifting to bury his head against Caleb’s chest. Caleb raises a hand instinctively, settling it in Molly’s hair and running in gently through the soft, dark purple strands. He can feel more dampness soaking through his shirt. He doesn’t move away. “I’m sorry. I- I didn’t tell you about this earlier, you should have known, you- you should have known what *bullshit* you were getting yourself into, Caleb.” Molly sniffles, and Caleb doesn’t stop himself from leaning down to press a soft kiss to Molly’s forehead.

“It’s alright,” he murmurs quietly. “It’s alright, Mollymauk.”

“It’s not.”

“It is, *Liebling*.”

“You don’t even know what I’m- what I’m crying about.”

Caleb shrugs and tightens his arms around Molly, holding him closer against his chest. “I don’t have to,” he says. “It is enough to know that you are upset about something, Molly.”

“It’s a stupid something…”

“If it is enough to make you cry then it is clearly not stupid.”

Molly gives a weak, humourless laugh. “You’re sweet,” he mumbles.

“I’m your boyfriend,” Caleb replies. Even now, even in this instance, Molly’s compliments still make his ears turn red. “I am your boyfriend, Molly, and you have looked after me many times. Let me look after you, *Liebling*.”

“That means *darling*,” Molly mutters, the words so quiet they’re practically inaudible, and Caleb startles before giving a small nod.

“*Ja, it does.*”

“I can remember some things…” The words are small, quiet and intimate like Molly is telling them to
himself. “I remember that. Liebling.”

Molly’s Zemnian accent is still terrible, but it makes Caleb smile. “Do you remember any Ancient Sylvan?” he asks gently. Molly is still sniffling with every breath, his voice shaky like it’s on the edge of breaking into tears again, but he’s talking now. Caleb wants to keep Molly talking. He wants to keep knowing that Molly is present, and responsive, and listening. “Do you remember what ƾȢƺơơƫ means?”

When Molly replies, Caleb can practically hear the frown in his voice. “I… maybe? I don’t know…”

“What do you think it means?” Caleb prompts gently.

Molly sniffles again, but his breathing is starting to even out, his voice sounding less like he’s still crying. “Good… something? Good night?”

“Ja!” Caleb says delightedly. He ducks his head, kissing Molly on the cheek again. “Ja, that is exactly it, Liebling!”

“ƾȢƺơơƫ,” Molly mutters to himself. He turns his head into Caleb’s kiss, sighing softly when Caleb kisses the peacock again. “I remember that too.”

Caleb kisses the peacock one more time for good measure and then leans away. This is to do with Molly’s memory, he thinks to himself. It’s a baffling fact, one that he doesn’t understand at all, but right now he doesn’t give two shits for the reasoning behind it. Molly will tell him if he wants to, and if he doesn’t then Caleb will do his best to comfort him all the same. He will be whatever Molly needs him to be.

Gradually, Molly calms down further. His breathing evens, the tears subsiding as he cries himself out. Caleb continues murmuring to him, caressing Molly with words and touch alike, and soon there’s nothing beyond the sound of his voice and Molly’s carefully controlled breaths, each inhale and exhale matching the pattern of Caleb’s heart. It’s a familiar technique to Caleb. It’s one that Molly has asked him to do himself, after all.

“Caleb?” Molly asks, when several more long, gentle minutes have passed.

“Ja?” Caleb replies.

“How much, um… did Fjord tell you anything? About… this? When he rang you?”

Caleb draws in a breath. “Fjord said- Fjord said over the phone that this was to do with your past, somehow. Before you joined the circus.”

Molly gives a short huff of weak laughter. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I suppose you could say that if you wanted to.”

“Do you… do you want to talk about it?”

Molly shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know. I don’t- I don’t know. It’s not normally this bad…”

Caleb pauses. “This has happened before?”

“Oh, absolutely. If it’s any consolation it happens way less now than it used to, but… yeah. Today is just… my head is all bad…” Molly trails off into silence, giving a small snuffle. “My past is… it’s pretty weird, Caleb. It’s pretty weird, and it’s not great, and sometimes my brain likes to remind me of that and then… well, this happens.”
Caleb doesn’t know what to say to that. He wants so desperately to fix this, to magically say the right words and do the right things and make it all better, but he can’t. Caleb hates this. He hates it. He feels completely useless, unskilled and unable to help Molly banish whatever brambles are in his head, and he hates it more than he’s ever hated anything else. He doesn’t know what to do, what to say or how to act, and all he can do is think back to the times that Molly has helped him in the past, and say Molly’s own words back to him.

“Molly,” he begins, and it’s like Molly could hear the thoughts in Caleb’s head because he speaks up immediately.

“You don’t have to do anything,” Molly mutters. “You don’t- I’ve had therapy, Caleb, I’ve got grounding techniques. I just-” He pauses, drawing in a breath, and when he speaks again his voice is practically inaudible. “I just… I really wanted to see you…”

“Oh,” Caleb says quietly. “Oh, Mollymauk…”

“You don’t- you don’t have to say anything, or do anything, but I- yeah. I know this was- it was stupid and pointless of me, and you were probably relaxing at home before I had Fjord call you because I couldn’t do it myself, but I- I just-” He sniffles, and Caleb’s heart hurts. “I wanted to see you,” he mutters. “I needed to see you…"

“Molly,” Caleb says. Molly sniffles again, burrowing in closer against Caleb’s chest, and Caleb lets him rest and settle for a moment before saying his name again. “Mollymauk.” Molly lifts his head this time, looking at Caleb with eyes made puffy from crying. On his cheeks, Caleb can see the drying tear-tracks. “Mollymauk,” he says again, softer. “I am here because I want to be. I was- I was worried all day- no, no, don’t apologise, Liebling- and I wanted to see you too. I want to help. If you need to talk, if you need me to listen, or distract you, or anything, know that I want to.” Molly gives Caleb a weak, trembling smile, and Caleb leans forwards to kiss him, feeling Molly soften beneath his lips. “I am here because I want to be,” he says again when he leans back. “You don’t have to tell me what this is about, Molly. Not if you don’t want to. But... I would like to help, however I can.”

“I want to tell you,” Molly says quietly, his words an echo of what Caleb said only a week ago. “I- you’re my boyfriend, Caleb. You should- you should know this about me.”

“I do not want you to hurt—”

“It doesn’t hurt to talk about,” Molly interrupts. “It’s not- it’s not like that. It’s- there’s nothing bad associated with it, you know? I mean, there’s bad feelings, and some nightmares and stuff, but there’s no serious trauma. It’s- it’s alright for me to talk about. I don’t mind.”

Caleb frowns. “If you are sure…”

“I am,” Molly says. He draws back a little, shifting on the bed to sit upright. Caleb follows him, watching with some surprise as Molly tugs his shirt off and drops it off the side of the bed, revealing the twisting tattoos and silver scars that mark his skin like a canvas. They are a familiar sight to Caleb – even now he can see the lingering remnants of a faded bruise nestled in amongst the lines of ink, and he feels he knows the scars as well as he knows his apartment. He knows how they feel beneath his fingertips and beneath his lips; he knows their order and pattern. He knows that, when Molly raises a hand to touch his fingers lightly to the scars, the scars are pressing against his fingertips in tiny, raised ridges. Molly doesn’t say anything for a while, instead just sitting and breathing quietly. Caleb reaches out without thinking, settling his hands on Molly’s knees, and Molly shoots him a small smile.

And then, finally, he speaks.
“I woke up in the ground five years ago,” Molly says quietly. There’s no inflection to his words, no emotion behind them beyond blank acceptance, and for a while all Caleb can do is blink. He hears the words. He understands them. But the sentence doesn’t make sense.

“...Do you mean on the ground?” he asks eventually, wondering if he simply misunderstood Molly’s Common, but Molly shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “In the ground. A metre underground, in a shallow grave.”

“...Oh.” It’s a shit response. It’s a stupid response. It’s all Caleb can think to say.

“The scars on my chest,” Molly says, and he takes Caleb’s hands and lifts them, placing them over the fine silver lines scattered across his torso. “You’ve never asked me how I got them.”

Caleb looks away. “I- I didn’t want to pry,” he says quietly. “You have- you never asked about my past. I did not wish to pry into yours.”

Molly gives a short, humourless laugh. “That’s sweet, Caleb. But don’t tell me you’ve never wondered how I got them. Most people don’t have this many scars, and if they do they’re not for nice reasons.”

“I... I was curious, ja...”

“Want to know something funny?”

Caleb frowns. The tone of Molly’s voice implies that what he’s about to say is anything but funny. “Yes?”

“I’m curious about where they come from too.”

“What do you mean?” Caleb asks quietly. He drops his hands from Molly’s chest, resting them in his own lap. “They are- what do you mean?”

“I don’t remember,” Molly says simply.

Caleb frowns. He knows that his own memory is somewhat abnormal, but he’s certain that it would be impossible to forget how you acquired a patchwork on scars across your torso.

Apparently not.

“I’m not perfect, Caleb. I have- I have memory gaps.” Molly pauses and gives a short, bitter laugh. “Well, no,” he adds, scrubbing a hand roughly over his eyes to wipe away the remaining tears. “I don’t have memory gaps. I just don’t have memories. Any of them. At all. No memories from before- oh, four years ago? Five? Nothing at all, Caleb. Nothing.”

“Nothing from before the- from before you woke up?” Caleb asks. He knows he’s pushing, knows that he’s prying, but he doesn’t understand.

Molly shakes his head. “Nothing.”

Caleb frowns. “You do not even remember-”

“No,” Molly answers, even before Caleb finishes speaking. “I don’t remember anything, Caleb! Nothing! I don’t remember the tiniest thing! I don’t remember my name, or my family, or if I even had a family, or anything. I just woke up, covered in scars and buried in earth in a- in a grave, and I couldn’t speak and I- I couldn’t talk and no one could hear me and I had to- I had to-”
Molly breaks off, drawing in a gulping, heaving breath. Caleb can see tears glittering at the corners of Molly’s eyes again and without thinking he leans forwards, pulling Molly into a tight hug. Molly practically collapses into it, slumping against Caleb’s chest as sobs continue to force their way out around his words.

“I had to dig my way out,” Molly says, his voice quiet and broken. He sniffs; Caleb thinks he can feel snot and tears mingling on the fabric of his shirt, and he doesn’t give a single shit about it. Molly can cry on his shirt. Molly can do whatever he needs to do to feel better, and Caleb isn’t going to judge him one bit. He lifts a hand, settling it in Molly’s hair as he presses a kiss to Molly’s forehead, and beneath his hand Molly keeps on talking around sniffles and soft, wavering, tear-edged breaths. “I had to- have you ever had to dig your way out of your own grave before, Caleb? Because it’s shit. It’s fucking awful. I- I had no idea who I was, or- or where I was, or what the fuck was going on but I couldn’t- I couldn’t breathe, it was all just soil and dirt and- and-.”

“Mollymauk,” Caleb interrupts. He squeezes Molly a bit tighter, startling him out of his panicked rambling, and then leans back to give Molly enough space to move if he so wants. Molly looks up at him with wide, uncertain eyes, and Caleb recognises the darkness that lingers behind them. He recognises the brambles. “Molly,” he says again, his voice softer. “It’s alright. You’re alright. You are here, Liebling. You are not in a- in a grave.”

Molly smiles a little. “I know,” he says quietly. “I know. I just- my head doesn’t always like to accept that, you know?”


“You do know,” Molly agrees quietly. “You know that bit, Caleb. But you don’t- your memory is really good, isn’t it?”

Caleb nods, a little confused. “Ja, it is. It is photographic and exact for the first month or so.”

Molly nods to himself. He leans back a little, putting some space between them, and seems to curl in on himself – he draws his legs up, wrapping his arms around them and resting his forehead against his knees. “So you don’t know what this bit is like,” he says quietly. “To have void in your head. You don’t have any idea what it’s like to go searching for any semblance of who you might once have been and find absolutely nothing. No clues, no points, no- no indication of any life or existence or anything. Do you know what it’s like, Caleb?” Molly sniffs once, quietly, and hugs his knees tighter against his chest. “I know what it’s like,” he mutters softly. “That’s what’s in my head. Just… nothingness.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is, Caleb. I know what’s in my own head.”

“Nein, I know you do,” Caleb says. “But I meant that- the nothingness is only from five years ago back, ja? You have memories of now. You remember your friends, and you remember Frumpkin, and you remember what Liebling and ƶʒơƫȢƺơ mean. You have more than just void, Molly.”

From behind his knees Molly gives a tiny smile. “I suppose that’s true,” he admits.

“You do not suppose; you know.”

Molly smiles a little wider. “Are you arguing semantics with me, Professor?” he asks teasingly. He drops his arms from around his legs, lowering them back into a crossed position and leaning forwards slightly. He still doesn’t look happy, exactly, but he looks a little bit better. The teasing tone
in his voice had even sounded almost entirely genuine.

Caleb smiles back. “Just a little bit,” he says. “I am quite good at arguing semantics. I have been invited to conferences to do exactly that.”

“Really?”

“Ja.”

“Damn,” Molly says quietly, before lapsing into silence. “Caleb?”

“Mn?”

“I’m so afraid of being forgotten.”

That’s an unexpected statement. “What… what do you mean by that?”

“I was forgotten before,” Molly says. The words are soft and inflectionless, suspended in the air between them like spider-silk. “Whoever was buried in that grave was entirely forgotten, Caleb. I- we know. Gustav and the carnival found me wandering through the woods, and Gustav- after he found me he did everything he could to get me back to… well, whatever family the person who used to have this body had, I suppose. He went to the police, and he looked through newspapers for anyone who may had gone missing, and he found nothing. Nothing at all. And, I mean… I stand out. I know I do. I didn’t have the tattoos when I woke up but I had all the scars, and, I mean… I’m a purple tiefling, Caleb. There’s not a lot of tieflings around in general, let alone purple ones, and the scars are kind of distinctive.” Molly pauses, giving a small shrug, and Caleb realises that at some point his hands had found Molly’s, holding them gently. He gives them a small squeeze and after a pause Molly squeezes back, his lips quirking in the tiniest hint of a smile. “Did you know that Gustav looked for several months even after I started talking?” he asks. There’s humour to his voice but it’s not genuine, and even now Caleb can see how close Molly is to tears.

“…Started talking?” Caleb asks softly.

“Yeah,” Molly confirms. “I- when I first woke up I didn’t- I didn’t have any words at all.”

“You were mute?”

“Pretty much. I didn’t know my name either, which didn’t help with the search.” Molly gives a short, dry laugh, and immediately follows it by moving one of his hands from Caleb’s to brush the back of it across his eyes. “Not like that would have made any difference,” he mutters. “ Whoever buried this body wanted it forgotten. And they- they succeeded.”

“Molly…”

“This body was forgotten, Caleb. And it- it wasn’t me. Whoever had this body before me wasn’t me, but they were still forgotten.” Molly’s words are speeding up, his voice becoming more frantic with every passing moment. “They were killed, and they were buried in the ground by the side of a road with no- with no marker, or anything, and no note, and no identifiable belongings at all, and they were forgotten. No one knew this body. No one at all.” He breaks off, pulling in a deep, shattering breath. His grip on Caleb’s hand is so hard now that it hurts, but Caleb doesn’t move away. He can’t. “They were forgotten,” Molly says again, his words softer this time. Quieter, like he’s long since accepted them. “And that could happen to me again.”

“It won’t,” Caleb says immediately.
“But it could. People could- they could forget about me. They could forget who I am, and then I wouldn’t exist anymore.”

“You will not be forgotten,” Caleb says quietly. “You are Mollymauk. You are Mollymauk Tealeaf. You know who you are, and I know who you are, and you have friends who know you, Molly. You are an unforgettable character, mein Liebling. We will miss you if you are gone, and we will adore you while you are here. I will not forget you, Molly. Not ever.”

“But one day-”

“We will all be forgotten one day,” Caleb says. He knows that it’s not the most comforting thing that he could say, but it’s true. “But you will not be forgotten for a long while yet. Trust me on that.”

“I do trust you.”

“Good. There is a phrase I read in a book once,” Caleb continues. He lifts a hand, brushing Molly’s hair from his face and tucking it back behind his ears before leaning in to press a quick kiss to his lips. “The phrase was, ‘a man is not dead while his name is still spoken.’ Whoever was in that grave before you woke up may be dead, Mollymauk, but you are not. I continue to speak your name, and so does Fjord, and Yasha, and Nott, and Jester, and Beau, and Gustav, and everyone else who loves you. You are not dead, and you are not forgotten, and if you were ever to go missing we would continue to speak your name until we found you again.” He tilts his head and kisses Molly again, barely more than a touch of lips to lips. “You are not forgotten.” Another kiss. “You will not be forgotten.”

“Thank you,” Molly says quietly. “I- thank you, Caleb.”

“Thank you for calling me,” Caleb replies, his voice just as soft. “Or- well, thank you for having Fjord call me, I suppose. Thank you for trusting me with this.”

Molly pulls a face. “I’m sorry about that…”

“About what?”

“Having Fjord call you instead of doing it myself. Not replying to your texts. All of that.”

“Oh.” Well, Caleb can’t pretend that he wasn’t worried by it. “I- thank you, Mollymauk.”

“I know I should have texted you,” Molly mutters. “Or rang you or- or done something. It was just… You know those days when- when your brain is just shit?” he asks.

Caleb nods. “Ja,” he agrees. “Ja, yes, I absolutely know, Molly.”

“Your brain is shit, and that makes the day shit, and next thing you know it’s four in the afternoon and you haven’t got out of bed all day because you just- you just feel awful? You know, you feel all tired and heavy and like there’s no point to getting up?”

“Yes,” Caleb agrees, more emphatically. “And you- you know that if you were to talk to a friend it would likely be better, but you cannot, and it is terrible! And you are not even necessary sad, but you feel awful anyway.”

“Yeah!” Molly says. He looks a little bit shocked, almost taken-aback by how immediately Caleb understood what he was trying to get across. “That! Exactly that! That’s what happened today!” His face falls abruptly and he looks down, his finger plucking at the soft fabric of his pyjama shorts. “That’s… that’s why I didn’t see any of your texts. Or reply to them. And I know that’s not an
excuse, but I just… I couldn’t…”

It’s a situation that Caleb knows all too well. “It’s alright, Liebling,” he says quietly, giving a small smile.

“It’s not,” Molly says softly. “I’m- I’m your boyfriend, Caleb. I care about you, and I really, really like you, and I should- I should be able to reply to one stupid fucking text to stop you from worrying for no good reason!”

Caleb frowns. “I think there was a very good reason for me to worry, Molly. I would not be here if I hadn’t worried.”

“This is a stupid reason to worry about me,” Molly mutters, but Caleb can see the smallest hint of a smile pulling at Molly’s lips. It’s barely anything, especially in comparison to Molly’s normal wide grins, but, right now, it’s enough.

Caleb smiles back, just a tiny bit. “Mollymauk,” he says softly, “You cannot stop me from worrying about you. I care about you too much for that. And I want to worry about you. I am your boyfriend, and I lo-”

Not now. Not today. “-and I want to make sure that you are okay. You are very important to me.”

Molly reaches out, taking one of Caleb’s hands in his own. “I’m okay,” he says. “Especially- especially with, um, with you here. You’ve helped a lot.”

Caleb shrugs. “I want to be here for you,” he says simply, and he feels Molly’s hand tighten on his hand.

“Caleb?”

“Ja?”

“Can you… can you stay? Tonight?” Molly’s voice is quiet, soft and uncertain like he’s half-afraid that Caleb might say no.

As if Caleb could refuse him anything right now.

“Molly,” he says gently, “I’d love to.”

“Yeah?”

“Ja, of course,” Caleb pauses, frowning. “I did- I did not bring pyjamas, though…”

“That’s alright, I don’t mind. You can just sleep in your boxers.”

“I cannot-” Caleb begins, and then he immediately cuts himself off. Molly doesn’t know. He doesn’t know why Caleb is never shirtless if he can possibly help it. He doesn’t know how Caleb cannot look at himself in a mirror after a shower unless the mirror is so fogged that he can’t make out any details. Caleb has been so, so careful to make sure that Molly has never seen his back, of his shoulders, or the very top of his arms where the scars stretch down, reaching across his skin like the searching tongues of flame that created them. All Molly knows is that Caleb doesn’t like to be touched there, where sensations are dulled and lessened by the nerve damage. He doesn’t know anything else.

That’s going to change.
Caleb turns his head and presses a kiss to Molly’s cheek, shutting his eyes for just a moment. “Alright,” he murmurs, more for his benefit than for Molly’s. “Okay. I will… okay.” He opens his eyes, gathers his nerves, and slowly rises from the bed. There’s no reluctance to his movement but there is uncertainty, weighing down his limbs and making him move slower. It seems that Molly notices, too – he sits up in bed slightly, the blankets falling to settle around his waist, and he frowns slightly in confusion as Caleb slowly kicks off his jeans. “Caleb?” Molly asks. “Are you- you don’t have to stay over, love, if it makes you uncomfortable. That’s- that’s alright.”

Caleb shakes his head. “I want to stay tonight,” he says. “It is- it is just… I would like to show you something first, Molly.”

Molly’s frown deepens. “Okay…”

Caleb nods to himself, bending down to pull off his socks so that he is standing in just his boxers and t-shirt. It should be strange, he thinks, how he has no issues anymore about Molly seeing his cock, but it has taken him so long for him to be comfortable with showing Molly his shoulders. It should be strange, but it isn’t. Hiding this has been a part of Caleb’s life since he was eighteen. “You showed me your scars, Mollymauk,” Caleb says quietly. He twists his fingers, tightening them in the hem of his shirt. He’s going to do this. He’s going to do this. He trusts Molly, and he loves Molly, and he wants Molly to know.

He wants Molly to see.

“You showed me your scars,” he says again. “But you- you have not seen mine. And that is unfair.”

“Caleb-“

“I want to show you, Liebling,” Caleb says. He doesn’t look up at Molly, instead continuing to stare at the carpet between his feet. His arms feel heavy, fingers trembling slightly as his breath starts to come quicker in his chest, but he doesn’t move his hands away. He pauses for a few moments longer, taking the time to deliberately slow his breathing.

And then, in full view of Molly, he pulls his shirt off over his head, and hears Molly’s quiet, shocked gasp as he sees, for the first time, the burn scars that envelop Caleb’s shoulders and back like a cloak.

“Caleb,” Molly breathes. Caleb opens his eyes, still looking at the ground, and forces himself to look up at Molly. He cannot hide his scars now. He cannot hide them behind t-shirts, and sweaters, and cardigans and coats and scarves and the endless, countless layers he insists on wearing. He cannot wear a t-shirt to bed, and he cannot ask Molly not to touch his upper back and shoulders so that Molly cannot feel the warped, twisting skin beneath his fingertips. Molly has seen them now. Molly is looking at them now – even without pupils Caleb can follow his eyes as they dart over the skin of his shoulders, and the urge to cover up is almost overwhelming. No one else has seen these scars. Not even Bryce. Not even Nott.

Molly is the first person that Caleb has willingly shown his scars to and, somehow, that feels entirely right.

“Caleb,” Molly says again. “I’m- love, I’m so sorry-“

Caleb shakes his head quickly. “This is not about me,” he says quietly. He crosses his arms over his chest, hunching in on himself, but he knows it does nothing to hide the scars in the slightest. “This is-
right now, Mollymauk, this is about you. You are what matters.”

“You matter too, love.”

Caleb gives a wry smile. “Maybe,” he admits. “But you are the one who had the bad brain day, and so I… I want to make sure that you are alright.” I need to make sure that you are alright. “This is… all this is normal for me, Molly. It can wait.”

“Caleb,” Molly says gently. When Caleb glances up he thinks he can see tears glimmering at the corners of Molly’s eyes, but then Molly scrubs a hand over his eyes and they’re gone again. Molly lifts the blankets around him wordlessly, beckoning Caleb back into bed, and Caleb moves almost without thinking, letting his feet carry him back to Molly’s side. He settles in next to him, lying on his back amongst the pillows, and Molly is quick to roll over and tuck in against Caleb’s side.

“Thank you,” Molly murmurs quietly.

“What for?”

“For that. For being here.”

“Oh.” Caleb shifts a little, tilting Molly’s head up and capturing his lips in a quick kiss. It’s a short kiss, sweet and simple, but Caleb doesn’t feel like it needs to be more. He is kissing Molly because he wants to, and because he feels like he should. He is kissing Molly to remind Molly that he is there, and to remind himself that Molly is alright. “I will always be here for you, Molly,” Caleb says when the kiss ends, and Molly kisses him once more.

“Thank you,” he says again. “For trusting me with your scars.”

Caleb shrugs a little. There are still nerves crawling beneath his skin but they feel lessened now, suppressed and made small by Molly’s presence. “You have trusted me with your physical ones for as long as I have known you, and today you trusted me with your mental ones too. It is only fair.”

“You still didn’t have to, dear heart.”

“I wanted to.” I wanted to show you all of me, is what Caleb doesn’t say, but it seems that Molly hears the unspoken words. He kisses Caleb one more before settling down, reaching out to grab the blankets and pull them up over them, cocooning them in warmth. Beneath the covers Caleb feels Molly’s tail curl loosely around his ankle; a grounding touch for both of them.

Caleb looks up at the dark ceiling above him, feels the warmth of Molly’s body pressed against his own, feels Molly’s breath brushing across the scars, and swallows.

“Tomorrow,” he says quietly.

“Hm?”

“I will- I will tell you how I got these. Tomorrow.”

There’s a pause. “Caleb,” Molly says softly. “You don’t- you know you don’t have to, love-”

“I promised. Last week, I promised you, Molly. And I am-” Caleb shuts his eyes, takes a breath, and feels it settle in his lungs. “I am ready. I want to tell you. You should know.”

Okay,” Molly says quietly, and he pushes the point no further. Caleb is grateful for that – he doesn’t know how to explain the difference between wanting to tell Molly something, and being able to tell him. He doesn’t know why, despite his absolute, unwavering trust in Molly, it has taken him this
long to feel comfortable enough to share his past.

But ‘why’ doesn’t matter. Caleb knows Molly. Molly doesn’t care about the ‘why’, and he doesn’t care how long it’s taken Caleb to get to this point. Molly just cares about Caleb.

Molly thinks that Caleb is deserving of all of this softness, and affection, and kindness, and he trusts Caleb enough to share the details of his past with him, and Caleb doesn’t know how to react to any of that.

Against his side he feels Molly shift, and a moment later the tiefling leans over him, propping himself up on one arm. “Caleb?”

“Ja?”

“Thank you,” Molly says quietly, and he leans down for a kiss. It’s a sweet thing, short and chaste, and Caleb adores it. He likes having this. He likes having this softness with Molly.

He likes having this trust.

“Go to sleep, Mollymauk,” he says when the kiss ends, his voice achingly fond, and he feels more than he hears Molly’s soft laughter as he lies back down again.

“I’m going to sleep,” Molly replies. He tucks himself back up against Caleb’s side, flinging an arm over Caleb’s waist. The direct, skin-on-skin contact is a new feeling for Caleb – up until this point they have only ever cuddled with Caleb wearing a t-shirt at the very least – but it’s nice. It’s very nice. Molly is so warm against his side, so absolutely, definitely, alive, and that certainty makes Caleb relax further. He could get used to this, he thinks.

“Mollymauk?”

“Yeah?”

In the darkness of the room, Caleb smiles a little. “Sleep well, Liebling.”

“You too, love.”

Caleb turns his head, presses a kiss to Molly’s forehead, shuts his eyes, and feels himself start to gradually drift towards sleep.

“Caleb?” Molly mumbles, some minutes later. Caleb blinks himself awake, staring up at the darkened ceiling of Molly’s room.

“Mm?”

“Could you- would you…” Molly’s voice trails off and he sighs, his breath brushing warm over Caleb’s chest. “…Nevermind…”

Caleb frowns. “Molly?”

“It’s stupid.”

“Liebling…”

“…I can’t sleep,” Molly confesses quietly, after several seconds have passed. “I- I can’t- my head is still all full of stuff, Caleb. And I- I was-…” He trails off again, shifting a little against Caleb’s side.
Caleb asks the question for him. “What would you like me to do, Mollymauk?”

“Could you… can you…?” Molly sighs. “…Would you read to me?” he asks, in the smallest voice that Caleb has ever heard from him. “In- in Zemnian? I just- your voice is really nice in Zemnian, Caleb…”

“Oh,” Caleb says softly.

“I know, it’s stupid, you can forget it-”

“I would love to, Molly.”

Molly grows still. “…You would?”

“Of course,” Caleb replies. “I would- I would always be happy to speak to you in Zemnian, Mollymauk, but you will not understand it.”

Molly gives a tiny laugh. “Right now, love, that’s exactly what I need.”

“What would you like me to read to you?”

“Anything,” Molly says with a shrug. “I know your memory, Caleb. I just- I just want to hear your voice. I don’t mind what you say.”

“Okay,” Caleb says quietly. He ducks his head, pressing a kiss to the top of Molly’s head, and thinks for all of half a second.

He has never been more grateful for his perfect memory than now.

What Caleb calls to mind is a poem that he has known for as long as he has known language. It is a poem that he has heard his mother say to his father, and his father say to his mother, and both of them say to him in snippets when he was younger. It is a poem that has taken root in his bones, in his heart. It is a poem that he has only ever associated with the oldest, deepest love.

It seems fitting now.

“Ich denke dein,” he says quietly, “Wenn mir der Sonne Schimmer vom Meere strahlt; Ich denke dein, wenn sich des Mondes Flimmer in Quellen malt.”

I think of you, when the shimmering sun
Gleams from the sea;
I think of you, when the glittering moon
Is mirrored in streams.

The poem is not a long one, and Caleb finishes it sooner than he would like. He doesn’t hesitate before starting to recite it again, murmuring the words lowly and softly in Molly’s ear, and beneath his arms he feels Molly’s breathing gradually slowing. It takes another few repetitions of the poem for Molly to fall asleep entirely, but even then Caleb keeps on speaking, lulling Molly even in slumber.

It is only when he knows for certain that Molly is truly, absolutely asleep, that he allows himself to say one more thing.

"Ich liebe dich,” Caleb murmurs, and then he shuts his eyes, sinks further back into the pillows, and lets sleep take him.
Chapter End Notes

The beautiful art in this chapter was done by nonsycamore on tumblr!
Caleb has no dreams that night.

He sleeps easily, safe and warm and comfortable in Molly’s bed. Despite knowing all too well that the morning will bring his turn to share his past, he does not dream of fire. He doesn’t see his home burn behind his eyes. He doesn’t wake up soaked in sweat, or dissociated, or anything like that. He doesn’t stir up at all, not until the morning light starts filtering slowly, gently, through the gauzy curtains of Molly’s room, brushing wakefulness across Caleb’s mind.

Even then, he does not wake fully. He wakes up just enough to be aware that he’s awake, and to be aware of where he is. At some point in the night he must have swapped positions with Molly, as he’s now half-sprawled across Molly’s front, the tiefling wrapped around him in a sleepy embrace. Molly’s tail is still loose around Caleb’s ankle – Caleb can feel the gentle shifting of it at the periphery of his consciousness – and Molly himself is moving a little, stirring lazily against Caleb’s body. Caleb doesn’t open his eyes. He doesn’t feel like acknowledging the world quite yet, not when he is still so comfortable and warm and relaxed. When he acknowledges the world he will have to acknowledge last night, which will mean acknowledging that it is his turn to speak. He doesn’t want to do that quite yet.

So Caleb keeps his eyes shut, and stays warm and comfortable under the blankets, and lets the world and Molly wake up around him.

“Good morning,” Molly murmurs sleepily. He stretches a little, his arms briefly leaving Caleb’s body as his spine arches, but they resettle a moment later as Molly tugs himself in closer to Caleb. There’s a rustle of sheets and then Caleb feels Molly’s lips press to his cheek in a kiss, immediately followed by a kiss to his forehead. It’s nice. These tiny touches of affection feel entirely natural to Caleb now, entirely expected and entirely normal, and he smiles a little, the expression hidden against Molly’s pillow.

He doesn’t need to wake up. Today, the world can wait for him.

“Caleb?” Molly asks quietly. Caleb doesn’t respond – he’s still more than half asleep, only barely aware of the world around him. He feels the bed dip next to him as Molly shifts, sitting up a little bit, and a moment later Molly’s hand brushes against Caleb’s face, tucking some loose strands back behind his ear. “Caleb,” Molly says again, but it’s not a question this time – Caleb’s name sounds more like a sigh in Molly’s mouth, and barely a moment passes before Molly kisses Caleb’s forehead again. He feels one of Molly’s hands settle in his hair, carding gently through the loose strands, his short ponytail having been long since ruined by sleep. Molly murmurs Caleb’s name again, and then again, each one interspersed with soft, barely-there kisses, like Molly doesn’t want to wake him.

Like Molly is afraid of waking him.

Caleb is happy with that. He’s wonderfully content, wrapped up in soft sheets and the warmth of Molly’s embrace and the comfort of having Molly close, where everything smells like Molly because everything is Molly. He doesn’t want to have to move. He doesn’t want to have to wake any further. His brain doesn’t bother him with brambles when he’s half-asleep.

So he stays where he is, and he lets his mind drift in a half-doze, and he very nearly misses what
Molly says next.

“I love you.”

For a moment, Caleb is sure that he misheard. He must have misheard. He’s tired, and he’s barely awake, and there’s no way that Molly just said— that he just said that. There’s no way. Caleb must be dreaming or imagining, his brain projecting his wants and wishes back at him in his half-asleep state. He must be, because there’s no way that Molly would say that to Caleb, because it isn’t true.

It can’t be true.

Caleb doesn’t move, not wanting to alert Molly to the fact that he’s awake, or awake enough to hear what Molly is saying. He keeps his eyes shut as Molly kisses his cheek again, and then his jaw, and then his shoulder, his lips lingering on the ruined skin. There’s a pause as Molly breathes and Caleb tries desperately not to let his suddenly thundering heart give him away. He’s imagining things. He knows that he’s imagining things and getting far, far too excited about what he thought he heard, but his heart doesn’t seem to catch that message.

Molly sighs, his breath brushing warm against Caleb’s skin, and then he speaks again.

“Gods, Caleb, I love you so much,” Molly murmurs, and this time Caleb knows that he didn’t imagine it. Molly kisses Caleb’s shoulder again and then leans away, shuffling to lie back down on the bed. The hand running through Caleb’s hair moves too, instead coming to rest warm against the small of Caleb’s back as Molly wraps his arm around him again, holding Caleb close and warm against his side. “Caleb…” Molly murmurs his name like a prayer, like a blessing – he speaks it like Caleb is something wonderful and treasured, like he is something altogether beautiful and beloved.

Molly says Caleb’s name like he loves him.

And that’s… that’s not right. Molly shouldn’t love Caleb. Molly was never meant to love Caleb. Caleb’s not complaining – far from it, in fact – but he’s so, so confused. He doesn’t get it. He doesn’t understand how or why he has Molly’s love, and he doesn’t know what to do with it.

He doesn’t know how he possibly deserves it.

He loves Molly. He knows that for certain now, knows it as well as he knows himself, as well as he knows his magic, but it is an entirely different thing to know that Molly loves him too. It is different to look back over the conversations from the last week and remember all the small, tiny instances
when Molly had cut himself off before continuing, and realise what he had been meaning to say.

It is different to know that, while Caleb had been struggling not to say anything, or text it, or let it slip into conversation alongside his normal soft affectations and endearments, Molly has been experiencing the same struggle too.

It is different to know that what he just heard was not a dream.

Molly loves me, Caleb thinks in a daze. He wants to reply, to open his mouth and tell Molly that he loves him too, that he adores him with everything that he has, but he doesn’t. He can’t. Molly had said the words so quietly, so carefully, doing his very best not to wake Caleb up. However much he loves Caleb – and that’s such, such a bizarre thought to have, that someone thinks he is worthy of love – he either isn’t willing to or isn’t able to say it openly yet. Caleb doesn’t know what’s holding Molly back, but he’s not going to push. Maybe Molly doesn’t want to overwhelm him. Maybe Molly doesn’t feel comfortable admitting those feelings yet. Maybe Molly – ridiculously, impossibly – thinks his feelings aren’t reciprocated.

Maybe, Caleb realises, thinking back to their first kiss, Molly is waiting for Caleb to make the first move.

Caleb knows that he will tell Molly that he loves him one day. He can feel the words waiting in his chest, settled within his heart, and every time he thinks them it becomes harder and harder to stop himself from speaking them aloud. One day he knows that he will slip up, and he will say them without thinking, and he will have to face the consequences. One day, Molly will know.

But not today.

Caleb doesn’t want to get up. He wants to stay in this soft bubble forever, with Molly’s words wrapped warm and secret around his heart and Molly’s arms wrapped around his body, holding him close beneath the covers. There is nothing painful or sad or unpleasant here, in the softness of Molly’s embrace. There is only comfort, and rest, and more love than Caleb has ever, ever believed himself to be worthy of.

He doesn’t want to get up, but he knows that he has to. Whether he likes it or not he knows that the world will keep on turning, and he has things he has to do.

He has a promise to fulfil.

Finally, Caleb forces his limbs to stir. He pushes himself up slightly, rolling over to look up at Molly as he blearily blinks his eyes open. He can only hope that nothing in his face gives away the three words that have fitted into place between his lungs. He can only hope that Molly has no idea that Caleb heard him.

Caleb gives a small smile, watching as Molly sits up a little bit too, and speaks.

“Hallo,” he mumbles.

Molly smiles at him. “Hey,” he says. Caleb sits up a little further, tilting his head in a silent, unconscious request for a kiss. Molly grants it to him immediately, pressing his lips to Caleb’s, and Caleb reaches out to rest one hand on Molly’s waist, his thumb brushing over Molly’s hipbone. Molly kisses him again, his own hand finding a mirroring position on Caleb’s side, and then leans back, still smiling softly. “Sleep well?”

“Mn,” Caleb hums in confirmation. Better than well. “Did- did you?” he asks, breaking off into a yawn part way through his question.
“I slept fantastically,” Molly confirms. “I always sleep better when I’m with you.”

Caleb smiles a little. It’s nice to know he’s not the only one. “I sleep better with you, too.”

“Mm, you certainly seemed very comfy last night. I woke up to find you using me as a pillow.”

Caleb shrugs, smiling wider. “It is not the first time that has happened, Molly.”

“No,” Molly admits, “It’s not.”

“And you use me as a pillow a lot, too.”

“I do.”

“So it is mutual, ja?”

“I suppose it is,” Molly says. In the flat red of his eyes, Caleb thinks he sees an echo of what Molly said when he thought Caleb was asleep. “Besides, you’re very cute when you’re using me as a pillow.”

Caleb feels himself flush a little. “Ja, well… so are you.”

“I’ll take that,” Molly replies easily. Caleb smiles a little wider, sitting up entirely now and leaning back against the headboard, one hand absently taking hold of Molly’s.

“Do you, ah… do you feel better than yesterday?” Caleb asks. He likes to think that he can see Molly’s state in the expression on his face and the relaxed way he holds himself, but he also knows how bad he is at reading body language. He doesn’t want to assume anything. Not about this. Not after what he saw yesterday.

Thankfully, Molly just gives a short nod. “I do,” he says simply. “I- yeah. It normally goes away on its own after a day anyway, but… yeah. Yeah, I feel a lot better than yesterday.”

Caleb smiles. “I’m glad to hear it,” he says quietly. “Yesterday was, um… it seemed like a lot.”

“It was a lot,” Molly agrees. “It was a lot for both of us.”

Caleb pulls a slight face at that. “I mean, I am certain that it was more for you. You were the one actually having the, you know…” He waves a hand at his head. “You know.”

“Bad brain day?”

“Ja.”

“I was,” Molly admits. “But stuff yesterday… it can’t have been great for you either. Just… considering what was said.”

That’s true. That’s very true. Caleb can still remember the entirety of yesterday in perfect detail – he remembers seeing Molly lying huddled on his bed in Caleb’s cardigan. He remembers listening to Molly talk about waking up in the ground. He remembers Molly asking him to stay.

He remembers Molly seeing his scars.

He remembers what he promised.

“Mollymauk,” Caleb says quietly. Molly must recognise the tone in Caleb’s voice because his
expression turns serious immediately, matching the heaviness in Caleb’s voice. “I- I said yesterday… I said that I would tell you everything. About- about my parents.”


“Could we… could I tell you now?”

Molly smiles softly. “You can tell me whenever you want, dear heart. You know that. Even if that’s not today.”

“I said I would tell you today,” Caleb says. “I promised. I intend on keeping that promise.”

“I didn’t want to pressure you.”

Caleb smiles back a little, reaching out for Molly’s hand. “I know,” he says. “You never have, Liebling. But this is… I want to tell you. About what happened.”

“About why you don’t like fire.”

_Not quite._ “Ja. More or less.” Caleb feels his face fall and he drops Molly’s hand, looking down at the sheets beneath them. “It is… it is not a happy story, Mollymauk.”

“You said you killed your parents,” Molly says quietly, and Caleb nods.

“Ja,” he whispers. “Ja, I did do that.”

“And you said it was an accident.”

“It was.”

“I know,” Molly says quickly. “I know, Caleb. I believe you.” He reaches out, stopping himself just short of taking Caleb’s hands, and glances down at them. “Is it alright if I…?”

Caleb nods, turning his hands over so that they rest palm-up on his knees. “Please,” he whispers. Molly takes his hands immediately, brushing his thumbs over Caleb’s knuckles, and Caleb lets himself lean forwards, slumping until half of his weight is resting against Molly’s front. Molly moves one of his arms instantly, wrapping it around Caleb’s back like he’s anchoring him in place.

It’s what Caleb needs. Right now, talking about his past, he needs an anchor. Talking about his past - _thinking_ about his past - is not a pleasant experience for him. It is not fun to remember what happened. It is not enjoyable to share the tale with another person, and know that they, like him, will carry around knowledge of what he has done for the rest of their life.

There is a reason that, up until now, Nott was the only person who knew what Caleb had done.

But, today, that is going to change.

Caleb can talk about this here. Here, in Molly’s room, in Molly’s arms, where there is no one but Molly to hear his words, he is safe.

_It’s going to be okay_, he tells himself. _It is going to be alright._

Caleb recalls the breathing pattern that Jester taught him, breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth, shuts his eyes, and speaks.

“When I was eighteen, I killed my parents.”
It feels like a safe place to start. Molly may not have known exactly how old Caleb was when it happened but he knew the important part. Caleb had told him as much only last week, thrown out of his skull by a nightmare with fire wreathing his hand. Molly doesn’t say anything in response to the statement, only turning his head to press a quick kiss to Caleb’s temple. The silence hanging around them doesn’t feel uncomfortable though, even in the wake of this statement. It’s just calm, and quiet, and Caleb lets himself breathe before continuing.

“I was- you know how I have magic, Molly.” It’s not a question.

“Yeah,” Molly says quietly. “Yeah, I know.”

“I found out about it when I was- oh, when I was fifteen? Sixteen? About that age.” He can’t remember now. So many years around the fire are fuzzy to Caleb, edged in soot and made unclear by smoke. It is only the fire that he can remember perfectly, crystal clear as if it had only happened yesterday.

As if it were happening now.

Caleb blinks back the flames behind his eyes and continues.

“I am… I am terrified of house fires, Mollymauk,” Caleb says softly, and he feels Molly’s hand gently squeeze his own.

“I know,” Molly says. Caleb lifts his head from Molly’s shoulder, frowning at him a little.

“How?”

“You told me.”

Caleb wracks his brain, trying to remember. If he had told Molly it must have been over a month ago - with his perfect memory of everything that happened in the last thirty days he knows for a fact that he hasn’t told Molly his fears in the last month.

Across from him, Molly smiles and gives a small shrug. “After our second date,” he says quietly. “When we were walking back from Titanic, before you got distracted by the cat. We were talking about fears and I-”

“You said yours was being buried alive or forgotten,” Caleb says slowly, the memory gradually coming back to him.

Molly nods. “Yeah,” he says, sounding just a little bit shaky. “Yeah. And you said you were afraid of house fires.”

“...You remember that?”

“It was important,” Molly says simply. “It was about you.”

“Oh.” Caleb can’t say he was expecting to hear that. Even now, when he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Molly cares for him, it still comes as a shock to realise that while he was paying attention to Molly and remembering the little things he said, Molly was doing the same to him. “I-um. That is… this is why I, ah, have that fear…”

Molly gives a tiny smile. “I thought it might be,” he says softly. “After- you know, after the fire incident by your office. I kind of started putting two and two together. I figured that something must have happened.”
Caleb gives a humourless smile. “You are not wrong. But you… you didn’t know that I had magic then.”

“I didn’t. I’m going to assume that it plays a part in this, though.”

That’s an understatement. “Magic is the entire reason any of this happened,” Caleb says. “If I did not have magic, I would not be- I would not be who I am now, Mollymauk.”

“You wouldn’t have your scars.”

“I wouldn’t have my scars,” Caleb confirms. “I wouldn’t- I wouldn’t have many things that I currently do.” Trauma. Anxiety. Self-loathing.

Caleb shifts a little on the bed, shuffling back from the warmth of Molly’s body to put some space between them. He doesn’t know why, but it feels easier to speak to the truth when he cannot feel the warmth of Molly’s skin against his own. He takes a moment just to breathe, settling himself in his head. He cannot rush this. He said he would tell Molly everything, and he intends to.

“I have always had magic,” he starts. “Always. I did not always realise that I had it, but I was born with magic in my blood. It has always been there, but for a long time I did not realise that it was present. Sometimes, I wish that I still didn’t know.”

Molly doesn’t say anything, only giving Caleb’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“I was going to be brilliant,” Caleb says quietly. “I was- myself and two others from my town, we were chosen. Selected. We had all shown a magical gift, more powerful than most, and… There was a school, a few towns over. A magic school. They came through every now and again to seek out new students, and they found us.”

“Who were the others?”

“A boy called Eodwulf and a girl called Astrid. I didn’t- I never got to know them very well.”

Molly makes an enquiring sound, and so Caleb elaborates.

“They went to the academy,” he adds quietly. “I- I did not.”

“Because of what happened?”

“Ja. Because of what happened.”

Molly doesn’t outright ask for the details, and Caleb is more appreciative of that than he knows how to say. Molly doesn’t ask anything – he just sits in silence, one hand settled warm and close against the small of Caleb’s back, and he waits. He gives Caleb the time he needs to find his words.

Eventually, Caleb does.

“My parents were so proud of me, Molly,” he says softly. “They were so proud, and they- they loved me so much. They were so proud that I had been chosen. We did not have much money but they saved up as much as they could, and for my birthday my mother and father bought me my first magic book. My first actual magic book, Molly. Not a second-hand one, not a borrowed one that I would have to return – an actual book, all for me, about my magic.”

Molly makes a small, curious sound. “Do you still have it?” he asks, and Caleb shakes his head.

“Nein,” he mutters. “It- it burned.” It all burned. “I do not have anything left from my childhood
“I’m sorry,” Molly says quietly.

“Don’t be,” Caleb replies. “It was my fault. I was- everything was going so well at the time, Molly. We were not a rich or well-off family, but we were happy. I was happy.” He takes a breath, tasting wood-smoke and ash on his tongue, and feels the familiar shape of the door he created at the back of his skull. Outside of nightmares, it has not been unlocked in a long time. “And then…”

“And then?” Molly prompts softly.

Caleb shuts his eyes, takes a breath, and opens the door.

Behind it there lies a small, simple living room, with an auburn haired teenager sitting at a table, pouring over a magic book. His fingers drum gently against the open pages of the book, one hand twisting and flexing as his eyes scan the text, devouring every word and symbol and sigil. He mutters a few words beneath his breath and then, just above his fingertips, a single flame flickers to life.

Even now, Caleb can remember the delighted hum of his magic beneath his skin.

“I started a fire,” Caleb says simply. “I was- I was practising. There was an entrance exam, some tests that I had to pass. I had passed the written ones fine, but the physical one was… I was afraid. I was so afraid of failing, Mollymauk. I was so afraid of letting my parents down, of not being good enough.”

“Caleb-”

“And so I- I practised. Every day.” From inside the room in his head he can hear his mother’s voice: no magic in the house, Caleb! “I was determined to do well. I was- I was going to be brilliant, and I was going to learn so much, and I was going to do so well, and my parents were so- they were so proud of me, Mollymauk. They were so proud. Not even for going. They were proud of me just for having been chosen. And I had to go. I couldn’t- I couldn’t let them down.” Caleb pauses, drawing in a trembling, rattling breath. “And so I practised. I learned everything I could, and I was happy, and my magic was happy, and it was all going so well…”

Molly doesn’t say anything as Caleb takes a moment to breathe. His hand keeps running over Caleb’s back in slow, comforting strokes, keeping Caleb tethered to the here and now.

Caleb does the breathing pattern again, and feels himself settle. He is alright. The fire has long since passed.

Molly will not hate me for this.

“I was practising,” he says quietly. In the back of his head he can hear the slightly off-kilter tick-tock of the grandfather clock that made up the familiar background noise of his home. “I was- my mother never let me cast magic in the house, you know? She would always be so annoyed if she caught me, but I liked to practise inside anyway. I- things like Mage Hand, you know? Small spells, simple things.” He gives a short, dry laugh. “Gods, they were so simple…”

“Were you good at them?”

“Ja, I was very good. I was excellent. A prodigy, they called me.”

“Who’s ‘they’?”
Caleb waves a hand, shrugging slightly. “The masters from the school. My family. Everyone. And
they were right, you know. I am- I am not good at many things, Molly. I know that. I am not good at
people, or at eye contact, or at so many other things, but I am- I was so very, very good at magic.
Magic liked me.” Magic loves him. Even as he speaks Caleb can feel the sparks crawling under his
skin, brushing against his veins like static electricity. It wants to get out, just as it always has.

And just as he always has since the fire, Caleb pushes it back.

“So,” he continues, “I practised. I was good, 
ja, but I could always be better. There was always more
to learn. Gods, there was so much to learn. I only had the one book that was- it was incredible,
Molly. There was so much to learn, all these different kinds of magic, and it was- it was amazing.”
He remembers the feeling of the cover beneath his fingers, the smell of the paper and the colour of
the ink. He remembers all of it. “It was the most amazing book I had ever read, and then I- then I
found fire magic, Mollymauk. And it was beautiful.”

“You said fire likes you,” Molly comments quietly. Caleb nods, thinking back to the previous week,
when he woke in the night and called fire to his palm. He remembers how it felt, dancing along his
blood and caressing his skin like a lover. He remembers the joy sparked deep in the back of his skull.

He remembers the hatred.

“Fire adores me,” he says quietly. Even now, just from thinking about it, he can feel his magic
coiling around his heart, touching against the inside of his fingers like a whisper, like a promise. “I
had never found a spell so easy, Mollymauk. No other cantrip even came close. It was- I could just
cast it, poof, just like that.”

*Just like that,* he had said to his parents, standing outside with fire proudly curling around his hand.
Just like that he could call fire to his palm; just like that he could control and manipulate it. It never
became boring, not quite.

But it didn’t take too long for Caleb to want to find a way to make it more interesting.

“I was- I was studying,” he continues. “And it was going fine. It was going absolutely fine. I love to
read, Molly – you know this – but reading magic was- it was something different. It is like reading
about language now but it was so, so much better. It was something that I was, you know? It was
me.”

Molly nods. “I think I know what you mean,” he says quietly. “Sometimes in life you find
something, or something finds you, and it fits.”

“Exactly,” Caleb agrees. “Magic fit.” He knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that had it not been
for what happened he would still be studying magic now, and he would be so, so happy.

It is a shame that the world didn’t work out that way.

“Magic fit,” he says again. “I learned everything in the book so quickly, even the slightly more
advanced spells. They were nothing particularly complicated, of course, and most of the components
were easy enough to come by, and eventually I grew- well, I grew tired of them. I wanted to try
something different. I wanted to impress the examiners, and so I- I tried to develop a, um, a variation
of Fire Bolt.”

“Oh,” Molly says quietly.

“Ja.”
“Did it- did it work?” Molly asks, but Caleb can hear in his tone that he already knows the answer.

“Kind of,” he says quietly. “It- it created fire.”

“…What happened?”

Caleb takes a breath. “The fire fell,” he says softly, “And I did not notice.” In his head he sees the sparks falling from his fire-wreathed hand like stars. In his head he sees them hit the wooden floorboards, sees how the fire, magic-fuelled and much, much hungrier than normal flame, takes the fuel and starts to devour.

In his head he sees what the Caleb of fifteen years ago did not, and watches as the fire starts to consume his entire house.

He watches it consume his parents.

“The fire caught and took my entire house. I- I did not have time to react before everything was burning – my book, and my desk, and- and my-… and my parents.” Caleb blinks back tears from his eyes, but he sees nothing of the room around him. “I heard their screams, Mollymauk. I heard them screaming, and shouting, and yelling, and dying and there was nothing I could do about it. Do you understand? I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t.” Caleb cuts himself off, catching his tears in his throat. He’s not going to cry. He’s not going to cry, and he’s not going to dissociate. He’s going to keep talking, because he promised Molly that he would. “It was my fault,” he says quietly, after several deep, shaking breaths. “It was my fault, Molly. I killed them.”

“Caleb…”

“I killed them. Their blood is on my hands.”

“It was an accident, love. You said it was yourself.”

Caleb gives a humourless snort. “I still caused it, Molly. I still caused their deaths. I burned my house, and I burned my cat, and I burned my parents. I burned everything so much that when they finally put out the blaze, they didn’t find bodies.”

“They- what?”

Caleb can hear the confusion in Molly’s voice, and he understands it. “They didn’t find bodies,” he repeats softly. “They only found ash. I had- my fire was so strong that they- my parents- there was nothing left. No bones or- or anything. There was nothing left to bury.”

“Gods,” Molly mutters quietly. There’s a quiet horror to his voice, clear for Caleb to hear even with how much effort he knows Molly is putting into appearing unphased, and in a sickly, ugly way, it feels good to hear it.

Molly should be horrified.

Molly should hate him for this.

“Tell me how I am not awful,” Caleb says. “Tell me how I am not a terrible, awful, disgusting excuse for a human. I killed my parents, Mollymauk. I killed them. However you look at it, it was my fault that they died.”

“It was an accident, Caleb,” Molly says softly. He squeezes Caleb’s hand, never once looking away from him. “You didn’t kill them.”
“How can you say that?” Caleb knows that there are tears rolling down his cheeks, silently choking his words. He is powerless to stop them. “How- how can you possibly say that I didn’t kill them? It was my magic, Molly. It was me.”

“You didn’t intend for it to happen.”

“Intent doesn’t matter.” There’s a horrible broken tone to Caleb’s voice when he speaks, so sharp and raw that Molly actually flinches back for a moment. “Intent doesn’t matter at all, Molly. Who cares what I meant to happen? Who cares that I didn’t mean for- for any of it to happen? It happened all the same, and it was my fault, and I am a murderer.”

“No-” Molly says softly, but Caleb barely hears it. His head is full of the ravenous roar of the fire; the sound of his own self-loathing.

“I am a murderer,” he says again, laying the words out like fact. “I am a murderer, Mollymauk. I was stupid and reckless and I killed them, and I nearly killed myself in the process. I should have been killed in the process-”

“No,” Molly says again, sharper this time. He squeezes Caleb hand again hard enough to hurt, but it’s what Caleb needs. The sharp flash of pain pulls him out of the room in his head, and when he blinks the flames before his eyes vanish, and all he can see is Molly.

Molly, who is watching him with tears on his cheeks that mirror Caleb’s.

“No, Caleb,” Molly says quietly. “You’re not a murderer.”

Caleb tries to speak, but at first no sound comes out. His lungs feel raw, like they’ve been filled with soot and ash and sparks and then emptied out, and he has to breathe a few times before he can muster any sound at all. “Molly…”

“You’re not, love. You’re not. You’re a good man.”

Caleb drops his head, looking down to where their joined hands rest between them. “I’m not…”

“You are. The fire- that was one thing,” Molly says quietly. “It was a big thing, yes, but it was an accident, and it was one thing, and you have done so much good since then, darling. You are a good person. You deserve to be here.”

Caleb doesn’t have anything to say to that. He gives a tiny nod, more to acknowledge that he heard Molly’s words than to agree with them, and doesn’t look up. There is nothing but silence in his head now, the fire dampened and the brambles falling silent in the wake of everything that Caleb just said. He feels hollow, like every thought and feeling and emotion has been pulled out of him. He doesn’t speak. He can’t speak. He just sits, and breathes, and listen to Molly doing the same across from him.

“Caleb?” Molly asks, what could be minutes or hours later. Caleb blinks, still staring down at their joined hands, and looks up into Molly’s face.

“Was?” The word is barely audible, but Molly hears it all the same.

“Have you- have you considered talking to someone about this?” he asks.

Caleb frowns. “I am talking to someone about this. I am talking to you.”

“I meant someone other than me, love.”
“I have told Nott-”

“Someone who is an impartial party,” Molly interrupts quietly. “Someone who is trained to listen and help you as best they can. A professional.”

Oh. “You are talking about…”

“A therapist, yeah.”

Caleb blinks. “I had… I had never considered that.” It’s true. He’s known about the existence of therapists for a long time now, but he has never once considered seeing one himself. His problems have never seemed serious enough, not in comparison to other people – he was not harming himself, and he was not a danger to himself or other people (although that last bit was, admittedly, debatable), and he was coping. He was handling it just fine. He may hate himself, and he may understand that he was worthy of practically nothing that he had, but that was only fair. That was only right. That wasn’t anything that he needed to talk to anyone about. That was just the way it was, and the way it had always been, and the way it always would be. He was Caleb Widogast. He had killed his parents when he was eighteen. He had fire in his veins and magic beneath his skin, and he had killed his parents, and killed his cat, and scarred himself, and destroyed his home, and he hated himself.

And that was how it was supposed to be.

Caleb looks down at their hands again. Molly’s skin rests against his own, soft lavender and vibrant ink lying alongside Caleb’s pale, freckled arms. Molly is so bright, and colourful, and whole. He knows exactly who he is, even after everything that happened to him. He has no memories older than five years, and he has no recollection of any family he may once have had, and yet he has never, ever, let that get to him.

Molly had a therapist – Caleb remembers him saying as much yesterday. He had a therapist who helped him, who taught him skills and techniques to help himself out of the shadows of his skull when the brambles come calling. They are techniques that he still uses now, skills that he has used with Caleb when Caleb got too lost in memory of soot and smoke and flame.

They are techniques that can be taught, if only he goes to the right person.

“Caleb?” Molly asks quietly, when Caleb still hasn’t spoken up after several minutes of silence. “Are you… I didn’t mean to push anything, love, I’m sorry if it sounded that way.”

Caleb shakes his head quickly. “Nein,” he says. “No, no, Molly, I know you weren’t. I was just…” He trails off, giving a small sigh. “Therapy is… it is not for me,” he says quietly. “I don’t need it. I am not hurting myself, and I am not a danger to myself or to others-” Liar. “-and I do- there are other people who need it more than me, Molly. I am coping. I am- I am…” Not fine. He hasn’t been fine for a long time. “I am coping.”

“Caleb,” Molly says again, but there’s sadness to his voice this time. Caleb looks up and is shocked and horrified to see what look to be tears glimmering at the corners of Molly’s eyes. “Oh, love…”

“What?” Caleb asks, utterly confused.

For a few long seconds, Molly says nothing. “Therapy,” he says eventually. “It’s… it’s not a case of needing it less than other people, Caleb. It’s not a case of someone else needing it more than you, so you have to give it up. You can be coping, and living your life, but therapy can still help. You don’t have to get to a certain level of bad to need therapy.”

“I am not bad, though,” Caleb says again. “I am coping just fine.”
“Caleb…”

“Was?”

“Are you coping, though?”

“Yes,” Caleb says again. He doesn’t understand what Molly is trying to say. “I- I am, Mollymauk. I am living my life, and I am working, and I am talking to Bryce, and I am looking after Frumpkin—”

“And you’re not looking after you,” Molly says quietly. “That’s- that’s what I’m trying to get at here, Caleb. You do so much to make sure that Nott, and Frumpkin, and myself are all fine, but you don’t look out for yourself.” He takes a breath, blinking away the tears that hang like jewels from his lashes, and continues. “I’m- I’m not going to force therapy on you, Caleb. If you don’t want it that’s absolutely fine. But, if you want, I can give you the number of my old therapist.” There’s no pressure to his words – they are presented as an offer and absolutely nothing more. “There’s no guarantee that it’ll help you, but it might. It’s worth a shot.” Molly pauses and then adds, in the tiniest voice Caleb has ever heard from him, “I don’t like seeing you hurt yourself…”

Caleb frowns. “I do not hurt myself, Mollymauk.”

“I didn’t mean physically, love.”

Oh.

Caleb doesn’t know what to say. He knows that Molly wouldn’t want him to apologise and so he doesn’t, but he can’t think of anything else to say beyond ‘I’m sorry.’ Molly knows Caleb almost as well as Caleb knows himself at this point – Caleb has no doubt that, even now, Molly can follow almost the exact pattern of his thoughts as he tries desperately to think of anything to say.

But he doesn’t have to, because Molly speaks for him.

“My therapist might not be perfect for you, Caleb, but at the very least she can help point you in the right direction. If- you know, if you want to do that.” Molly gives Caleb a small, uncertain smile. “If you think it would help.”

Would it help?

Because it feels undeniably good, telling Molly all of this. It’s terrifying, and awful, and it’s forcing Caleb to go back through memories that he has locked away for more than half his life, but it’s… freeing. He knows Molly. He trusts Molly. He knows that Molly isn’t judging him for anything that he’s says, knows that Molly genuinely only wants Caleb to say and do what he’s comfortable saying and doing. Molly wants Caleb to be happy, and to be happy with himself, and to be happy for himself.

And sharing this burden makes Caleb happy, kind of. He’s not delighted, isn’t ecstatic at reliving his past, but it’s… nice. It’s nice to tell Molly all of this, every awful, disgusting facet of his past, and hear Molly say no.

And hear Molly say, You are not disgusting because of this.

Already Caleb feels lighter, almost. There are still brambles around his brain and he feels that there always will be, but he feels unexpectedly better for having told Molly everything. His past is no longer a secret that he shares only with Nott – someone else has been added to the fold, now. Someone who Caleb knows he can go to whenever he needs to, can message whenever he needs to, to ask for help when his brain gets bad. And Molly isn’t an expert – he’s said as much himself – and
every technique he has was designed for him and for his own situation. They’re not even made for Caleb and yet they work all the same, to a certain degree.

Caleb can’t imagine what therapy could do. He’s far too accustomed to his own brain.

But it is undeniably tempting.

“Okay,” he says quietly, when a few long moments of silence have passed. “I will- ja. I will contact her. And, um. Ja.”

“Would you like me to help you know what to say?” Molly asks softly. Caleb looks up, giving a weak smile. Molly knows how Caleb can struggle in situations he hasn’t experienced before. He knows how they can make Caleb panic if he doesn’t have the direction and instruction that he needs.

“Yes, please,” Caleb says, and Molly smiles back.

“Alright.” Molly squeezes Caleb’s hand and then gives it a tiny tug – an unspoken ask if Caleb wants a hug. Caleb doesn’t speak his reply; he leans forwards instead, dropping his head to Molly’s shoulder as Molly’s arms wrap around him, holding him close and tight. “I’ll text you her number later,” Molly murmurs into Caleb’s hair and Caleb hums softly in response. “Caleb?”

“Mm?”

“I’m proud of you.”

“What for?”

“For making this step.”

“Molly…”

“I mean it,” Molly says, leaning back a little to better see Caleb. Caleb looks away immediately, feeling entirely unable to maintain eye contact, but Molly understands. He doesn’t force Caleb to look at him. He just slides his hands down to rest them on Caleb’s hips and gives a smile that Caleb can barely make out in the periphery of his vision. “I’m proud of you, Caleb. Even if you decide not to go through therapy, even if nothing comes of it… I’m still proud of you. It’s… it’s never fun, admitting this to yourself. I’m proud of you, and I-” Molly pauses, cutting himself short, and Caleb feels his heart leap in his chest. He knows what Molly wants to say, now. He knows what words Molly is stopping himself from saying.

They’re the same words that Caleb has stopped himself from saying so many times.

“I’m really proud of you, darling,” Molly says again. “For all of this. For telling me. For trusting me. All of it.”

_People should not be proud of me_, Caleb thinks reflexively, but this time, in the light of their discussion, he stops the thought. _People should not… people can be proud of me_, he corrects himself. _Molly is proud of me. Nott is proud of me._

_I can be proud of me too._

Caleb swallows down the quiet rebuttal that he wants to say, and says something else instead. “Thank you,” he murmurs quietly. There’s a blur of purple at the corner of his vision and then Molly’s lips press to his cheek in a kiss.
Distantly, Caleb thinks he can feel his own tears running slowly down the side of his face.

“Whatever help you need,” Molly murmurs softly. “Whatever it is, I’m here for you, Caleb.”

“I- thank you.”

“You doing alright?”

“I… I think so,” Caleb says quietly. His head feels strange, but not exactly bad.

Molly hums quietly. “You want to just stay here and cuddle for a bit? We don’t have to talk.”

“I- I would like that.”

“Alright.” Molly kisses Caleb again, quick and fleeting, and then leans back, turning around to start piling up pillows at the head of the bed. “Give me a moment,” he says, “I’m just- I’m just making a nice, good, comfy area for us to- there.” He shuffles up, tugging the blankets down so that he can settle in beneath them, comfortably supported by the veritable mountain of pillows, and pats the area next to him, giving Caleb a warm smile. “Come on,” he says. “Snuggle in.”

Caleb does.

He moves up the bed to Molly, falling gracelessly onto the piled cushions beside him. Molly gives a small laugh, freeing the blanket from beneath Caleb’s body and draping it over them both before wrapping an arm around Caleb’s shoulders, drawing him in closer.

“Comfy?” he asks. Caleb makes a small grumbling sound, shuffling around so that his head is cushioned on Molly’s chest, directly above his heart. With no fabric in the way it’s easy for Caleb to hear it – Molly’s heartbeat rings through his head like a metronome, counting out the passing seconds in blood and vitality and life.

“I am now,” Caleb says quietly, and Molly gives a tiny laugh.

“As I said earlier – you’re very fond of using me as a pillow, love.”

“Mm, but you do not complain about it.”

“I don’t,” Molly agrees, He ducks his head, the angle a little awkward what with how Caleb is slumped against him, and manages to kiss Caleb on the cheek. “I like knowing that you’re comfy, Caleb. You go all relaxed and comfortable when you’re cuddling me and it’s- it’s very nice. You don’t often seem to let yourself have things that you enjoy.”

As is standard by now, there’s no judgement in Molly’s words, Caleb gives a small shrug, barely feeling his shoulder brush against Molly’s through the scar tissue.

“Nice things are…” he starts, before trailing off. “They are… they are not normally for me.”

“Oh? Why not?”

Caleb gives a small, uncomfortable squirm. “You know why…”

“I don’t.”

“I- people who have done what I have done, Mollymauk, do not deserve nice things.”

“Mollymauk.”

“It was an accident, Caleb. You know it was.”

Caleb swallows damply. “It still happened,” he whispers. “It was still me, Molly.”

“It was you, Caleb, but that doesn’t change the fact that you’re allowed to have nice things.”

“It should.”

“It shouldn’t,” Molly says, his voice firmer. “The only person who thinks you don’t deserve nice things is you, Caleb,” he adds quietly. “You’re allowed to be happy, love. I want you to be happy.”

Caleb squeezes his eyes shut and turns his head to hide his face against Molly’s chest. He can feel tears threatening at the corners of his eyes, can feel them in how his throat constricts and his lungs squeeze. It shouldn’t matter, Molly saying that he wants Caleb to be happy. It shouldn’t matter at all, because Caleb knows from experience that just because you want something doesn’t mean that you should be allowed it, and it certainly doesn’t mean that you’ll be able to have it. Caleb wants Molly’s love. He wants not to have to check the latch on his window every night. He wants to be able to maintain eye contact with people that he cares about. He wants plenty of things, and so many of them are things that he doesn’t deserve or will simply never be able to do. It shouldn’t matter that Molly wants Caleb to be happy.

It shouldn’t matter, and yet it does.

Caleb loves Molly. He loves Molly so much that he thinks his heart might break with it and he knows now that Molly loves him back, at least in part. Caleb doesn’t know why Molly hasn’t told him properly yet, but he doesn’t mind. He doesn’t care. Molly never has to love Caleb openly if he doesn’t want to, and Caleb will never complain. This, what they have now, is already so, so much more than Caleb ever thought he would get. He adores Molly, and he trusts Molly, and he knows that when Molly said that he wanted Caleb to be happy, it wasn’t a selfish want. He didn’t want it for himself.

He wanted it for Caleb.

There are no words left in Caleb’s lungs, now. He doesn’t feel tired but he does feel worn out, and instead of replying to Molly he just presses closer against him, breathing in the faint remnants of lavender and incense and letting time pass. Molly’s heartbeat beneath his head drums away steadily, marking out the seconds and minutes as they pass, and the regularity of it lulls Caleb into something akin to a doze.

“Caleb?” Molly asks suddenly, and Caleb startles a little.

“Mm?”

“…Do you want to get breakfast?”

Caleb blinks, surprised to realise that he is actually noticeably hungry. Breakfast sounds good. It sounds very good. It sounds like exactly the normalcy that he needs right now.

“Oh,” he says, “Um. Yes? If that is not too much trouble…”

Molly smiles, pressing a quick kiss to Caleb’s lips before rising from the bed. “No trouble at all, love. Do you feel like anything in particular?”
Caleb shakes his head, watching as Molly crosses to the door, starting to rummage through the robes that hang in multitudes from the back. “Nein. Whatever you have will be fine. I am not much of a picky eater.”

“I’ll see what we’ve got in the kitchen,” Molly promises. He finally selects a long silk and gauze robe in stunning kingfisher blue from the back of the door and starts to shrug into it, the fabric falling in an elegant drape around his body. “If you want, by the way, you’d be more than welcome to borrow a robe. I’ve got plenty, and it’ll be more comfortable than putting your jeans back on.” Caleb hears the silent, unspoken, and you won’t have to walk around with your scars on show.

“That would be nice,” Caleb says quietly. “Yes, please.” Molly smiles at him, and gestures to the back of the door.

“There’s plenty there; take your pick. I’ve got a nice fluffy one somewhere in there if you don’t quite feel like silk and lace.”

Caleb smiles a little, already starting to feel more like himself just from this conversation. “I do not think silk and lace is, ah, quite my style, Mollymauk.”

Molly shrugs, crossing his arms over his chest with a slight smirk. “I don’t know,” he says, “I think you could look very lovely in them.”

Caleb can feel himself blushing. He glances away, stepping up to the door and starting to rummage through the collection of hanging robes in an attempt to hide his burning face from Molly’s eyes. “I—well—perhaps,” he manages to stammer out. From behind him he hears a soft laugh, but Molly says no more as Caleb finally locates the robe that Molly had mentioned.

The robe is warm and soft and surprisingly simple, given Molly’s taste—it’s made of a thick, pale blue towelling material, with a pattern of silver stars and moons. Caleb glances over at Molly, waiting for a nod of permission before shrugging it on. The fabric is soft against his skin, resting gently over his scars and covering him almost entirely, and when Caleb ties the cord around his stomach he feels certain that no one will be able to see his scars at all.

“Thank you, Molly,” he says, looking up, and Molly smiles.

“No problem.” He pauses by the door, holding a hand out for Caleb. “Come on,” he says, and Caleb smiles, takes Molly’s hand, and follows him out to breakfast.

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Caleb has breakfast with Molly, and he has lunch later with Molly and Fjord both. He texts Nott part way through the day, letting her know that he is alright and that Molly is too, but as the afternoon draws on he slowly starts to accept that he will, at some point, have to return home. And he doesn’t want to.

He doesn’t know Molly’s flat, and he doesn’t know Fjord particularly well yet, and were this anyone else Caleb knows that he would have long since left, made twitchy and anxious by the simple uncertainty that comes from being in someone else’s space. But this is Molly’s flat, and Fjord is Molly’s flatmate. He’s understanding about Molly’s bad brain days even if he doesn’t understand what causes them, and he’s nothing but polite as they eat lunch together, asking Caleb about his research and his job and his cat as Molly holds Caleb’s hand under the table. It’s nice. It feels homely, somehow, for all that the flat very clearly isn’t Caleb’s home, and it’s a bit of a novel feeling for him. He likes it, though. He can see himself visiting Molly and Fjord again, and had it not been
for the responsibilities waiting for him at home, he feels he very well could have stayed another
night.

But he can’t, and so after lunch and a number of hours spent enjoying each other’s company, Caleb
eventually has to leave.

Molly walks Caleb to the door, leaning against it as Caleb tugs on his shoes and swings on his coat.
He’s still wearing Caleb’s cardigan, his outfit deliberately picked out to compliment it after Caleb had
told him that he has absolutely no issues with Molly keeping hold of the garment for a while longer,
and Caleb can’t stop himself from smiling at the sight of Molly’s fingertips peeking out from the ends
of the sleeves.

Molly seems to catch him staring. “Something on my hands?”

Caleb shakes his head with a smile, straightening up. “Nein. I am just… you look very cute.”

Molly grins. “That’s because I am very cute, as well as being extremely hot and incredibly gorgeous.
But you’re also biased.”

“Perhaps,” Caleb says, shrugging. “I do not hear you complaining, though.”

“Oh, no, no complaints here. It’s always nice to be reminded that my boyfriend thinks I’m
attractive.”

“I always find you attractive, Liebling.”

“Oh, I know,” Molly says, with a particular cadence to his words that makes Caleb flush a little. “It’s
mutual though, darling.”

“Ja?”

“Of course. I can assure that out of everyone on this planet, you have my favourite face.”

Caleb snorts a little at that, shaking his head as he moves to open the door, stepping outside into the
hallway of Molly’s building. “Well, I am certainly glad to hear that I have your favourite face.”

“It’s a very good face.”

“You’re ridiculous, Liebling.”

Molly grins. He opens his mouth, clearly about to say something, but then shuts it again with a shake
of his head. Caleb sees him mutter something beneath his breath but he can’t quite make it out, and a
moment later Molly lifts his head, still smiling.

“Come here,” he says, holding his arms out and stretching up a little for a hug and a kiss that Caleb
willingly gives. He wraps his arms around Molly tightly, settling his head on Molly’s shoulder, and
relaxes into the familiar embrace.

“Thank you, by the way,” Molly says quietly, when the hug ends.

Caleb frowns. “For what?”

“For coming over.”

“Molly,” Caleb says quietly. He reaches out, taking one of Molly’s hands in his own without
thinking. “You do not have to thank me for that, Liebling. I wanted to be here.”
Molly shrugs, squeezing Caleb’s hand. “Thank you all the same,” he says simply. “You listened, Caleb. You helped. Not a lot of people can do that for me when I get- when I get like that. Normally it’s only Yasha.”

“I am your boyfriend, Molly. I want to help you.”

“Wanting to and being able to are very different things when it comes to this, love,” Molly replies, smiling slightly. “I’m sure you understand.”

He has a point, Caleb admits. “That is fair,” he agrees. “But anyway, I should be the one thanking you.” For listening. For accepting.

For not leaving me.

Molly smiles. “I’m your boyfriend,” he says back – an echo of Caleb’s words. “I want you to be happy, dear heart.”

“I am happy, Molly.”

“You can always be happier.” Molly quickly hugs Caleb again, turning his head to press a kiss to Caleb’s cheek. “Let me know if you call the number I gave you. Or if you need help preparing to call, or- yeah, or just if you need advice or just want to chat or anything. Okay?”

Caleb smiles. “Okay.”

“And let me know how Frumpkin is.”

“I will. I will see you tomorrow,” Caleb says, his words a promise, and Molly smiles and kisses him one more time before stepping back inside the flat.

“See you tomorrow,” he agrees. “Bye, Caleb.”

“Goodbye, Mollymauk.”

Molly shuts the door as Caleb steps back, turning to head towards the stairwell of Molly’s building. As he walks he lifts a hand to his mouth, pressing two fingers to his lips as if holding Molly’s parting kiss in place. There was nothing particularly special about the kiss – they have kissed more times than Caleb can count now, after all – but now, in the light of everything they spoke about, it feels different.

It feels different after what Caleb heard Molly say that morning.

Caleb’s recent memory is infallible. He knows that. He knows that whatever his memory presents to him from the last month is accurate, every moment correct and every sound perfectly preserved in his head. Caleb has never doubted his memory and he doesn’t doubt it now.

He stops just outside Molly’s building, leaning back against the stonework beside the door. His memory is perfect, even when muddled by sleep; it is perfect even when Caleb was only half-conscious for what he heard.

Caleb knows what he heard.

I love you, Molly had said. Caleb can hear his voice in his head – he can hear the soft accent resting above the words, the way Molly had murmured them so as not to wake Caleb up. He can hear the gentleness wrapped around them, the softness of every syllable, the absolute truth and certainty and
honesty of them. Molly had said that he loved Caleb, and he meant it.

And he means it.

Unlike in the wake of his nightmare the previous week, Caleb feels no doubts now. Molly knows everything, has heard everything, and his actions towards Caleb haven’t changed in the slightest. He is still Molly, and he still treats Caleb exactly how he used to. He doesn’t pity Caleb for his past, or hate him for what he did, or fear him for what he can still do.

He loves him.

Mollymauk loves him, and Caleb loves him back so much that it very nearly hurts.

*I love you*, Molly had said. Caleb gathers the words close and tight around his heart, finally walking away from Molly’s building and towards the bus stop. *I love you.*

*I love you too*, Caleb thinks.

One day soon, he will be able to tell Molly that.

Chapter End Notes

The lovely art in this chapter was done by nonsycamore on tumblr!
Summertime draws on.

Molly doesn’t say ‘I love you’ again, or if he does, Caleb cannot hear it. As the days go on and exam season truly begins Molly continues to spend the occasional night at the flat, even staying the full length of the weekend on more than one occasion. Caleb, too, starts spending more time at Molly’s flat – he still prefers his own, feeling noticeably more comfortable and secure when he knows where everything is and knows that he doesn’t run the risk of crossing some boundary or social line that he wasn’t even aware was there, but over time Molly’s flat also starts to feel familiar to him. He comes to know how to position Molly’s ridiculous number of pillows into something comfortable for both of them. He comes to know how to maintain simple, light conversation with Fjord as Molly bustles around the kitchen in one of his countless ridiculous robes, singing quietly to himself as he cooks up something for breakfast, or lunch, or dinner. He comes to know the timings of the bus to Molly’s flat well enough that he rarely has to wait more than a few minutes for it.

He comes to know his place in Molly’s life, and Molly’s place in his.

Caleb will not say that Molly is everything to him, because that simply isn’t true. There are so many components to his life now, so many players that make up the network he has surrounded himself with. There is his job, and his research, and his friendship with Jester, and his closeness with Nott, and his shared glances with Bryce that speak volumes. There is Frumpkin, and afternoons spent talking to students, and evenings of chatting with Beau at girl’s night as Nott paints his toenails a shade of purple that is almost, but not entirely, exactly the same shade as Molly’s skin. There is so much in his life that isn’t Molly.

And yet.

And yet, Molly has ingrained himself into Caleb’s life right down to the core. He may not be everything to Caleb, not in the way that Caleb feels that poets mean it, but that doesn’t stop him from being so unspeakably important to him. Molly has made a home in Caleb’s heart, nestled in deep and comfortable between his lungs.

Molly is familiar. Molly is comfortable.

Molly is home.

Caleb can no longer count the number of times that he has woken up to Molly wrapped around him like a particularly clingy octopus, his jewellery safe and sound in a little bowl on the bedside table and his tattoos practically glowing in the soft morning light, making him look more like an old, beautiful panting than a flesh and blood being. It is an entirely normal part of his life now – something that Caleb had never even hoped or dreamed of having, but something that he has all the same. He has Molly to hold and to love and he knows that, for all that he does not deserve it, he is loved in return.

He wants to tell Molly that he loves him. He really, truly does – he wants to stop having to catch himself from saying it as he speaks, want to be able to text Molly ‘I love you’ without forcing himself to go back and delete the message before he sends it. He wants to share his love with Molly so that it’s no longer bottled up inside him, waiting for his brain to grow quiet and calm enough for him to
finally, finally say it without his entire mind feeling like it’s wrapped up in brambles.

He wants to tell Molly, but he can’t. Not on his own.

Not without help.

Caleb has never liked reaching out for help but he doesn’t feel bad about it in this instance. He wants to do this, and he’s going to do it, and if he has to get help and encouragement from a friend in order to take that step then that’s exactly what he’s going to do.

But, for once, Caleb does not go to Nott.

This time, he goes to Jester instead.

He needs someone to help him sort out the brambles in his head and for this Nott just isn’t an option. Caleb already knows what Nott will say to him - he knows how she’ll reassure him, and comfort him, and state with absolute certainty that it’s okay for him to tell Molly that he loves him. Normally, that would be fine. Normally, that would be all that Caleb would need to here.

But this is not normal. This is important, and it matters.

For this, Caleb wants to talk to someone who actually knows Molly.

He knows that Molly loves him, at least in part. He knows that. He’s heard it directly from Molly himself, has heard Molly catching himself about to say it almost more times than he can count now, and he knows that, even if Molly does not love him as much as he loves Molly, his feelings are not entirely unrequited. Caleb loves Molly, and he knows that Molly loves him, and there should be nothing stopping him from telling Molly as much.

And yet…

And yet.

And yet here he is, sitting with his phone in hand, his leg jittering beneath him as he stares down at the open conversation with Jester. Jester has known Molly for longer than Caleb has and she has known Caleb for a long time too. She knows him, and she understands him, and even if she doesn’t know why his brain acts the way it does from time to time, it is enough right now that she knows that it does. Jester will not mind him texting; Caleb knows that much. She will not mind him asking for help, and after they talk he may finally, finally, be able to tell Molly how he feels.

That final thought is what it takes to finally spur Caleb to action.

[To: Jester] Jester?

[From: Jester] yessss?

[To: Jester] I would like to talk to you about something.

[From: Jester] :OOOO what about???

[To: Jester] Molly.

There’s a long, long pause. Caleb gets the impression that Jester is waiting for him to elaborate; he knows that he should, but he doesn’t know how to put everything that he’s thinking into words, and especially not over text.
It’s as he’s mulling over what to say, though, that Jester replies.

[From: Jester] okayyy……
[From: Jester] that doesn’t sound good caleb is everything ok???
[From: Jester] are you two ok?

[To: Jester] Ja!
[To: Jester] Ja, we are excellent.
[To: Jester] That is what I need to talk to you about.

[From: Jester] ohhhhhhh ok good
[From: Jester] don’t do that to me caleb I was really worried that you two had broken up or something :CCCC

[To: Jester] I am sorry.

[From: Jester] it’s ok
[From: Jester] but anyway what do you want to talk about???
[From: Jester] did you want to talk about other relationship stuff?? ;) ;)
[From: Jester] like advice or suggestions~~~? because as a tiefling myself I can give you a lot of pointers~~~
[From: Jester] like did you know that tails are super super sensitive? because they are~~

[To: Jester] I did know that, Jester.

[From: Jester] :OOOO CALEB!!!

[To: Jester] But that is not what I am texting you about.

[From: Jester] :C

[To: Jester] Do not give me that face, Jester.

Even when she’s not actually there, Caleb knows exactly what that pout looks like.

[From: Jester] :CCCCCCC

[To: Jester] Jester. This is serious.
[To: Jester] This is important to me.

[From: Jester] I’m sorry, caleb.
[From: Jester] what did you want to talk about?

Caleb pauses, his thumbs hovering over the keyboard. He wants to share this with someone. He wants someone else to know, and he wants to go to Jester because he knows that he will help her.

Still, it is both a wonderful and terrifying text to send.

[To: Jester] I want to tell Molly that I love him.

[From: Jester] :OOOOOOOOOOO CALEBKHBGSRHFSGDHKGFLHSGJHDSJHGLHD
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
[From: Jester] OMG IM SO HAPPY IM CRYING
[From: Jester] when are you doing it and what is your plan and you have to promise to tell me everything that happens omggggggg

[To: Jester] Um.
[To: Jester] This is why I wanted to speak with you, Jester.
[To: Jester] I want to tell Molly that I love him.
[To: Jester] But I am afraid.

[From: Jester] oh noooooooooo caleb why?

Caleb drags a hand over his face.

[To: Jester] Can we talk about this in person? Would that be alright?

[From: Jester] of course!!
[From: Jester] at your flat orrrrr??????

[To: Jester] I was thinking at your flat, if that is alright. Maybe tomorrow?

[From: Jester] of course it is alright, caleb
[From: Jester] im going to the gym with yasha tomorrow morning but you could come round in the afternoon? at 2?

[To: Jester] Ja, that sounds good.
[To: Jester] Thank you, Jester.

[From: Jester] <3 <3 <3 <3

Already Caleb can feel the knot of fear in his chest loosening. He trusts Jester. She can be boisterous and bouncy and far, far too loud for him to deal with from time to time, but her heart is undeniably in the right place. Caleb knows that she will listen to him, and that she will help him however she can, and that she will be more than happy to share her significantly greater knowledge of navigating relationships with him.

On his lap, his phone buzzes again.

[From: Jester] calebbbbb is it alright if i bring someone else to this meeting????

…Well. Two heads are better than one, he supposes.

[To: Jester] That depends. Who are you planning on bringing?

[From: Jester] yasha! she knows molly super super well and she’l be able to extra help you out and also she says that she doesnt think shes met you enough and that she needs to check that youre going to be good for him before anything like this happens

[To: Jester] Oh.
[To: Jester] Is Yasha at your flat?

[From: Jester] yeah! she’s seeing beau ;)

[To: Jester] Ah. I see.
[From: Jester] do you

[To: Jester] Yes.

[From: Jester] but /do/ you?

[To: Jester] Yes, Jester, I do.

[From: Jester] if you say so…..
[From: Jester] so, do you want yasha to join the talk or not?
[From: Jester] she wont mind if you say no

Caleb looks down at his phone, turning over the suggestion in his head. Yasha does know Molly better than Jester does – Molly himself had told Caleb that – and she is Molly’s best friend in the same what that Nott is Caleb’s. It had been important to Caleb for Molly to meet Nott as Caleb’s boyfriend, even if he couldn’t put the reasons why into words, and though he has met Yasha before it has never been like this. He has met Yasha while being Molly’s boyfriend, but they have never discussed it.

That should change.

[To: Jester] Please tell Yasha that I would like her to join us.

[From: Jester] ok!!!!!
[From: Jester] I’ll see you tomorrow caleb :)

[To: Jester] See you then, Jester.

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Jester is surprisingly quiet when she opens the door for Caleb the following day, stepping aside to let him in with none of her usual exuberance. It’s a distinct change from her normal manner of greeting, but Caleb knows why she’s doing it, and he appreciates it. He’s feeling twitchy and anxious, on-edge for all that he’s absolutely sure about his feelings, and he feels that Jester being her regular, bouncy self would only make that worse.

She does draw him into a hug as she always does though, wrapping him up tight and squeezing hard enough to make him wheeze.

“Hi, Caleb,” she says. Her voice, like her actions, seems caught on the cusp between her natural bubbly personality and the seriousness of what they’re going to be talking about. It’s a strange balance, and it’s not really something that Caleb’s seen before, but it feels oddly right. This is a strange situation.

For starters, he never thought he’d have someone to consider saying ‘I love you’ to.

Caleb wheezes again, feeling his feet finally hit the ground as Jester lowers him and releases him from the hug. “Hallo,” he says, bending down to quickly kick off his shoes. “How… how are you?”

“I’m good,” Jester says leaning back against the wall. “How are you, Caleb?”

Caleb pulls a slight face, standing upright. “I’m okay.”

“Just okay?”
“Ja. I’m, you know…” He shrugs. “I am worried about this, but life is- life is good. So I am okay.”

Jester gives a slow nod. “I understand.” she says sympathetically. “You’re happy about everything with Molly, but you’re also worried about Molly, right?” Caleb nods. “I understand. But it’s okay!”

Jester grins suddenly, and it’s so wide and contagious that Caleb cannot help but smile back a little bit. “That is why I am here to help you, and that is also why Yasha is here to help you too.” She reaches out, waggling her fingers a little, and Caleb takes her hand, letting Jester drag him down the hallway.

“Is Beau-” Caleb begins and Jester shakes her head, leading him into the living room.

“Beau’s out,” she says, dropping his hand and sitting down on the couch next to Yasha. “I thought it would, you know, be easier and nicer for you if it was just us.”

“Oh,” Caleb says, a little surprised. “Um. Thank you, Jester.” He sits down on the couch opposite her, perching on the very edge of it and twisting his hands together in his lap, his right thumb scratching absentely at his wrist. Yasha glances up at Caleb, raising one hand in an awkward wave and giving a small smile which Caleb tries his best to return.

“Hi,” she says, her voice soft.

Caleb smiles weakly. “Hallo.”

“Are you… how are you?”

He shrugs. “Gut.”

“That’s good.”

Jester leans over, resting one arm on Yasha’s shoulder as she stretches up to stage-whisper in her ear. “He’s nervous,” she hisses loudly, and Caleb feels his lips twitch. In a strange way, it’s nice to hear Jester laying the truth of it out so plainly. It makes it easier for him to talk about it, if someone else paves the way first.

It makes it easier for him to breathe, and listen as Yasha starts to speak.

“So,” Yasha begins quietly. “Jester… Jester said that you’re here because you want to tell Molly that you love him, correct?”

It seems there’s no beating around the bush today. Caleb glances at Jester, who mouths a quick ‘sorry’ in his direction before he turns his gaze back to Yasha. “…That is correct, Ja.”

“Okay. And she said that you had some, um, problems about it.”

Caleb pulls a slight face. “I- ja, I suppose…”

“And that I might be able to help?”

Caleb lifts a hand, scratching at the back of his neck. “Possibly,” he says. “You- you know Molly very well, from what I understand.”

“I do. I do know him very well.”

“Good,” Caleb mutters. “That’s- that’s good. I was, um…” Gods, how does he possibly put this into words? “I was- I was hoping… I love Molly,” he blurs out all of a sudden, and there’s a soft sound as Jester claps both hands over her mouth, hiding a muffled sound of delight behind them. Yasha
glances at her, frowning a little with confusion, but Jester just waves a hand, encouraging Caleb to continue talking.

“Go on!” she whispers, the words somewhat stifled.

“I love Molly,” Caleb says again, a little easier. “And I… I think I want to tell him, but I… I can’t. But I want to.”

“Oh,” Yasha says quietly, at the same time that Jester makes a sound like that of a sad puppy. She drops her hands from her mouth, eyes wide as she looks over at Caleb.

“Oh, Caleb…” she says. “Do you really want to tell Molly that you love him?” There’s no rudeness to her words, and Caleb knows that she does not mean them in a mean way – she sounds hopeful, like she wants for Caleb to tell Molly just as much as Caleb himself does. Caleb nods immediately, no hesitation in his response.

“Ja,” he says quietly. “Ja, I- I really do.”

“Caleb,” Jester says again. There’s no mistaking the quiet, proud delight in her voice this time. “That is so cute. Do you know why you haven’t told him yet?”

Of course I do, Caleb thinks, looking away. “I- I don’t…” He trails off, giving a small sigh. “I am… afraid,” he admits quietly, twisting his hands together in his lap.

Across from him Jester frowns a little, tilting her head to one side. “Afraid?” she echoes. “Afraid of what?”

Of Molly not feeling the same way. “Of something… happening…”

“Caleb,” Yasha asks quietly. “What do you think will happen if you do say it?”

Caleb shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know.” It’s a lie and he knows it. When he shifts his gaze, looking away from Yasha and over at Jester, he can see that she knows it too.

He knows exactly what he’s afraid of.

“…I am afraid that Molly will not love me back,” he says quietly. It’s a stupid fear and he knows it – he has heard Molly say that he loves him, and he knows that Molly would never lie to him, least of all when he thought Caleb to be asleep. He knows that Molly loves him.

All the same, he worries about it.

And it’s like saying that has opened the floodgates, because suddenly he finds every one of his fears pouring from his mouth.

“I am afraid that Molly will not love me back,” he repeats, “and I am afraid that this is too soon, and I am afraid that I will say it wrong, and I am afraid that Molly will be uncomfortable, and I am afraid that I do not deserve this, and I am- I am-” He breaks off, drawing in a breath. Wordlessly Jester reaches out, procuring a tissue from somewhere and handing it to him. Caleb takes it, pressing it quickly to his eyes before starting to shred it in an absent-minded, automatic way. “I’m afraid,” he says quietly, his words practically inaudible. “But I… I do not want to be. I want to tell him that I love him, because I do.”

“Oh, Caleb,” Jester breathes. She reaches out again, and for a moment Caleb is confused before he realises her intent. He leans forwards, letting Jester take his hand and give it a soft, reassuring
squeeze.

For a moment, Jester’s small living room is silent.

“Okay,” Yasha says suddenly, sitting back a little bit. She taps her fingers together, looking surprisingly awkward and uncertain for all that she also looks like she could snap Caleb in half with a look. “Okay,” she says again, quieter, before looking up at Caleb. “Caleb?”

“Ja?” Caleb replies, letting go of Jester’s hand.

“What I say next is not to leave this room, okay?”

Caleb nods, frowning slightly. “Okay…”

“Good. Jester?”

“Yeah?”

“Same rule applies.”

“Aww.”

“I mean it.”

“I know, I know…” Jester sighs quietly, flopping back against the couch and tucking her legs up underneath her, smoothing her skirt out over them. “I promise.”

“I need an actual promise, Jester.”

Jester pouts. “Fine,” she says. “But only because you are asking.” She sits up, tugging a pendant out from beneath her shirt. It’s a simple pendant of silver and jade, shaped to look like an open archway at the end of a path, but Jester holds it like it’s something altogether infinitely more precious and valuable. “I promise on the Traveller that whatever you say will not leave this room, Yasha.”

Yasha visibly relaxes. “Good,” she mutters. “That’s good. Thank you, Jester.”

“Of course.” Jester smiles widely, tucking the amulet back beneath her shirt before leaning forwards, resting her chin in her hands. “So! What were you going to say that is so secret that you made me promise on my god to not tell anyone?”

“It is… ah…” Yasha trails off, giving a soft sigh. For a few long moments she sits in silence, looking down at her lap. Caleb doesn’t hurry her. He knows the importance and difficulty of finding the right words, and so when Yasha finally speaks up again, almost an entire minute later, he doesn’t blame her in the slightest for making him wait.

“I have known Molly for a long time,” Yasha says softly. “A very long time. Almost as long as he’s been out of the ground for. I knew him when he was nonverbal, and he hung out with me a lot at the carnival before he started speaking and moved in with Fjord. I am not exaggerating when I say that I know him better than anyone, save maybe for Gustav.” She lifts her head, pinning Caleb with her mis-matched gaze. For a moment, Caleb thinks that he can taste storm-touched ozone on the back of his tongue. “Do you understand? I know him better than you, Caleb.”

“I know,” Caleb replies, trying not to squirm in his seat. He doesn’t like eye contact, and Molly and Jester both know this, but Yasha doesn’t. He cannot blame her for this but it still makes him feel like this is a trial on some sort. A challenge. He holds her gaze steady as he replies. “I know, Yasha.”
“Good,” Yasha says, and whatever thing she was doing ends as she drops her gaze from Caleb. “I hope that that means that you will trust what I say next.”

Caleb frowns, leaning forwards a little. Next to Yasha, he sees Jester do the same. “Okay,” he says slowly. “What are you going to say?”

“Molly loves you,” Yasha says simply.

It is not a surprise to Caleb. He knows that Molly loves him, has known that Molly loves him for weeks now.

But it is altogether different to hear it from the mouth of Molly’s best friend.

Caleb feels some tension in his body lessen. He slumps back against the couch, almost feeling lighter from those three small words alone. Molly loves me, he thinks. A smile tugs at the corners of his lips and he is powerless to resist it. Molly loves me, and I am not the only person who knows this.

He wets his lips, still fiddling with what remains of the tissue. “Molly loves me,” he repeats quietly, and Yasha nods.

“Yeah. He does.”

“So why has he not told me?” Caleb can’t stop the words from escaping him. Ever since he first heard Molly say it, that first night that he stayed over at Molly’s flat, he’s been puzzling over it, wondering why Molly had waited until he thought Caleb was asleep to say it.

Across from him, Yasha gives a small shrug. “Because he is worried.”

Caleb frowns. That doesn’t make any sense. He knows Molly, and he knows that beyond what fears they have discussed together there is very little that can frighten Molly. Molly is, by all accounts, a much, much braver individual than Caleb. What could he possibly be afraid of? “Yasha,” Caleb asks, his words slow and confused, “What is Molly worried about?”

“You.”

“…Me?”

Yasha nods. “He is worried that you may not feel the same way. He is worried about rushing you. He is worried that he is moving too fast.”

There’s a long pause.

“Oh,” Caleb says softly. “Oh.”

He didn’t think he could love Molly any more than he already did.

As it turns out, he thought wrong.

Caleb had realised from the very start of their relationship that Molly was being careful with him. He has known since their first date, since their first kiss, since their first everything that Molly was carefully, deliberately, only ever moving at exactly Caleb’s speed. Caleb does not know how fast Molly wanted to go, but he knows that Molly never minded being patient. He knows that, to Molly, Caleb’s comfort and consent always came first, and it hadn’t taken him long at all to pick up on the sheer degree of Molly’s care, and attention, and patience.

Caleb just hadn’t realised that that same care and attention and patience extended to this too.
How long has Molly loved me for? Over a month, most likely – Caleb can remember plenty of instances of Molly stopping himself from saying what he wants to in the past month alone, and he knows that there are instances earlier than that. For a month, for at least a month, Molly has been waiting, holding his tongue and holding his words so as not to hurry Caleb. So as not to rush him.

Caleb remembers the absolute care with which Molly had asked if he could touch Caleb’s waist, all those months and weeks ago when Molly first brought him Frumpkin. He remembers how calmly Molly had told Caleb what he was going to do, how gently he’d asked for permission to do everything. He remembers how, even now, Molly waits to get his permission with a glance, or a raised eyebrow, or with soft, quiet words to do anything that Caleb has not yet explicitly stated that he is entirely comfortable with. Molly cares for Caleb to a scale that Caleb can barely comprehend.

It is only when he compares it to how much he cares about Molly that he thinks he can begin to understand it at all.

“Molly has known a lot of people,” Yasha continues, her voice soft in the stillness of the flat. “It is not my place to tell you any more than that, but this… you… he is different around you. I have never seen him care this much about someone else and Molly cares a lot about everyone. He always has.”

“I know,” Caleb says quietly. How can he not know, when he has seen the proof of Molly’s care and kindness himself? Molly cares about him, yes, but Molly cares about everyone else too – he asks Nott how her day was, he brings treats for Frumpkin on occasion, and he’s started bringing Bryce coffee every time he drops by the office to see Caleb, brushing it off with a laugh and an explanation that he knows how terrible the office tea and coffee is whenever Bryce asks why. He cares, and he loves, and he does his best to leave every place better than how he found it, however he possibly can.

Molly cares about everyone and to hear his best friend say that he cares about Caleb even more than normal makes Caleb’s entire chest feel suffused with warmth.

“I know,” he says again, softer. He looks down at his hands, remembering the gentleness of Molly’s touch - how Molly was so, so careful with Caleb on the night that he arrived with Frumpkin, and on every night after.

“He cares about you very much,” Yasha says. Caleb doesn’t look up at her, still touching his fingertips to the back of his hand as if he can draw Molly’s touch back to the surface of his skin. “Very much, Caleb. He loves you.”

And I love him. Caleb looks up at Yasha, his hands stilling in his lap, but he does not say anything. He just catches her eye, and waits.

Yasha gives him a soft smile. “He loves you,” she repeats. “He doesn’t want to make you uncomfortable or hurry you in any way.”

“He hasn’t,” Caleb says. “He- he never has.”

“But that is why,” Yasha continues, “at least for this, you need to take that step first. Molly will wait for you forever if he has to. You know that he will.”

“I do,” Caleb confirms quietly. “I. ja, I know that. And I- I want to tell him.”

“I know you do, Caleb.”

Caleb nods to himself. “I will tell him,” he says. From beside Yasha, Jester gives a tiny, almost inaudible gasp. “I am… I am going to tell him. Soon.”
Yasha smiles. “Good,” she says softly. “I am glad to hear that, Caleb. You’ll make him very happy.”

Caleb smiles back, just a little bit. “I want to make him happy.”

“I know you do, Caleb. And you do.” Yasha’s smile drops abruptly, her whole face turning stony. “And,” she adds, “I am not going to tell you that if you hurt him, I will break you, because I think that you already know that.”

Caleb swallows, unable to stop his eyes from darting over Yasha’s very, very prominent biceps. “Ja. I know that too.”

“Good.” Yasha gives him a small smile, and Caleb feels himself relax slightly. “But also, I think I do not have to tell you not to hurt him because I feel that if you were to hurt him, you would not need me.”

“No,” Caleb agrees immediately, his voice quiet. “No, you are- you are correct about that.” If he were to hurt Molly in any way, shape, or form, he knows that he would be far harsher on himself than Yasha ever could be, and it seems that Yasha knows that too. “I never want to hurt him…”

“You will not hurt him by waiting,” Yasha adds softly.

“But I do not want to wait.”

“And he will not want you to rush yourself,” Yasha replies, as calm and as sure as ever. “He wants you to be happy. That is all.”

That is all.

That is all Molly has ever wanted for me, Caleb thinks. And it is all I have ever wanted for him. Beneath his fingers, he remembers the touch of warm skin, and cool metal, and endless lines of peacock-toned ink.

“Does that help, Caleb?” Jester asks, her eyes wide and a little bit worried.


Jester beams and, next to her, Yasha gives a small, shy smile. “Of course, Caleb!” Jester says delightedly. “I’m glad we could help! You and Molly are so cute together! You always look so happy when you’re with him!”

Caleb smiles back, unable to stop himself. “I am happy with him,” he says quietly and manages not to flinch at the volume of Jester’s delighted squeal.

“Caleb! I’m so proud of you!”

This time, Caleb doesn’t need to ask why. He’s had this conversation enough times and, this time, he’s not going to brush it off.

People can be proud of him – he knows that now. He still struggles to understand it, and to accept it, and he’s still a long way off being truly proud of himself but right now, in this moment, he can accept Jester’s words. He can accept that Jester is proud of him, because she’s right to be. He knows that he’s come a long way from his first kiss with Molly, when he almost worried his way into a panic attack within a second of it happening. He’s come a long way from believing that Molly giving him his number was a mistake. And he may still struggle to accept that he is allowed to have this, to
have Molly’s company and Molly’s affection and Molly’s love, but at the very least he no longer tries to push it away.

And so he smiles back at Jester, and ignores the bramble trying to wind around his brain, and sits up tall and proud.

“Thank you,” he says, and Jester only beams wider. She, like him, knows what this acceptance means.

“Any time!” she chirps. “You know I’m always here to chat and to answer any questions that you have, Caleb!”

That’s a good point. Despite their discussion, Caleb still does have just one more question. “Jester?”

“Yeah?”

“When will… how will I know that I’m ready? To tell Molly?”

Jester shrugs. “You just kind of do,” she says. “Like, maybe he’ll say something, or he’ll do something, and then you’ll just know. It’s really cute and magical like that – you never know what’s going to happen to make you say it!”

Caleb frowns a little. It is sweet, in that strange Jester way, but it also doesn’t really answer his question. He doesn’t like answers that rely on a strange, intangible thing that he will never be able to track. He likes knowing dates and times and even though he knows that he will never get one for something like this, he was at least hoping for a timescale.

He opens his mouth, about to reply, but it’s then that Yasha speaks up. Her voice is soft, quiet and calm in that way that it always it, but Caleb doesn’t miss a single one of her words.

“Caleb,” Yasha says softly. “…I… I cannot give a lot of advice in this area, but from what I understand of this, if you truly do love Molly – and I believe that you do – then you will know when you are ready to tell him. Or when you want to tell him.” She looks up at him, her mismatched eyes serious. “I cannot say when that is, or when you will know, but… remember that Molly does love you. Very much. He won’t mind waiting for you. He is- he is a very good person.”

Caleb swallows. “I know,” he says quietly. “I know he is.”

“…Caleb?”

“Ja?”

“Be good to him.”

“I will,” Caleb says. There has never been a more precious object in his life than Molly’s heart; it is a heady power, to hold such a thing in his hands, and the thought of breaking it hurts him more than he knows how to put into words. He does not have to think to swear to keep it safe. “I promise.”

Yasha gives a small, contented smile. “Thank you,” she says, and that seems to be the end of that.

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There is no dramatic turning point when Caleb finds himself ready to tell Molly that he loves him. There is no grand event, or great revelation, or anything like that. Caleb just looks at Molly one day, and he knows.
He realises it on a warm summer day while marking exam scripts at the dining table in his flat. It’s the weekend and Molly has been staying over since Friday evening, cooking dinner with Caleb and chatting with Nott and generally belonging in the flat, fitting in between Nott’s accumulated knick-knacks and Caleb’s stacks of books and exam scripts. A few of Molly’s own possessions have even started to make their home in Caleb’s space – he has a toothbrush in the pokey bathroom, and a change of clothes in a drawer in Caleb’s dresser, and a designated set of Caleb’s clothes that he borrows so that he can wander around the flat in the morning without horrifying Nott with his nudity. It’s nice. It’s normal.

It’s comfortable.

There is no strangeness or awkwardness from having Molly so deeply ingrained in Caleb’s space and life. Even now Caleb doesn’t have to look to know where Molly is – he can hear Molly moving around the living room of his flat as he sits at the dining room table, his pen leaving trails of red ink in its wake as he works his way through the exam scripts. Molly’s footsteps are entirely different to Nott’s, but even beyond that there are small differences that let Caleb know with absolute certainty that it’s Molly who’s in the flat with him and not his flatmate. There’s the gentle, faint scent of incense and lavender. There’s the soft, barely-audible sound of Molly’s tail swishing through the air, and the faint jingling of his jewellery.

The gentle kisses that Caleb occasionally feels pressed against the crown of his head are a pretty good indication too.

Caleb is maybe a third of the way through the stack of exam booklets when he hears Molly moving around behind him, his path evidently having taken him from the living room portion of the room to the kitchen part. Caleb doesn’t turn his head, absently picking up on the soft rumble of the kettle boiling and the gentle clatter of ceramic against the kitchen counters as he flips a page in the answer booklet before him, doing his best to decipher the student’s hurried handwriting. He hears the gentle clicks of a few cupboards opening and closing, followed by a faint rustling as Molly does something that Caleb can’t see, but he doesn’t turn his head to look. He’s focused on his work right now, and the sounds of Molly puttering about his kitchen and his home fade into the background of his mind.

It’s only when he sees a blur of purple skin and bright fabric at the corner of his eye that he looks up from the exam script.

“Was ist das?” he mumbles, watching as Molly places a mug of steaming liquid down next to his hand. The steam drifting off the surface of it catches prettily in the summer sunlight streaming in through the window, turning gold and silver and sparkling white as it dances and twists in steady, gentle waves. Caleb inhales, catching the smell of the drink in his lungs, and then frowns. It smells like tea. More than that – it smells like a Classic Widogast, somehow. Caleb’s certainly not complaining at the appearance of his favourite drink, but he is confused. For all his searching he’s never been able to locate that particular blend anywhere outside of Pumat’s shop, and while half of his mind is still preoccupied with trying to figure out what, exactly, his student had written, he’s still very certain that he is in his own home.

From the edge of his vision he sees Molly shrug and he turns his head to look at him. Molly gives a small, soft smile.

“It’s a Classic Widogast,” he says simply, shrugging again. Behind him, his tail sways gently through the air, punctuating his sentence with slow, relaxed waves. “I thought you could do with one.”

Caleb frowns. “But we are- I didn’t know you could buy this blend.”

“Oh, you can’t,” Molly says, smiling a little wider.
“Then how did you- Pumat has never given me the recipe.”

“I asked him if he could make me teabags of the blend that I could buy a week or so ago.”

“…Why?”

“Because I know how much you like it,” Molly says. On his cheeks, Caleb thinks he can see the faint hints of a blush. “And you’ve been working really hard recently, love. You looked like you could do with a Classic Widogast right now. You looked like you needed a drink.” He reaches over Caleb’s shoulder to scratch Frumpkin under the chin and Caleb finds himself leaning back into Molly’s space without even thinking, taking the mug with him. “You’ve been working every day, darling. And I know you won’t take a break until you’re done marking all these, um-”

“Exam scripts,” Caleb supplies for him.

“-Exam scripts, thank you, so I figured that I’d help you as much as I can while still letting you work. I felt a Classic Widogast would be ideal for that. It’ll give you the energy that you need and it’ll keep you hydrated.” Molly turns his head, giving Caleb a somewhat admonishing look. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed you forgetting to drink water while you’re marking, Caleb.”

“…Do I do that?”

“Mhmm,” Molly hums. “That’s why I notice for you. I can’t have my boyfriend wandering around the flat all dehydrated and complaining that he’s got a headache.”

“I do not complain. I haven’t had a single headache yet this exam season.”

Molly leans down slightly, resting his chin on Caleb’s shoulder as one arm wraps around Caleb’s stomach in a gentle hug. “That,” he says, “Is because Nott and I have been keeping you hydrated and fed.”

“Nott is in on this?”

“Of course she is! Where did you think the lemon cake you keep eating comes from?”

Caleb blinks. “I- in all honesty, Molly, I hadn’t even noticed it was there.”

“Maybe not, but you’ve definitely been eating it.” Molly pats Caleb’s stomach gently. “Like I said – I’ve been noticing for you. I know how busy you are with marking and writing and all that clever stuff.”

Caleb can feel himself flushing, just as he does every time Molly calls him clever or compliments his mind. “Ja, well- I- it is just marking, Mollymauk…”

“Let me compliment you, handsome.”

“I- okay…”

Caleb feels Molly’s soft laugh through his shoulder and he cannot help but smile too. “As I was saying, darling,” Molly continues, “You’ve been busy. And I know how you tend to go all single-minded and super-focused when you’re really hard at work, so I, y’know…” He trails off, giving a small shrug. Beneath the chair, his tail skims across Caleb’s ankle in a caressing, loving touch. “I figured I’d help you out a bit. Keep you fed and watered and all that so that you don’t have to worry about it and can focus on your marking and research instead.”
In his chest, safe behind his ribcage, Caleb feels his heart squeeze. He tilts his head back a bit, turning slightly in his chair so that he can see Molly. “Mollymauk,” he says with a soft smile, shaking his head in disbelief. “You are- you are…”


“Wonderful,” Caleb says simply. “You are wonderful, Mollymauk, and I- I am very lucky to have you, Liebling.”

Molly smiles, moving his hand from Caleb’s stomach to instead catch Caleb’s fingers with his own. “I consider myself very lucky to have you too, dear heart.” His fingers squeeze gently, and at the same time he turns his head to press a kiss to Caleb’s cheek, letting it linger before standing upright. “Now you go back to work. Drink your tea before it grows cold.”

Caleb rolls his eyes but he lifts the mug to his lips all the same, taking a quick sip. “Thank you, Mollymauk.”

“Of course, love,” Molly says. “Come find me on the couch when you’re done.” He bends down, pressing a quick kiss to Caleb’s lips before straightening up and walking away, his hand trailing from Caleb’s shoulders as he goes. Caleb watches him leave, his smile hidden behind the mug. He loves Molly. It’s such a normal thought now, one that’s so absolutely, completely obvious to him. There’s no question to it, no doubt. He loves Molly.

He’s going to tell him.

He’s going to tell him today.

The realisation is that straightforward and simple – it arrives in Caleb’s mind with no great fanfare, no exultant mental celebration of the depths of his feelings. He hums to himself quietly as the thought settles further into his mind, taking another sip of the mug Molly had left him and smiling at the familiar taste of the tea. Caleb going to finish his work, and drink his tea, and then he’s going to go to Molly, and he’s going to tell Molly that he loves him.

And, Caleb is almost entirely certain, Molly will say it back. Even if he doesn’t, Caleb realises that he won’t care. He doesn’t need Molly to love him as much as he loves Molly. He doesn’t even need Molly to love him at all. He just needs Molly to know that he does love him, and to hear Caleb say it, and to know that Caleb means it. That’s all. He has Molly’s care, and Molly’s affection, and the lingering feeling of Molly’s lips on his own, and of Molly’s hand on his shoulder.

He doesn’t need any more than that.

Caleb takes another sip of the tea, still smiling, and goes back to work.

He doesn’t manage to finish marking all the exam scripts but he wasn’t planning to; he still has a couple of days until they need to be turned in to be processed and he’s been much more productive than he was expecting to be – due in no small part, he’s sure, to Molly and Nott’s constant quiet observation and care. Caleb stands from the table with a soft groan, stretching his arms above his head and hearing his joints pop as they finally get the chance to move after being held in one position for so long. It’s getting to late afternoon but the sky beyond the window is still a clear, cloudless blue, bright with the promise of more summer days to come. Caleb is looking forward to them – he’s looking forward to spending his summer with Caleb, and with Nott, and with Jester, and Beau, and Yasha, and Fjord, and with Bryce, and with this strange mish-mash of people that he’s slowly coming to consider his family. He’s looking forward to long, lazy days spent with Molly, and loud
evenings with Jester and Beau and Nott, and calm afternoons with Fjord and Molly in Molly’s flat.

He’s looking forward to the future, and, for the first time in a long time, he’s more excited than apprehensive about what it may bring.

Caleb drops his now-empty mug in the sink before moving over to the couch where, as promised, Molly is lying comfortably across it, his back supported by the arm rest and his tail hanging lazily off the edge. He’s watching a video on his phone that Caleb can’t quite make out and, though he doesn’t look up as Caleb approaches, he does sit up slightly, shuffling forwards to make just enough space for Caleb to slip in behind him. He leans back against Caleb’s chest the moment that Caleb is settled, Caleb’s long legs bracketing Molly’s, and turns his head to press a quick kiss to Caleb’s shoulder.

“Hey,” he murmurs.

“Hi,” Caleb replies.

“You done with marking?”

“Mm, for now.” Caleb drops his chin to Molly’s shoulder, wrapping both arms around his waist. He slips his hands under the hem of Molly shirt, pressing them flat to his stomach instead just to feel the warmth of his skin with no fabric in the way, and watches the video with him over his shoulder. The video is about halfway finished but Caleb recognises the style of it almost immediately. They’ve been a favourite of both his and Nott’s ever since Molly first showed her one and ever since Molly first helped Caleb calm down from his nightmare.

“Is this another one of your knife videos?” Caleb asks quietly, and Molly nods.

“Yeah.”

“What is he making it out of this time?”

“A giant conch shell.”

Caleb gives a small hum, settling back further into the couch. Molly is a warm, grounding weight against his front, his tail wrapped gently around Caleb’s ankle and shin as it so often is when they cuddle these days. “Is he already sharpening it?”

“Yeah, you missed the start. Do you want me to go back to the beginning?” Molly asks. “I know you prefer the shaping process.”

Caleb pulls a slight face. “I don’t want to bore you if you have already seen the start of the video…”

“I don’t mind, love,” Molly replies. He pauses the video, turning slightly to smile at Caleb, and finds one of his hands, giving it a quick squeeze. “Really. I don’t mind. Do you want to watch the whole thing?”

Caleb rubs his thumb against the back of Molly’s hand, and he cannot help but smile back. “…Yes, please.”

“Alright then.” Molly smiles wider, leaning in to press a quick kiss to Caleb’s lips before twisting back round to settle against him, quickly scrolling the video back to the beginning. “You comfy, love?”

“Mhmm,” Caleb hums. He drops his hand from Molly’s, settling it under his shirt again. Though he cannot see it, he knows what the ink that he is trailing his fingertips over looks like. He knows every
touch of colour against Molly’s skin, every shining spot of metal and every twisting flamboyance of feathers. He knows every scar, and every sensitive spot, and Molly knows his body just as well. He knows Caleb better than anyone ever has, and Caleb loves him for it.

He loves him.

“Mollymauk?” Caleb asks softly. Molly gives a quiet hum, his finger pausing just above the ‘play’ button.

“Mm?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Oh?” Molly shifts slightly against Caleb’s front, rolling over so that he can tilt his head and look at him, frowning curiously. “What is it?”

Caleb smiles. There is no worry in his mind now, no doubt or anxiety. He’s not afraid to say what he’s about to say next.

“I love you,” he says quietly, and leans down for a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to nonsycamore for the wonderful art! <3
Professor Caleb Widogast-Tealeaf (Bachelors in classical civilisations and languages, Masters in descriptive linguistics, PhD in the etymology of pre-divergence Sylvan, PhD in Ancient Sylvan declamation and semantic change) has a very set routine to his life. Every morning, between 4am and 6am, he is woken by the sounds of Frumpkin nosing around his now-empty food bowl, meowing plaintively a few times, and then going back to bed when it becomes apparent that no one is going to get up and feed him quite yet. At 6:30am exactly Caleb’s alarm goes off, prompting Molly to roll over in bed with a groan, reach across Caleb’s blanket-burrito’ed body, and hit it until it stops making noise. At 6:35am Caleb’s second alarm goes off, giving a similar result. At 6:45am Caleb’s third alarm, positioned on his marginally less cluttered, marginally less overcrowded desk on the far side of the bedroom goes off, making Molly grumble loudly and elbow Caleb in the side until Caleb sighs, extricates himself from his blanket-bundle, presses a quick kiss to Molly’s lips, and then crosses the room to hit that alarm until it too falls silent.

Then he wakes his husband, and together they do everything else.

So, this is it. The end of The Descriptivist’s Approach. It’s been a long journey and I’ve absolutely loved writing this - I can only hope that you’ve all enjoyed it just as much. As you probably know from the end of fic note, this was my first ever multichapter fic, and I think it’s safe to say that it got significantly out of hand (my original dream goal for this fic was 50k words. 50k!). I want to say a quick thanks to everyone who’s read this - people who have been here since chapter one, people who started reading when it was halfway done, and people who are starting it now that it's finished. I’m so happy to know how many people have enjoyed my ramblings about a sad wizard man and his purple boyfriend, and it would absolutely make my day if you could leave a comment mentioning your favourite scene from this fic, or a scene that you found particularly funny, or anything along those lines.

Once again, thank you. Writing this and reading your comments has been one hell of a time ❤

-Crunchy -cat emoji-

(Thanks to many wonderful artists being much too nice, art of this fic has now been added to chapter 1, chapter 4, chapter 5, chapter 9, chapter 11, chapter 12, chapter 16, chapter 20, chapter 21, and chapter 22.)
So here it is, my first ever multi-chapter fic. Hopefully it goes well and you all enjoy it ^^

As always thanks go to my wonderful betas Naluh, CodeSculptor, and Eileen for catching my mistakes and generally cheering me on, as well as to my wonderful friend Sam for listening to my ramblings. You guys rock x

If you have any prompts or requests for me please do send me a message over at my tumblr!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!