The Lusty Magicians Apprentice

by ClasslessTulip

Summary

All Julian wanted to do was shake-down the local Magician for answers. He was NOT expecting a shakedown of his own.

He most DEFINITELY wasn't looking to be involved in an investigation into a possible Worm Cult, nor finding love along the way but, eh, what can you do?

Notes

There’s a reason why The Arcana fans are all horny on main...and that reason is Julian.
(No, the title was not snagged from an Elder Scrolls smut book...(yesitwas).

See the end of the work for more notes.
Julian stood there, smug as can be with his arms up. As anyone who knows Julian knows, any time he can be flirty or outright suggestive, he takes it.

Especially when it involves an attractive person. A very attractive person.

Said person was apprentice to the witch (Julian refuses to utter his name). Although how the witch ended up getting this person as an apprentice is beyond him. It’s not everyday an Umbra is seen outside their mountains, let alone out of their country.

(Not that Julian is complaining, Umbra’s are gorgeous. All leg, olive skin tones and great big handfuls of hair. Oh yeah, they hit allll of his buttons.)

So imagine his surprise when he revealed himself after the Countess took her leave, just to have the person stand up. And up. And up. Fuck. This wasn’t just anyone. This was one of their men. An Umbran female usually hovers around 6’. This person was tall enough that he had to cant his head back a bit. And damn, those shoulders.

(Yes, Julian realizes that he shouldn’t be checking out someone that could literally break him, but he has poor self control and is great at making bad decisions. Pasha will tell you that in a heartbeat.)

Seeing what he had in front of him, Julian did the only logical thing: Threw his arms up and begged for a pat down.

“Me, a thief? Whilst I don’t blame you for such an assumption, you’ll find I have not stolen a thing. I only seek the witch. But, please, feel free to pat me down. If I have indeed stolen a thing, then I will show myself to the stocks”.

He thought that that was quite the clever line, but all he gets for it is a quirked eyebrow. Time to up the ante.

“What? Not afraid of a little pat down are you? Are you certain-!” Before he could even finish the sentence, the apprentice stepped closer, getting very close into Julian’s space, toe-tips mere inches apart. The apprentice leaned down, brow still quirked with the start of a smirk on his face (delightfully showing off his handsome cheekbones, with a dimple on one side of his chin).

“I don’t know, Doctor, would you be able to...handle it?” He graces Julian with a full smirk when he sees a rosy flush appear on Julian’s face at the sound of his voice. Asra always teased him about making various shopkeeper’s (and their daughters. And their son’s) blush when they heard him. He’s fully appreciating the ability now.

“I don’t know, Doctor, would you be able to...handle it?” He graces Julian with a full smirk when he sees a rosy flush appear on Julian’s face at the sound of his voice. Asra always teased him about making various shopkeeper’s (and their daughters. And their son’s) blush when they heard him. He’s fully appreciating the ability now.

“Handle away”, Julian says flippantly, an unabashed grin on his face as he stripped away his coat and cloak, leaving his torso clad only in a thin and open shirt, “but if I could have the name of the man about to get well acquainted with my magnificent self?”

“The names Tiberius. And I will have no problem reminding you,” the newly named Tiberius stated, ending with a bit of a playful rumble. Julian’s breath hitched at that sound, though he tried to hide it. From the look on Tiberius’ face, he failed. Badly.

Tiberius walked a slow circle around Julian, and on his initial pass leaned down and in, running his nose a hair's width above the skin of the Doctor’s neck before burying it behind his ear and inhaling deeply, ending with a hungry growl.
Julian’s heart stopped beating, the reverberating sound shooting straight to his groin. It took everything he had not to moan like a whore. He’s always had a thing for voices, but this was something in another league.

By this time, Tiberius had finished his visual inspection and had returned to the front. He slowly raised his hands, echoing the pose of Julian’s. His grin had morphed into a lecherous smirk by this point, and it was doing delightfully dirty things to Julian’s libido.

“As a shopkeeper, I know that there are a variety of ways for someone to smuggle ill-gotten goods from unsuspecting individuals. I would lose all self-respect if I didn't give you a most thorough search.” As Tiberius stated this, his hands settled in Julian's collar, thumbs resting on his neck and long fingers curling around to the back. There was a light squeeze before they were slowly (agonizingly so) spread over the shoulders before being pulled over heaving pectorals.

The accused thief took a shaky breath, color high on defined cheekbones, before letting out a breathy chuckle, “Well, I hope for both our sakes that you do such a search. Wouldn’t want all of that effort wasted for nau~”, he ended off on a choked-off groan, Tiberius using Julian's quipping as an opportunity to dig his nails into his chest and tug his hands down abruptly, a nail tugging harshly on one of Julian's nipples. Tiberius smirked.

“What's this, cat got your tongue? And you were such a chatterbox mere moments ago”, at this point, Tiberius’s nails were scraping along Julian's stomach, getting caught occasionally on abdominal muscles before ending at his belt. By this point, Julian had somewhat composed himself, although one can still easily observe the effects the ‘search’ were having on him.

Julian looked up at his tormentor, throwing a snarky, shaky grin at him. “Is this it? I must say I'm disappointed! I've had more vigorous pat downs from old fishmongers!”

He was met with a raised brow. “Did I say I was finished?” Tiberius retorted, while at the same time slipping his fingers past the belt until it hit palm. Julian gasped, shooting the other an incredulous look. Those fingers slowly smoothed within his belt from the front and along the sides, before again meeting in the back along his spine, barely scraping by his groin. He had mere moments before both hands were forced passed the belt to cup his rear, grabbing tightly: pulling him onto the front of his molester and not allowing him to hide his intense arousal.

Julian moaned lowly as he was forced onto a muscular thigh, the hands behind him forcing him to ride up momentarily before they clawed and pulled up to the small of his back. He had no choice but to throw his arms around Tiberius’s shoulders, lest he lose his balance in his suddenly weak knees.

At this point Tiberius had his nose buried in Julian's hair, breathing deeply. “You make such delicious sounds” he stated, breathing harder. “Makes me want to sink my teeth into you…”

Julian gasped and moaned loudly, wrapping a long, boot-clad leg around Tiberius’ hip and grinding on his thigh. He threw his head back, placing both hands on the others face and forcibly turning their head into his neck, invitation and desire clear.

Slowly, Tiberius brought his hands up and wrenched Julian's arms away and to the side, bringing his head up to stare directly into Julian’s eye. He looked at Julian like a starving man looks at a full meal, and Julian was more than ready to be devoured.

“I haven’t finished my search” Tiberius intoned lowly. “It wouldn't do to leave things unfinished.” He stepped back, breathing hard and looking like he wanted Julian spread out on the nearest flat surface.
Julian gaped. He could not believe it. Here he was, harder than he has ever been in his life, ready to engage in some vile, filthy, and disgusting sex acts with a literal stranger, and he is insisting on **FINISHING SEARCHING HIM?**

Tiberius had taken Julian’s momentary shock to walk behind him. Julian whipped around, snarl on his face (a look truly doing **wonderful** things to Tiberius, one that he would have to explore more in the future), just to have his flaming locks gripped harshly, his head forcibly turned back forward and to the side, pulling out a loud and surprised lusty exhale.

“**Did I say you could move?**” growled Tiberius. Julian moaned out a pitiful mewing noise, his right arm reaching back for Tiberius, which was then grabbed and harshly hauled up against his back between his shoulders. Tiberius shook him roughly, causing Julian to give a choked off, helpless sound.

“**Do not make me repeat myself...**I want an answer”.

Julian could do nothing but gasp deeply, forced onto his toes from the strong grip on his arm, with waves of delicious pain flowing from his shoulder. It took him nearly a minute to muster the breath to give a small, pitiful sounding “**noooooo.....**”.

His tormentor leaned in close, his clothed cock nestled high along Julian's backside, and crooned “I only have one more place to search, and then I promise to feast on you. I would never leave a lover hanging after being so good.” The hand in Julian's hair traveled down his neck and torso, coming to a rest scant inches from where it was truly wanted. “Can you be good for me for a few...more...moments?”

“**Oh gods yes!**” Julian blurted. He felt a rumble of approval before his arm was released, and he was re-positioned to his initial pat-down pose. Tiberius then slowly and firmly ran his hands down Julian’s side, smiling when he got a surprised laugh when he got to the waist. He flattened his hands and palms when it came to the hips, transitioning them to slowly and firmly run along the v-join where leg meets groin, ending with his hands and thumbs nestling around Julian’s twitching and clothed cock.

Poor Julian was quivering uncontrollably, his head lolling forward. He was caught between a literal rock and a hard place and couldn't do anything about it. He startled when he felt one of Tiberius’s hands drag back along his hip to a pocket, and plunge into it. Moments later it reappeared holding a small sheathed dagger. “**Ah, don't mind the knife in my pocket...but I am happy to see you!**” he quipped. Tiberius chuckled, laying a gentle kiss along Julian's neck. With the one hand he wriggled off the sheath, admiring the blade and how the moonlight from a nearby window played along the metal. He abruptly raised his arm and threw the blade, sending it spinning thru the air to embed in the wall opposite the entangled men. Julian did a full-body twitch, releasing a shaky gasp, now realizing he has found a new kink.

Tiberius returned his hands back to Julian's waist, then continued to pull them down the outer thighs, slowly sinking into a squat as he did so. His body dragged over the overwhelmed redhead. His victim looked down to see strong thighs fanned out on either side of his legs, breeches tight over the powerful muscle. He was struck with the overwhelming urge to get on his knees and worship those same legs, to sink his teeth into such meaty muscle, to hold onto them as he gets the daylights fucked out of his mouth.

But he didn’t, because he promised to be good. And he knew he would get his reward soon as Tiberius skimmed his hands around the front of Julian's legs, slowly making their way back up. Upon reaching the start of the inner thigh, those sinfully delightful fingers hooked and were abruptly
jerked back to the join of the leg, causing Julian to give a startled cry.

Tiberius leaned forward, lips against a pale neck. “You’ve been such a good boy, and good boys get rewards. What do you want me to do to you, sweetheart?” The statement was emphasized with a harsh, sharp slap to Julian's sensitive thighs, bringing more cries from him, before soothing the sting with some rough rubbing and grasping, palming pinches. One hand eventually made its way to Julian's groin, cupping him roughly thru his trousers. A keen was reward for his handling, and his poor victim backed into his tormentors cock, grinding and undulating obscenely. Only now did Julian finally lower his arms, reach behind him to bury gloved hands into thick sable hair, painting and moaning wantonly. Such motions slowly forced Tiberius to move a few steps backwards before he bumped against the shops sales counter.

At this point, the mess of a human known as Julian looked up, and caught sight of himself in a large scrying mirror on one of the walls. He was a mess, hair sticking up every which way, his face down to his chest painted red from rushing blood. His mouth hung open, panting, looking like it was waiting for a lusty treat and his shirt was merely hanging on by his arms, which were entangled in his partners hair. He was covered in red welts, with the hands of the perpetrator molded to his arousal and thigh, never ceasing in their lusty movements.

His breath hitched when he caught sight of Tiberius’ reflection watching him. His face was thrown into shadow, curled around Julian as he was, but those same shadows couldn’t hide the heated stare roaming around his body. Julian blushed harder when he realized those same eyes had caught him staring, a crooked smirk traversing sinful lips.

Tiberius slowly ran his lips and teeth up Julian's neck, stopping at his ear to take a leisurely nibble.

“So, have you made up your mind? What do you want me to do...to...you?” Each syllable was punctuated with a slap to either Julian's thigh or cock, the pain sending supernova exploding behind his eyes. He threw his head back and gasped “Fuck! Fucking use me! Fuck me to pieces and leave me, I'll do anything just to feel you on and in me!” Julian startled, placing a hand over his mouth in surprise. He had NOT meant for that thought to be vocalized. He lowered his head, shame on his features…

Just to have his chin grabbed and twisted by a strong, calloused hand. Tiberius’s mouth scant millimeters from his own, a lascivious grin on his face. “Who am I to deny, when one begs so prettily?” He pinched his hand, forcing Julian’s mouth to drop open just to plunder it. Teeth and tongue made swift work of pulling the breath from both their lungs. Julian was a moaning, shuddering mess. He tried to kiss back, to get some semblance of control, but this man left his inner masochist delighted. It had been soooo long since he found a person that made his body sing this way.

Tiberius roughly spun them, his hands grabbing Julian's thighs to lift him onto the shop counter. He made quick work of Julian's belt, using a searing kiss to distract his partner as he used the belt cord to tie the Doctor’s gloved hands behind his back. Julian gasped, melting into a puddle of begging.

“No, please! Let me touch you, make you feel as good as I do, fuck please, please,pleasepleaseplease....” he begged, a tear trailing down his cheek. He gasped as he was pushed onto his back, landing awkwardly on his bound hands, the pain of doing so leaving him a shuddering mess. Broad hands with strong fingers quickly unbuttoned his pants, hooking into his waistband and jerking down his trousers along with his underclothes, only for them to be caught on the tops of his boots. Julian wriggled, attempting to lift his hips and legs to assist in the removal of
said boots, only to be shocked into stillness with a resounding slap to his hip.

“No,” a hoarse voice said. “Your perfect just as is…” Tiberius could no longer keep an unaffected air. This man was everything he wanted: stunning, breathless, submissive. He was not letting him go after this. If he had to, he would tear the city apart to keep him.

Julian was just as caught up in his partner. Long hair, black as pitch and full of riotous curls was everywhere, the long braid they had been kept in was no match for Julian's earlier antics. His chest and shoulders were heaving, pulling in billowing breaths. Julian could just make out the tenting in Tiberius’ pants, knowing he was going to be in for a wild ride. He blushed deeper, and felt his cock twitch against his bare stomach, when he realized he was the only one in some state of undress.

“Please, I want to see you…” Julian whined. Tiberius made quick work of raising the front of his shirt over and behind his head, leaving it still hugging his back and shoulders but having his sculpted torso on display. Julian whined again and bucked, frustrated that he couldn't run his hands along his lovers body. Tiberius responded by pushing his legs up, leaving his body on display. Julian squeaked in mortification, and again as he got even more aroused.

“You sound so fucking cute. I'll have to try to get you to make more of such sounds” Tiberius chuckled. Before Julian could respond, Tiberius latched onto one of his thighs, sucking and biting hard. Julian stopped breathing, head lowering to hang off the back of the counter, before gasping like a drowning man. Tiberius licked, sucked, and bit those pale thighs to his heart's content, letting out the occasional rolling growl, each of those sounds shooting straight to Julian's dick.

Julian let out an abrupt, choked off yell as a hard slap landed on his ass. That same hand grabbed the throbbing cheek, giving a harsh shake before slapping it again, harder this time. Tiberius’ mouth had moved up, leaving a line of love bites to the skin just below the boundary created by the pants and boots still adorning the beautiful legs he was mauling.

He abruptly shoved Julian's legs as far back as they could go, pushing his knees under his jaw. The new position raised Julian's lower body off the counter, forcing most of his weight onto his shoulders and upper back. Tiberius then shoved and wiggled Julian onto a new spot on the counter, before clambering onto it on his knees himself. One hand grasped the pant material bridging the gap between Julian's thighs, the other making quick work of his own pants. He only pushed them down far enough to free his own cock and to cup under his ass.

Tiberius leaned forward, fitting his heavy dick between the reddened cheeks of Julian's ass, jerking him back so his hips would rest in the cradle of his thighs. He leaned forward, Julian's thighs flush against his torso, with his knees over his shoulder, his partially clothed legs keeping the marked thighs close and tight against the dick nestled between them. He tangled one fist in Julian's hair, enraptured with the red face of agonized pleasure below him, feeling the labored gasps against his own face. Tiberius dove in, fucking that helpless mouth with his tongue. His other arm reached behind the counter, searching the shelves for a bottle of oil (one typically used when far-seeing: Asra would faint knowing what Tiberius is using it for).

After a few moments of flailing around, his fist emerged triumphant. Tiberius brought the dark bottle to his face, using his teeth to pull out the quark before spitting it out to the side. He leaned back slightly an reluctantly, loath the separate from the absolute angel writhing below him. He poured a large dram of oil into Julian's crevasse before throwing that too, causing the poor dear to try to buck away from the cold substance. A buck that resulted in another harsh spank to an already beaten set of buttocks. He shifted his cock to the side, rubbing his index and middle finger into the well of slick oil, before easing one into and then passed the tight ring of muscle.

Julian seized, and then arched as much as he could, letting out a low hissing “yessssssssss…”
between clenched teeth. Encouraged, Tiberius started to deftly work his hand, adding another finger shortly thereafter. Julian started rocking up to meet the thrusting fingers, moaning like a damnable pro. He started muttering under his breath, eventually getting louder, begging for Tiberius to just *stop and fuck him already!*

He got a light slap across the face for that, causing his eye to roll back. His hair was then fisted again and Tiberius leaned low, growling “You'll take what I fucking. Give. You,” emphasizing his point with extra vigorous thrust of his fingers, finally brushing against that much desired sweet spot. Julian mewled in response, teeth biting into his lower lip.

Tiberius slowly added a third finger, taking his sweet time in retribution for his needy bottoms antics. “I won’t have my partners put thru unneeded pain...at least not until we can have a nice, long discussion about do’s and don'ts, so be fucking good.” At this point, he removed his fingers, smoothing his hand along his cock, coating it in a generous amount of oil. He raised his hips slightly, using his oil-slick hand to guide his cock to its much wanted destination.

Julian's breath hitched at the sensation of something blunt and hot on him. He felt Tiberius rub his thumb over his cock and Julian's twitching hole before he started to press in, *swearing* he could hear a faint wet popping noise followed by a wonderful burn. All his breath left his body as Tiberius sunk inch by hot burning inch. He didn't inhale again until Tiberius bottomed out, and even then only doing so because the last few inches were slammed into him, rocking him harshly against the counter as he shouted in surprise delight.

Tiberius settled low and heavy upon Julian, feeling calves cross behind his neck as Julian started to writhe, wanting more friction within him. Tiberius hooked both his hands onto the edge of the counter, settling his hips lower and more parallel instead of arched, his folded legs widening their angle to give him more stability. He buried his face in Julian's neck, hoarsely gasping “Fuck...wait for me love. If you keep moving I won't be able to last”. Julian, too far gone in desire to comprehend him, continued his motions. Until teeth buried into his neck, drawing blood, startling him into orgasm. Tiberius froze in place, fighting against the sudden vice gripped upon him as Julian shrieked in surprised pleasure.

A few long, agonizing moments later he came down from his high, flushing deeply in embarrassment. He had shot off like some virgin having their first experience. This hadn't happened to him in years (at least, not without their being copious amount of alcohol involved). He slowly raised his face to make eye contact, only to be met with the filthiest, most *sadistic* fucking grin he had ever seen, along with a harsh and deep thrust that rubbed against some overly sensitive areas. His hips twitched involuntarily, trying to get away from more stimulation. He didn't make it far.

Tiberius leaned down, faces scant millimeters apart. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he stated, grin unchanging and maintaining eye contact. “I’m keeping you here, spread for my pleasure, until I'm satisfied”. One arm jerked, and Julian realized his wrist had been released from the belt. Tiberius re-positioned his arms around Julian, snaking them under Julian's shoulders and burying his hands in the thick red locks, leaving Julian no choice but to look directly into the face in front of him.

Julian had mere moments to wrap his arms around thick shoulders before Tiberius started a punishing pace. He moved his hips and belly like a Prakran dancer, thrusting in long and smooth strokes. Each thrust caused the counter to rock, slowly scooting it across the floor until it eventually met the wall originally behind it. Julian had to bend and push himself up to accommodate the new vertical surface, breathing harshly thru mouth and nose as he was used like a cheap toy. Such a feeling was causing sharp spikes of desire to well deep in his belly, helped along with the friction created on his cock being trapped between both himself and Tiberius, the cum from his earlier release providing some lubricant.
Tiberius backed off the counter to stand, pulling the crying and mewling wreck formerly known as Julian Devorak back onto his dick just to start jack hammering into him. Julian twisted his torso to lean on one arm, the other reaching for Tiberius, grunting out at each hard thrust as he rocked back and forth on the counter. Tiberius caught a long glove-clad finger in his teeth, pulling harshly and ripping it off completely.

Julian sobbed as he reached his newly stripped hand down to his weeping erection, only getting a few pumps in before it was smacked away. He looked up to meet a dark glare, challenging him to try again. “The only way your coming again is speared on my dick!” Tiberius growled. “If you want to cum, do something about it. Put your silver tongue to use, or is it all talk and no talent?”

Julian lost count of how many times he has flushed in mortified arousal from this man. Talk to him? Talk to him? How does he expect him to talk when he’s a blithering, teary mess? He’s harder than he has ever been, and being used like a cheap whore offering a 2-for-1 special for sailors on shore leave.

Unbeknownst to himself, Julian had been muttering these exact thoughts between cries out loud. Tiberius groaned long and loud at the filthy, disgusting narration, thrusting even harder into the sopping wet hole around him. “Fuck, yes, that’s right sweetheart. Your a fucking slut, my little whore. Look at you begging for it… I bet you do this for everyone you bend over for…”

Julian shivered, shaking his head no vigorously. “Nooo~ooooo, just you, you fuck me soooooo goooood~” was Julian’s response, thrust out of him at the new, even more brutal pace.

Tiberius growled, hooking his arms under Julian’s shoulders and heaved him off the counter. Julian squawked (although he would later deny it), clinging as best he could to shoulders that already had his knees propped over them. Tiberius re-positioned his arms, wrapping one around the thighs and waist and the other going around the upper back of his ride. Julian’s jaw dropped and his head fell back, the new position allowing the thick cock even deeper than he thought possible and providing even more friction to his own neglected one as he bounced.

“I….I….I can’t hold off any longer. I cant, i cant, Ican’tlcantlc-a-” he was broken off with a particularly hard thrust.

“You’ll come when I say three, do you understand?” Tiberius lowed, his thrust rapidly losing pace and his face twisted, trying to hold off for a few more moments. He was going to ensure that his partner got a second orgasm, and nothing was going to stop it from happening, not even the Countess making a reappearance.

Julian nodded his head so quick Tiberius was surprised he didn't bit off his own tongue.

“One.”

Julian sobbed, thanking him and whatever gods were listening.

“Two~oo” Tiberius stuttered, burying his face into the bitten, tantalizing neck in front of him.

“THREE!”

Tiberius buried his teeth again into that fucking delicious neck, worrying at it almost animalistically as his orgasm shot thru him. He growled loudly and clawed at every bit of skin he could as Julian wailed his release, damn near convulsing in Tiberius’ arms as he painted their stomachs and chest with his second release of the night, some even hitting his own jaw. Tiberius himself semi-collapsed back onto the counter, adding a few more deep and long thrust into the velvety grip below milking
him so damn good!

It could have been minutes or hours later when Tiberius pulled back slightly. Blood ran down his mouth and his neck from the mauling he gave Julian, and he opened his mouth wide, trying to use his long tongue to clean his lips up somewhat.

He was joined by a second one, licking up his neck to entangle lazily in his mouth. What followed was a few sloppy, wet opened-mouth kisses as they came down from their mutual high. He pulled back further to disengage, both men wincing at the sensation to over sensitive body parts, along with the obscene sound of cum dribbling out of a well-fucked hole.

Tiberius gave a pleased hum as he took in the debauched sight of a wanted man. Hair all kinds of fucked up, eye-patch still somehow in place (he made a note to try harder next time, because he will make sure there is a next time), shirt hanging by the crook of bent elbows. He ran a hand up and down an abused thigh, the other hand holding both booted ankles high as he surveys the utterly demolished ass before him.

Both cheeks were flaming, with the welted outline of a hand-print on the right one. Scratches, some welling with pinpricks of blood, while thick rivulets of oil and cum dribbled out of a pink and puckered loose hole, running down the crease of the buttocks to pool on the counter just below in a small puddle.

“I can feel your self-pleasure at what you have wrought, you vile and insatiable demon,” was uttered by a painting, grinning Julian. Tiberius snorted, pulling a nearby stool over and resting Julian’s feet on it, knees bent so he doesn’t smear more release than necessary on his backside. He wandered to the back, wetting a flannel in cool water. As he cleaned himself up and redid his breeches, his eyes wandered the shelves, looking for something. After finding the small tin, he wet a new cloth and made his way back front.

He ran the cloth down Julian's neck, checking the bites he left. They both looked worse that what they were, being the neck and scalp were notorious for bleeding at the drop of a hat, but he still slathered them both in a thin layer of the salve. He made quick work of cleaning the drying fluids from Julian's chest and stomach, lathing soft kisses to Julian's naked palm when it raised to run thru tangled black locks.

It dropped heavily back down when Tiberius pulled away to clean the mess between Julian's legs. He pulled off the boots, followed by the trousers (he left the socks because he’s always had a thing for thigh-highs, and they were such a pretty sight clinging to shapely, muscular legs). He gently spread the freed legs, applying more salve after cleaning up the fucking mess he made.

“Hnmnmnmnm….” Julian trilled, head lolling to the side, slowly running both hands up his chest to lightly touch the ring of bites surrounding his neck. A gentle swipe of a finger to the edge, and he lazily brought it up to his nose, daintily sniffing. It smelled cool and fresh, crisp almost. Rubbing it between finger and thumb showed that while the formula was thick, it was also somewhat slippery; excellent when applied to wounds that may be covered, allowing free movement and preventing bandages from tugging.

Tiberius snorted. “Well, Doctor? Does my salve meet with your approval?”

A chuckle was his response, as the aforementioned doctor slowly raised himself into a sitting position, hissing as he did so. Tiberius raised a questing brow, but Julian just waved him off with another low hum. He pushed himself off the counter, landing lightly on his feet and swaying slightly. Strong hands caught him at his waist, a quiet ‘are you okay, lovely?’ asked of him. He threw a fucked-out grin back, with a ‘never been better’ jauntily added for measure.
Julian turned, looking for his missing glove and belt. Not finding it, he turned back to Tiberius, just to see him kneeling with Julian's trousers in his hands, and said glove and belt upon his shoulder. Julian chuckled, "What is this? The Palace?". He rest his palms on the strong shoulders before him, raising a foot. Tiberius first helped one foot, then the other into their respective legs, dropping the occasional gentle kiss on any bare skin he could, leg or otherwise. He helped the trousers to travel up, catching Julian's bare palm on his cheek as he did so.

Said palm made its way into thick hair, attempting to card the thick curls into something more manageable than the current birds nest they now resembled.

"You're being so sweet, I can just melt…"

Tiberius just grinned into the skin of Julian's chin, tucking his shirt into the pants before closing and re-bonding them. He then pulled the lone glove from his shoulder and slowly worked it back onto its long-fingered hand.

Both worked to get the coat and cloak back onto newly clothed shoulders, trading kisses and nuzzles the entire time. Julian attempted to tame his sex-mess hair, but gave it up as a lost cause. He stood back from the other, not wanting the intimacy to end.

He opened his mouth to say something, just to be cut off. "Are you free any time the next couple nights?" Tiberius cocked his head to the side, eyes focused onto Julian like a hawk on a rabbit.

"Wha- ah yes. Yes I am!" Julian coughed, a slight flush on his cheeks, embarrassed to be caught sounding so eager. "The night after tomorrow, to be precise!...although I don't think I can do 'this' again so soon...not that I actually know what 'this' actually is, and now I'm rambling like a-" a pair of lips softly covered his own, a smile painted on them.

"There's a open concert happening at one of the gardens. How's about some dinner and dancing?"

Julian flushed. "Aren't we doing this out of order? Should we have had a date AND THEN fallen into bed together? Or well, in our case a counter-" he was cut off with another kiss and chuckle.

"Just a yes or no would suffice" was murmured against his mouth. A rapid nod was his answer. Tiberius pulled back, a smug look on his face. "Then I'll see you the night after tomorrow. Bring your dancing shoes. I'll meet you on the main bridge at 8".

"Isn't Asra going to ask questions about where you get off to?"

"Asra's a fucking freak who knows better to mind his own business, lest he be called a hypocrite."

"There's a story there I want to know…"

"And you may just learn it on our date. As it is, if you don't leave now you may get caught, and then you definitely won't learn it."

Julian sighed dramatically, spinning towards the door, cape flaring out at the move. He attempted to strut towards the door, just to wince. He glared back over his shoulder at the cause, before facing back forwards at the snicker he got. He exited the shop, hearing a faint 'sweet dreams' before the door closed.

"Ilya?"
Julian spun to the right. “Pasha?” he breathed, both relieved and panicked.

Portia stood there, not believing her eyes before her face crumpled, tears streaming down her cheeks. She barreled into him, hugging tightly as she buried her face into his abdomen. All he could do was hug her, missing her just as fiercely as she did him.

Abruptly, she pushed back from him, grabbing and twisting his ear. “What are you doing back here! Are you insane? Wait, don't answer that question, you doof! I need to hide you! And you need a shower, you absolutely reek! Just what were you doing in there?”

Tiberius snorted, having seen and heard everything from the window next to the door. He snorted again, watching the much shorter woman led Julian away by the ear, giggling quietly at the sight of the taller male brought low by a short, angry female (sister?).

But she was right. If Julian reeked, then the shop smelled like brothel. He had to throw open some windows, light some incense and thoroughly clean the counter after moving it back.

Asra might be a fucking freak, but at least he cleans up after himself. Tiberius should show the same courtesy.
A cloaked man strolled along the boulevard, his hood up. Shortly, he came to the main city bridge, sidestepping lamplighters and last minute shoppers. Revelers would soon be out, along with prostitutes selling their services.

He made his way to one of the lamps. His companion should be here shortly. He rested against the bulstrode, shifting to make himself comfortable.

He didn't have to wait long. Another cloaked man, somewhat taller than the first, melted from the crowd. The two hooked arms, and strode down the outer ring road, eventually entering the area now known as the Flooded Quarter.

They hugged the parts of the quay closest to the buildings, occasionally sidestepping areas of rotted wood or collapsed stone masonry. After a journey lasting roughly a quarter of an hour, sounds of laughter and music could be heard. A few buildings ahead, warm light could be seen glowing down an alley. Turning down this alley, it quickly opened up into a courtyard, with greenery like climbing ivy and trumpet flowers overrunning the walls and statuary.

Strung up thru the large yard were lanterns, with simple poll tents dotting the perimeter. Off to one side, what looks like a makeshift musicians stand was being assembled. Opposite of that was a seating area, with a few small tables dotted between large picnic slabs. Along one wall, platters of food and drink were being set.

“I must say, when you said outdoor concert, this was not what I was expecting” drawled the shorter of the two (although ‘shorter’ is an arbitrary description, seeing as both men were above average height). He pulled off his cloak, revealing auburn hair and a cool lavender eye, the other being obscured by an eye-patch. He twisted about, examining the yard.

His companion did the same. He was somewhat taller than the other, and more built. He had a swarthy complexion, with hooded dark eyes under bold black brows. His cheeks were pronounced, doubly so from the open smile on his wide, generous mouth. On one side of his angular jaw was a dimple. Completing the picture was a long, straight and defined nose and a head of long thick black curly hair, confined in a braid ending at the thighs.

A braid that was distracting a certain wanted Doctor. He knew his companion (friend? Lover?
Sadist?) had long hair, just not that long. Seeing it brought flashbacks from their encounter a few nights previous, and how he had repeatedly buried his hands in that thick mane.

Tiberius took off his cloak, and gestured to Julian to pass his over. At dances like this, there is always a spot to store such things. One also did not have to worry about theft. It’s not smart to shit in their own yard and all that rot.

For the night, Julian wore his usual ensemble, minus his coat. The night here was warm, and the courtyard was humid. Tiberius was clothed in a black sleeveless doublet, that led down to wide-legged trousers. There were some flashes of color buried in the black fabric, stopping on the top of leather-clad feet. A thick red silk scarf was tied at his waist, and he had a few leather cord and metal bracelets on his wrists.

At this point, the band stand was assembled, and the various musicians were gathering, tuning the instruments and playing warm up scales. Julian and Tiberius made their way over to one of the food tables, sampling bits here and there. A final stop for drinks and they settled at a small table.

“While I am not one to question” *snort* “- as I was saying, while I am not one to question, I am a wanted man. Wouldn't someone here turn me in for the sizeable bounty on my head?”

“Nope.”

Julian raised an incredulous brow. “Really? And prithee tell me, why?”. He curled a gloved fist under his jaw, the other flourishing a bread stick.

“First rule about Dance Night: You don't talk about Dance Night” Tiberius held up a finger. “Two,” he raised a second finger, “you DO NOT talk about Dance Night. Everybody minds their own business. Those who squawk quickly find themselves dis-invited, and possibly dead.”

Julian's eyebrow had disappeared into his hairline at this point. “Reeeaaaalllyyy? You all take this ‘Dance Night’ quite seriously, don’t you?”

Tiberius bit some spiced beef off of a skewer, before reaching for his wine. “No one knows who started the tradition, but it has changed little. You show up, eat, dance, be merry, and mind your own business. Whatever happens here is stays here. Guards need not be involved.” He gave a hard stare to Julian “If your worried about getting turned in before you can complete what you came back here to do, you need not to. There are people here who have done far worse.”

Julian cocked his head to the side, eye narrowed in contemplation. After a few moments, he shrugged and popped a small shrimp puff in his mouth. “So, if I am surrounded by scum and villainy, that leads me to wonder: how do you and Asra know of these...shindigs?”

“Asra knows and sees a lot. He’s not just a magician of Vesuvia, he’s THE Magician. People of all walks come to our shop for everything from cures to readings about fortune. While he doesn't have a malicious bone in his body, he has a hard stop on what he will and will not do. There have been a few times where someone wanted something that was...NOT good, and wouldn't take no for an answer. One man wanted a variation of a sleeping tonic, to use on a butchers daughter. He was found a few days later in the main square, covered in filth and spewing madness.”

Julian threw a disbelieving look at his companion. From what he remembered, Asra, while a liar and deceiver, would never use his gifts in such a way. Tiberius gave a half shrug in response.

“Asra has a weird moral compass when it comes to some things, but it is pointed in the direction of good. Although what you would consider good may be vastly different from him. You need to
remember, as a magician, he deals with things other than people. There are creatures that have a much different, almost alien way of living, and magic itself follows its own rules. Things like that are going to greatly color how one sees the world.”

Julian waved his words away, raising his glass to his face. “While I do not doubt your words, the point is moot. I have no mind for talk of magic or philosophy.” He bit into a roll, delighting in the fact it seemed to be stuffed full of lobster.

Tiberius smiled at the happy sound Julian let out, resting his chin on his palm. A soft smile curled his lips as he watched. After a few moments, Julian looked up, being caught in his gaze.

He gestured to Tiberius’ plate. “Do you not enjoy your meal?” He got a smirk in rebuttal.

“Don’t worry about me, I’m having my fill.”

Julian was silent for a few moments, before he caught on. “Oh, your a sly one. I like that!” A blush and crooked grin appeared. “So, what are you buttering me up for?”

Tiberius leaned forward, gently grasping a gloved hand and raising it to his face, laying a gentle kiss on the back of it. He maintained eye contact, a low smolder present. Julian blushed even further, his grin turning lazy.

“Just wondering if you would like to have a dance with me?”

“Oh really? And just what type of dance are we talking about?”

Tiberius feigned a look of outrage, “Why, one that is had on a dance floor! What do you take me for, a common tomcat? Besides…” he trailed off, causing Julian to lean forward more, “…the other dancing we could do, I want as a private show. VIP treatment and all. I the patron, you the performer, with the bed as our stage,” he ended on a low purr.

Julian’s face lit up in a combination of lust, glee, and embarrassment. “Well then, most kind and generous patron! Shall we not dance?” He stood, affecting a gallant bow with their hands still intertwined. Tiberius stood as a few people at the long table next to them tittered. Both turned, making their way to the floor, Julian throwing an exaggerated wink at the onlookers, causing the group to laugh uproariously.

They made their way near the center of the floor, the band playing an upbeat, quick country song, one full of brassy instruments, lively flutes and jaunty fiddling. They quickly settled into a fast two-step, filled with jumps and quick turns.

The song transitioned into a faster one, more fiddle and brass, with drumming replacing the flutes. Everyone split into two lines, partners opposite before coming together, clasping hands just to spin out and come back tight, arms on waist and shoulders.

There were a few other songs, before the beat and instruments changed into something a bit more ballroom. Tiberius transitioned them into a fast foxtrot. At this point, the dance floor was half empty, with many clearing off to rest and refuel after dancing several quick and active songs.

After the foxtrot, the music changed again, slowing, with cello's joining the violins and brass. This addition created something sultry and spicy, something that one can easily...

“Tango?”

...to. Of course. Julian could never give up an opportunity to perform such a scandalous dance.
Julian threw a challenging, heated grin at his partner. A challenge that was quickly answered.

Tiberius pulled Julian close, quickly taking the lead. They read each other easily, Julian stepping forward when Tiberius moved back, and vice versa. Their bodies molded together perfectly, legs sliding, side's pressing and rubbing. Their footwork was quick and precise, Julian throwing in a bit of extra flair on the spin-outs.

It was during one of these spin-outs, Julian noticed his partners pants. More precisely, the fact that the pants were not fully closed. The legs were split down the front, from groin to the cuff. The edges were overlapped somewhat, hiding this fact. At each spin, the unsecured, weighted ends flared out, revealing both strips of bold color placed at random, along with the firm, muscular thighs and shapely calves of Tiberius.

Julian remembered, quite heatedly, just how strong those legs were. How they easily held himself up as long, hard thrust drove Tiberius into his core.

He wanted an encore.

He wanted to bury his face between all that firm muscle, cock lodged in his throat, hands in his hair and tears on his cheeks as he was face-fucked.

He wanted it so fucking bad.

On a dip, he let a hint of his lusty thoughts peek on his face. At this point, there were the only ones on the dance floor, the other dancers clearing off completely to allow the two masters free reign. However, neither man were aware of this fact, being completely absorbed in each other.

They made a striking pair, Tiberius being just that bit taller, a warm golden glow on his skin from a light sheen of sweat. A finely sculpted torso, leading down to a wasp-waist that sat upon sinful hips and devastating legs. Julian was a perfect contrast, all pale skin, svelte build, and long leg, a rosy blush dusting his face and chest.

Both had been dancing for nigh on an hour, and their appearance showed. Julian’s hair was a ruffled mess, sweat starting to heavily gather at his temples. Tiberius was not far off, the long braid confining his hair to order having since fallen loose, the quick turns and steps of a proper tango doing its best to create disorder.

Many onlookers were bewitched, the chemistry between the dance partners being obvious to even the blind. A few regulars who knew Tiberius knew the auburn one had to be special, not giving up his dance partner even once. Not even Lucille, a woman of great beauty and that many would kill to dance with (and some have), could cut in during one of the earlier dances.

All too soon, the song ended, with a final dip. Moments after, the entire courtyard erupted in loud cheers and clapping. The men were startled, having been wrapped up in each other, at the loud noise. Several other party’s quickly made their way onto the floor, compliments flowing like water.

The band was in recess, so it would be some time before the dancing could begin again. That did not stop the many others asking for a dance with either man. Eventually, Tiberius and Julian made their way from the floor, begging off more dances. They made their way back to “their” table, with Tiberius making his way to one of the wine casks. He returned with two full glasses, a different variety from before.

He handed a glass off, settling in his seat and taking a sip. It was a pale, almost clear white, with a hint of hibiscus. The cask was charmed to stay cool, and it was quite appreciated.
He turned to look at his companion for the night, utterly charmed by the rich flush to his cheeks and open grin. The mussed hair just added to the image.

Tiberius was slightly hypnotized by the graceful way Julian held his wine glass. Holding the main cup of the glass with nary his thumb and middle finger, allowing the unoccupied digits to arc freely from the glass as he brought it up to his face. He sat at a slight angle from Tiberius, and his profile was thrown into beatific relief from the glow of the nearby lanterns.

The wine had to be stronger than he thought. How else could he explain his infatuation with the curves of Julians neck, the shadows created from the back-light on his face and cheeks? How his hair was like spun amber, and his flushed skin looked inviting to a full-bodied, thorough tasting?

He had a sudden urge to run his hands thru that hair, and no reason not to. It was his luck that Julians right was facing him, giving him easy access to the bulk of his locks. Julian startled at the sensation of hands in his hair, relaxing when he saw that it was only Tiberius.

Julian revealed in the sensation. The fingers were firm yet smooth, gliding thru the strands and gently scraping his scalp. A fine shiver ran down his spine, and he leaned towards Tiberius, giving him easier access, a low hum leaving his throat.

Unfortunately, the moment was cut short as a man ran into the courtyard, shouting about guards. Someone snitched.

Everything froze, before chaos erupted. People scrambled for different exits, some going into one of the abandoned buildings that opened into the yard, hoping to escape via the roof. Tiberius dashed to their cloaks, Julian scrambling over a table to meet him.

They exited the alley they first came down, just to see a full regiment of guards making their way down their original path. They turned, going further down the quay, catching each other as they slipped or broke thru the rotting wood.

They came upon an old stone crossing, hurtling over it and going left. The quay made way for solid stone, but it was covered under a few inches of standing, fetid water. As they continued, the rotting smell that is unique to such waters grew.

Eventually, they came to a dead end. Both were turned around at this point, having made a myriad of twists and turns. Looking back, they could hear the metallic clank of a few guards.

“Shit. And I was expecting a far more pleasurable end to the evening”, Julian snarled. He looked around, mind going a mile a minute. He chanced a look up.

“Up there! Can you boost me?” Up on what would be the second story was a length of rope. While neither could get it on their own, it may be possible if Julian was lifted.

Tiberius knelled. “Get on my shoulders. I'll get close to the wall, that way if needed you can stand.” Julian scrambled to do so, initially slipping due to the water coating his soles. He eventually got into a crouching position, then Tiberius stood. He leaned against the wall, heart thundering as the clanking got closer. Julian stood on his shoulders, using the brick as a support. His fingers just brushed the rope, slipping a few times before getting a good grasp. He tugged, more dropping down. He started climbing, feeling the rope jerk under his hands as Tiberius made his way up.

They both tumbled over the roof edge, Tiberius landing on top of Julian briefly before rolling off and madly pulling up the rope. It made it just past the edge they were ducked behind mere moments before the guards rounded the corner.
They sat frozen in place as the guards made their way to the dead-end, incredulous to the fact that two suspects disappeared into thin air.

After the longest minutes of their lives, they heard the guards give up and make their way back. Both men waited until they could no longer hear their clank, and an extra 10 beats.

Once sure of their safety, they released the breath they were holding, before bursting out laughing. Their shoulders slid against each other as they collapsed in relief.

On one knows who reached for who, but they soon fell on each other in a hungry clash of mouths, teeth, and tongue. Hands tore at hair and clothes, roaming without restraint. They rolled, trying to get as close as possible. Julian ended up on top, setting himself firmly on Tiberius’ clothed groin.

He tore his mouth away from the other, licking his lips as he pushed back his hair. He pushed off his cloak, grinding down as he did so. Tiberius groaned, large hands going to the others hips, holding Julian in place as he roughly ground up into his ass.

Julian cursed, ripping off his gloves just to bury his hands in the free-flowing curls trapped under Tiberius as he ducked in for more soul-sucking kisses. He ground down again, moaning as a clothed dick settled between his legs. The thighs he sat upon quivered, reminding him of what he fantasized about earlier.

He felt the hard cock under him, landing sloppy, open-mouthed kisses down Tiberius’s jawline and throat. When he met fabric, his fingers made to undo the doublet’s buttons, shaking in anticipation. As each inch of skin was revealed, a kiss or nip was dropped. When he got to one defined pectoral, he sunk his teeth into the firm muscle.

He felt the hard cock under him jerk, and felt more than heard the deep rumble of approval from his partner. He laved at the bite, before moving down his sternum, tongue dancing over abdominal muscles before dipping into a pierced navel.

While his mouth was occupied, his hands were far from idle. As he tongued the metal bar, his hands ripped off the silk belt, hastily throwing it to the side. He undid the corset closure keeping the pants closed, fingers getting tangled. He grabbed fistfuls of fabric just below the hip ridge, yanking. The pants lowered a few inches, revealing more stomach, along with the start of a thick patch of pubic hair.

At each yank, more flesh was revealed, and his tongue continued its journey. Tiberius fistedit his hands in Julian's hair, air hissing between clenched teeth and hungry growls rolling from his throat.

Julian was nibbling just above Tiberius’ groin, when one final yank freed the trapped erection. It slapped along Julian's jaw as he buried his face in the coarse hairs, breathing in the heady musk that was distinctly Tiberius. He moved back, flattened his tongue, and gave a long, slow lick from base to tip.

“Fuck!”

Feeling hands spasm in his hair, Julian placed a kiss to the tip, eventually sinking down and sucking a few inches of cock. He gave a particularly hard suck, with a reward of a shot of precome. He gripped the base firmly, before bobbing his head.

Tiberius spread his legs, giving Julian more room to work with. He bent his knees, feet flat on the roof, doing his best not to jerk his hips too much. He felt an arm curl around his thigh, fingers curling in his pubic patch and tangling and tugging. The sudden, sharp stimulus caused his back to arch and
his hip to jerk, adding another few inches unexpectedly.

Julian gagged on the extra length of cock in his mouth, stilling and breathing thru his nose until the other relaxed. He continued his original pace, before gagging himself again, tears starting to form in his eye. The hands in his hair ripped his face away, forcing his head up as a mixture of cum and spit trailed down his chin.

It took everything Tiberius had not to shove his dick back into that heavenly mouth. Julian was a sight, face beet red and covered in spit and cum, eye bright and tearing. His breathing was hard and labored, lips swollen.

Before he could voice his concern, Julian beat him to it. “Fuck my face. I’ve been gagging for it all night. I’ve wanted to do since our first encounter, and i saw just how strong and thick your thighs were.” At this, he planted his teeth deeply into the meat of Tiberius’ inner thigh. He reared back, a trail of blood dripping from his mouth, and made eye contact as he brought a finger up his chin, gathering a combination of blood, cum, and spit into a thick wad before sucking his finger clean. “I want your strong legs wrapped around my face as you force yourself down my throat.” He ran his flattened tongue up the same thigh he had bitten into, stopping to lap at the wound.

Tiberius was a mess. Covered in sweat, clothing and hair askew as he stared into the eye of a veritable sex fiend. He cocked his head to the side as one, final act of asking. Julian responded with another bite, this time higher up on the other leg.

Before he could sink his teeth too deep, his head was whipped to the side, one of the hands in his hair releasing. Moments later, two thick fingers were shoved into his mouth. He gagged again as they were forced back, the remaining thumb and fingers catching on the sides of his chin and cheeks.

His jaw dropped as low as he can go, and those same fingers started thrusting, gently at first. They quickly transitioned into fucking his throat, pushing gobs of spit past his lips and down his chin. Just as quickly as it began, those digits withdrew, before his head was grasped and Tiberius forced his cock into that wet mouth.

Julian threw his arms around Tiberius’ legs just as the hands forced his head down lower. He gagged as more was pushed past his mouth and into his throat, tears starting to stream freely down his cheeks. At this point, his sadist attempted to pull him up, but Julian slapped his hands away, regripped rippling thighs, and forced himself down the last few inches. He didn't stop until his nose was buried deeply in thick hair, breathing heavily thru his nose. The heady musk and thick cock in his throat had him impossibly hard, and it took everything he had not to palm himself thru his pants. He raised his hips up some, before getting low on his spread knees, ass popped up in the air.

The new position opened up his throat and airways more, giving him just enough leeway to poke his tongue out and swipe at the root of Tiberius’ cock. If he strained, he could taste the slight difference in skin between shaft and sack.

Tiberius returned his hands to Julian's hair, sweating profusely and cursing. When all is said and done, he’ll get Julian back for that. Turning him over his knee and giving him a good, hard spanking sounded just right for acting like an impudent brat.

In the meantime, he settled for this: he curled his legs about the head and shoulders between them, and started rolling his hips up. After a few minutes and adjustments, he started fucking up into that mouth in earnest. He held Julian's head in place, his hips snapping up quickly and smoothly, with enough force to bounce them both. When he looked down, he was only able to get the occasional flash of scarlet skin, gleaming with a combination of sweat, tears, and spittle.
Julian was in heaven. The oral abuse was forcing heat into his veins, each time he was gagged
causing him to moan and his neglected length to throb in need. His shirt was starting to cling to
himself with sweat. He could already feel the burn in his mouth and throat, and know that even with
his gift, he would feel this tomorrow.

(He mourned the loss of that tender pain from their first meeting. All bites were fully healed by they
time he reached Pasha’s home, with the deep, core dwelling burn gone by the time he woke up. He’s
ashamed of the amount of times he got himself off to the memories of that pain.)

All too soon, Tiberius hips started to stutter. He unwound his legs and planted his feet flat on the
ground in leverage. He forced Julian’s head down as far as possible and held it there as he choked on
dick. He thrust up as hard and deep as he could repeatedly, relishing in the sounds and sensations of
a throat going tight. Just before orgasm, he pulled Julian off and forced him to his knees, holding him
up with his hair. Tiberius stood, thrusting back into that dripping, cherry mouth before settling.

He felt arms wrap around his hips, hands grasping a muscled ass as he forced Julian’s head still as he
went as deep as he could, before he shot his load down a most willing and accommodating neck,
groaning loudly. He forced Julian's head to stay as he rocked himself to completion, on hand buried
in hair as the other cradled the others face and jaw.

Julian wiggled his head back a forth, trying to drag out the milking for as long as possible. He
swallowed repeatedly, both attempting to swallow the cum and drool flooding his mouth and to try to
get a second drink. He pulled back off, sucking and slurping hard and obscenely loud to catch as
much as possible. Try as he might, much had spilled and trailed down his jaw and onto his chest.

When Tiberius finally pulled free, he looked down onto a sight that nearly wrought a second orgasm.
Julian was wrecked. He sat slouched on his knees, thighs splayed and showcasing that he was still
hard. His shirt was wide open, still on his shoulders but framing an expanse of smooth skin from his
belt up. Thick strands of drool and cum covered his jaw, neck and chest, the cooling liquid pebbling
pale dusky nipples. His hair was un-salvageable, with his eye patch being lost somewhere in the
scuffle. He was still breathing hard, drying tear tracks cutting thru the filthy mixture caked upon him.

As Tiberius watched, Julian drug his fingers thru the mess on his chest, before shoving his fingers
into his mouth, moaning lowly, visible eye closing in pleasure. As he was sucking his fingers clean,
he cracked his eye open a sliver, throwing a sultry look at Tiberius.

Julian loved putting on a show, his love of theater notwithstanding.

However, Julian did not anticipate Tiberius pushing him onto his back, legs trapped below him. Both
arms were wrenched above his head, wrists being held together by one strong hand. The other ripped
off his belt, quickly undoing his fly and viciously pulling them down and freeing his cock. Tiberius
then swept his hand over Julian’s face and neck, gathering the results of a fantastic blowjob and
using it as lubricant on Julian's dick.

Julian croaked out a hoarse and broken groan, his voice having been destroyed along with his throat.
The combination of the cooling spit/cum mixture and the fact of just how it got there made him feel
dirty in a wonderful way.

Tiberius spent a few moments rubbing the filthy mixture all over Julian’s throbbing dick, before
jerking him harshly and quickly. Julian jerked at the abrupt pace, mouth falling open in a scream that
was horse and breaking, never getting louder than a whisper. His hips bucked until Tiberius sat on
the folded limbs, trapping them.

The broken sounds were like music to Tiberius’ ears, adding a pleasing contrast to the wet sucking
sound produced from his hand around Julians cock. He leaned over the broken man who was sobbing for more, his hips bucking up despite the considerable weight resting on them. He slowed down the furious pace his fist was making, dialing down to just punishing. At random, he started to twist his hand as it came to the tip and squeezing.

He brought his mouth near Julian's ear, relishing in his gasp and pleas being breathed into his own. He laid a gentle kiss on it, before purring into it.

“That's it sweetheart. Plea for me. Ask for me. Tell me what you want. You were phenomenal, sucking my dick down. You made me feel so good. You're my good boy, aren't you?” At this statement, he felt a hard throb and jerk in his hand.

“You like that, don’t you? Being called my good boy? That’s what you are, isn't it? Soooo very good. Your my best boy, and I take care of my boy.” He closed his fist even tighter, nearly pinching his thumb and index knuckle together. He changed his pace, going slow but hard, with the ball of his thumb digging into the skin covering the thick vein running up the underside of Julian’s cock as he dragged his fist from root to head, forcing streams of precum to bleed out. The additional wetness was appreciated, the friction from earlier rubbing away most of the initial lubrication.

Tiberius started tonguing the ear beneath his mouth, biting and nibbling at random before sucking the lobe into his mouth. He released it wetly, going back to his earlier praising.

“Sweet boy, do you want to come? You have more than earned it. You just need to tell me…” he felt furtive nodding. “You need to use your words. I can't understand you if you don’t.” He was being a bastard, he knew. He knew exactly what Julian wanted. He just wanted to hear it, coming from that destroyed throat.

“Can you just give me one word? I won't make you beg, I just want to hear one sweet yes. Won’t you do that for me, my sweet boy?”

Tiberius could hear Julian try to talk, but the throat fucking combined with his gasping pleas had wiped out any possibility of speaking, let alone saying one word. He truly wouldn’t deny Julian, not after all this. He just wanted to see how far he could push him.

But Julian continued to surprise him. Tiberius could feel him take a deep breath, before opening his mouth and shouting ‘YES!’ It was weak for a shout, nothing louder than a kittens chirp. But unmistakable for what it was.

Tiberius purred in pleasure. During this ordeal, he got hard again. How could he not when the man below him was fucking perfect? He raised up slightly, spitting into his working hand thickly before wrapping it around both their cocks. Neither lasted long afterwards, Tiberius still being sensitive from his earlier release, and poor Julian being at the end of his rope.

A few passes were all that was needed as Julian came with a broken whisper. Tiberius followed; such a sweet sound was like a sirens call. After another pass to wring the last few spurts of cum, he withdrew his hand, whipping it to the side sharply to remove the filth. Tiberius rolled off to the side, dismounting the wrung-out doctor and laying on his side. Julian’s mouth hung open, pulling in and exhaling large amounts of air. His hands remained flung passed his head, and his legs folded under him.

Tiberius leaned on his elbow, and used his clean hand to unfold Julian's legs, marveling again at their length and build. He rolled over, reaching for his scarf, pulling it close. He shifted back, and used a corner to start cleaning up his partner.
Just like last time, he worked top to bottom, the task made more difficult with a lack of water. He made due as well as he can, taking care of Julian first before attending to himself. Eventually, he concluded he did all he can. The scarf was a total loss. By the time he cleans it, the scarlet will be permanently stained. Drakarian silk, while surprisingly durable, was easily stained.

After tossing the scarf aside, he crawled the few feet to their cloaks. He used one as a pillow for himself and Julian, while using the other as a makeshift blanket. Getting comfortable, he pulled Julian to his side, noting that he seemed to have passed into sleep at some point.

It was still a few hours before true dawn. Tiberius figured it wouldn't cause harm if he let his poor, fucked out boy nap before getting themselves somewhere safe.

The shop wouldn't do, with Asra being expected to be back soon. He had a few boltholes they could lay low at. He should also see about asking Julian where he was staying. He obviously had somewhere, seeing as he was clean and kept.

But that was a issue for the future. Right now, he was going to settle down and get a nap and some cuddles.
When Julian came to, it was to liquid warmth and fingers running through his hair. He was leaning back against something firm and moving. Faintly, he could hear someone talking.

After a few moments, he connected the movement to a firm chest, and the liquid to water. He opened his eye (mindful to keep the condition of the other hidden) and turned his head.

Tiberius was behind him, leaning back against the lip of a tub. He had leaned Julian against him, and the voices he heard earlier were Tiberius and another quietly speaking. He turned about a bit more, observing that they were in a small bathing pool.

The room was primarily white tile, with flowing, organic mosaics done in blues, greens, and shimmering golds along the borders of the walls. The pool they were in was recessed into the floor, and to the right, the room opened onto a balcony, giving them an unfettered view of the late afternoon sky.

Turning back to look at Tiberius, he saw him speaking with another person. Julian realized she looked familiar, but couldn't recall from where. It was only as she tossed her hair to the side that he realized it was Lucille.

She had crouched by the pool, and was speaking with Tiberius in hushed tones. Despite the large open room, their words were very low and soft spoken. It was only when he shifted that they realized that they had an audience.

As Tiberius turned back to him, Lucille gave Julian a cool once-over. She caught him looking at her, and threw a saucy smirk at him, eyes doing a slower second pass.

She turned back to Tiberius. "As I was saying, no one knows who ratted us out...yet. Alfonso and Chile are making the rounds, but they have a few people yet to narrow it down to."

Tiberius hummed, his right hand going back to Julian's hair. His left reached to a bowl that was unnoticed by Julian until now. He reached inside and grabbed a ripe peach, bringing it to his mouth before biting into it. It was firm and succulent, juices running down his chin.

"I know that Gor is having money problems. He lost his contract with Lady Eilese, and that was where most of his funds came from. However, Mik was recently ejected from our shop, trying to sell
us fake mordel root. And Fran is looking to off her husband and take over the leather business. The only reason she hadn't yet is that a good assassination cost money, and there is a reason her husband controls the moneybags.”

Lucille moved to sit at the edge of the pool, letting her feet and legs dangle. The robe she was wearing was sheer and red, showcasing her comely figure. Her breast were naturally high and tight, with a sharp curve where her waist gave way to thick and full hips. Her long mahogany waves were currently pulled back in a loose twist. As she settled, she leaned back on her hands.

“I also know Prew was quite miffed that you turned her down, Ty…”

Tiberius snorted, setting aside the peach pit and grabbing a large dark plum. This he brought down to Julian, resting it against his lips as Tiberius raised a questioning brow. Julian opened his mouth and bit down, moaning quietly as the cool flesh parted and juice ran down his parched throat. A small rivulet of the dark red liquid escaped a corner of his lips, painting a crimson trail.

Both Tiberius and Lucille could not help but look at the delightful picture he made. A pink flush to his high cheekbones, lips painted in tart plum, hair pushed back from his face, darkened to a deep red by the water in it. The cool lavender of his seeing eye stood out in sharp contrast, surrounded by thick lashes. Lucille know of several ladies that would kill to have his lashes. She was a bit envious of them herself.

Tiberius leaned down to drop a quick kiss, staying a bit longer than anticipated. Julian tasted divine, the slight tartness from the plum adding to his unique flavor. The kiss evolved into a lazy bit of tongue-play, leaving Julian dazed when Tiberius pulled away.

Julian leaned in for another kiss, only remembering that they were not alone when he heard a slight snort. He pined more when he saw the look on Lucille’s face, and buried his face in a chuckling Tiberius’ shoulder at their snicker. Deep down, he couldn’t help but notice his...pleasure at having someone watch. It was leading to some interesting thoughts.

“I'll leave you two to it then.” She withdrew from the pool, sheer wet fabric clinging to her legs.

“Your welcome to stay as long as you want to, Ty. Both of you. Feel free to use my rooms as you would your own.”

Tiberius hummed his agreement, returning his attentions to the man in his lap. He buried his fingers in wet locks, and returned the plum to sticky lips, making a pleased sound when it was nibbled.

As Lucille made to pass, she couldn't help but lean down and caress the side of Julian’s face. “What a sweet bit of boy you found yourself, Ty. It’s too bad you got to him first, his face would look adorable between my legs.” She smirked as Julian shot up, nearly slamming his head into Tiberius’s chin, squawking in embarrassment as he flushed and flapped.

“I-I-...you...what!? Why would you say that? Not that your not...um...attractive or anything-”

She just smirked in amusement, exiting the room accompanied by the snickers of Tiberius.

“Well, she’s not wrong luv. You look so precious down on your knees.”

Julian sputtered again, before moaning in defeat, leveling a half-hearted splash in Tiberius’ direction. He most decidedly did not squawk when he was moved back to Tiberius lap. He was mollified when he was offered a handful of grapes.

He pulled each grape off the stalk with his teeth, mind turning in circles. It sounded as though they
were talking about the events of last night (?), seemingly trying to figure out who and what alerted the guards.

“At the party, there was a...gentleman...that I had deals with before the whole Lucio murdering bit. Our last meeting went sour quick, when he didn’t produce the items requested by Quaestor Valdemar. They refused payment, and Travi took umbrage to that.”

Tiberius hummed. “What were the items? And what were they needed for?”

Julian’s brow furrowed. “It’s difficult to remember. The only thing I knew was that Valdemar wanted to try new things to treat the plague. We were getting desperate, the death toll kept climbing. I do know that the items would be considered illegal, but…”

“Desperate times called for desperate measures?”

A short nod. “When I went to collect, Travi said he couldn’t get them. But, he still wanted payment. Valdemar told me no goods, no payment, and that’s what I did. I walked away.”

The empty grape stalk was set aside, and the hand running thru Julian’s hair was removed. Moments later, both hands returned, smoothing a musky-scented shampoo thru his hair.

Tension he didn’t know he had released from his shoulders. He gave a pleased moan as fingers scrubbed thru lathered locks, digging into and massaging his scalp. He could feel Tiberius shift them closer to one of the pool’s sides, before guiding his head back.

Moments later, fresh water from a basin was trickling thru his hair, taking shampoo and dirt away and down a grille-covered drainage tract built into the floor. Both hands returned, smoothing excess water from his hair before applying a conditioner.

Lucille must be very wealthy, to be able to afford a matching set. Even most other merchant nobles can only shampoo and condition infrequently. To get the right balance of oils and essences to return the moisture stripped from the hair in cleaning is very difficult. Only the very rich can do it as a regular hygiene ritual.

Or someone who has some advanced chemistry training...like a plague doctor.

As he sat, letting the conditioner do its work, he watched as Tiberius attended to his own hair. He didn’t realize until now just how much hair Tiberius had. It was all gathered into a messy bun atop his head, with random curls sticking out. Due to the amount of hair and it’s texture, his bun was almost as big as his head, if not bigger.

The sight was almost comical, and would have sent Julian into a tizzy if he hadn’t also been gripped by the insatiable desire to brush that hair.

As Tiberius turned to grab a wide-toothed comb, Julian made one of his well known impulsive decisions. He boosted himself onto the poolside, making a ‘come hither’ motion with his fingers. Tiberius acquiesced to his request, a small mou of confusion on his face. Julian took the comb, before turning the other away, pulling out the rod being used to keep the hair in place.

He caught it as it fell, admiring the color and texture. It was thick, similar to that of horse hair, and very heavy. The color was a very deep black, shot thru with blues and violets when light bounced off the strands. The color reminded Julian of obsidian. The curls were large and somewhat loose: not nearly as tight as what are produced by curlers, but unmistakably there.

He separated a section, and started running the comb thru the ends. He slowly made his way up,
diligently taking care with every tangle and knot. Each section he did returned life and bounce to the previously smushed curls. However, only a true wash could really let them shine.

After quite a bit of work, they were now ready to be washed. Julian felt some excitement from the thought of this. He turned this way and that, looking for the bottles. As he turned back, Tiberius was holding one, a smile on his face. Julian snatched at it, a gleeful grin emerging as he dumped a palmful of shampoo out. Tiberius chuckled as he turned away, only stopping as he dunked his head.

Julian was speechless when Tiberius came back up. The heavy strands were pulled straight, showing how long the hair was. When in its usual braid, it slapped the back of Tiberius’s thighs. Wet, it had to reach his knees. It was truly a majestic mane.

He pinked as he ran his sudsy fingers thru Tiberius’s hair. He went red when his massaging fingers brought a throaty moan up from the others chest. A heavy sigh escaped Tiberius as Julian pulled up more hair to clean. With nimble fingers, a rich lather built up.

Julian ended up pouring more shampoo directly into the hair, scrubbing vigorously. Large dollops of suds melted down his hands and arms to dance along firm shoulders, running down a sculpted back.

After a few more minutes of this, Julian reached for a water basin, a tall flagon of warm water next to it. Tiberius turned, bending backwards, resting on his elbows over the drainage grill. The action caused slippery locks to pull over Julian’s lap, the sensation pleasant. He slowly poured the flagon water over the crown of Tiberius’s head, running his unoccupied hand thru the hair to help rinse.

Tiberius had closed his eyes to prevent shampoo from getting into them, letting Julian gaze unhindered at his companion. The suds from his earlier work traveled down a strong neck, clinging to firm pectorals. Despite the amount of hair on his head, Tiberius was fairly hairless. Some of the foam that made it past the chest to his strong abdominals had settled in the thin trail of hair that started under his pierced navel, ending in a nest of curls at his groin.

Tiberius stopped at a bench on the opposing wall, rummaging thru a bag. He turned, a dark glass bottle in his grasp. As he returned to the pool, he pulled off the cap, presenting the bottle to Julian.

He took it, bringing the neck up to his nose and taking a sniff. It smelt musky and floral, like rose and
sandalwood with something darker. He poured a dollop into his palm, a rich golden amber puddle. He rubbed his hands together, warming the thin oil. It became even more fragrant than before.

Just as when he had brushed Tiberius's hair, he started from the ends up. He ran his long fingers thru the wet locks, getting a bit more oil midway thru.

He used a damp flannel to rub the excess oil off his hands, the murder’s mark standing out in sharp contrast. He spent a few moments looking at it, before a hand covered his. He looked up, meeting Tiberius's eyes. He received a soft look, before being presented with a brush, a different one from before.

Julian blushed. He hasn't received a look like that before. He’s received looks of admiration, lust, envy, but not one like this.

He mentally shook himself, pushing such thoughts away. He was a doomed man, death having forsaken him for the time being, but she will come to collect her dues in time. Best to not get too attached, when there would be nothing but heartbreak and emptiness in the end.

He picked up a section of hair, running the brush thru. The bristles were a bit denser and thicker, evenly pulling thru the oil for a better distribution.

As Julian traveled further up the dark tresses, Tiberius turned away from him, to make the brushing further up easier. He had a slight frown on his face, not liking the look on Julian's face currently. He decided to let it be: if Julian wanted to, he would share. As it was, Tiberius would respect his privacy...for now.

After the brushing, Tiberius spun his hair into a twist, gathering it back atop his head. As he was re-affixing the rod, a servant came in. She had some folded robes and towels, setting them down on the bench. She refilled the flagon and gathered up their clothes, before informing them that her mistress had left the manse, but that they were welcome to go and do as they pleased.

She turned and left, quietly shutting the doors behind her. Tiberius grabbed the flagon, turning back to Julian. He moved to the gap between Julian’s legs, guiding his head back and rinsing the conditioner out. He dropped a few tender kisses to the neck below him, appreciating the long lines and pale skin. There was little heat to them, just a simple desire to be close.

When the water finally ran clean, he set the flagon down, wrapping long arms around the redhead and burying his face in the junction where neck meets shoulder. He felt the other’s arms rest on his shoulders, legs curling and locking behind him. He inhaled deeply, bring the warm scent of Julian deep into his lungs. As he did so, their chest’s pressed firmly together, the faint hair covering the doctors chest scratching his.

His exhale was long, with much unwanted stress exiting with it. Things in the city were heating up. The rules of Dance Night had been broken the day before, and by the morrow a body or two will be floating down the canal. There were too many people who could have squawked, warranted or otherwise.

He had also brushed off the Countess, using the excuse that Asra was out for not coming up to the Palace immediately. He cannot afford to put her request off any longer. The reappearance of Dr. Devorak (though most welcome) was stirring the pot, making some of the more...unsavory characters in the city sit up and take notice. Julian may have thought he was being subtle, but the underbelly of the city had grown even worse than when the Count was alive.

If he weren’t careful, Julian would be devoured before finishing, let alone starting what he returned
to do.

After long minutes, Tiberius separated from Julian, grasping the marked hand in his own. He led his (lover? Companion? Fuck buddy?) out of the pool, and over to the bench. Grabbing a large, fluffy towel, he started drying off the other, playfully dodging the others attempts at doing to the same. He then held up a sheer silken, dark blue robe for the other, helping it onto alabaster shoulders, dropping kisses on skin, the robe chasing after lips.

A red robe, redder and brighter than Lucille's own, was left for him. He smiled at the color, remembering with fondness when he had received it. It was nice to have a reminder of his original home, hazy memories aside.

After donning his robe, he took a smaller towel and used it to lightly pat dry his hair, pulling the twist down and out. He left it loose for the time being, allowing it to air dry a bit. He wrapped an arm about Julians waist, leading him out of the bath.

The hallway they emerged into was open, with sconces providing light. Sunset was nearing into night, making Julian realize that he had slept the day away.

They padded down tiled floors, done in rich black marble shot thru with golds and white. Periodically, columns dotted the walls in intervals. Some had silk hanging, others the light-giving sconces. There was a door here and there recessed into the walls.

Midway down, Tiberius steered them left, opening a door. They had entered what was clearly a bedroom, a large intricate rug covering the floor. On the right was the bed, low-slung and broad. It had enough room for 8 people to sleep comfortably...or hold an orgy.

Across the room was a large mirror and vanity, done in dark wood. It was cluttered in common female grooming items, and a few miscellaneous accessories. Across from the door was a large wardrobe, with a set of balcony doors.

The bed was full of plush pillows and soft, sumptuous sheets. Despite sleeping for most of the day, Julian instantly felt tired when he saw the bed. He collapsed onto it with a sigh, flopping back. He felt Tiberius undue and remove his robe, hearing the other one removed as well. Large hands picked up and shifted his legs, moving them onto the bed proper. The covers were scooped down, and he felt hot naked skin meet his.

After some shifting, the covers were pulled up. Tiberius wrapped himself around Julian, burying his nose in thick hair. He snaked an arm around the trim waist in front of him, before drifting off to the deep, steady breathing of the other.

They can take care of their problems tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Well fuck, we have a hint of plot sneaking in along with the fluff. Our boy's seem to also be cathing feels for each other. Anyway, enjoy the cuddling. Next chapter will be like, 95% porn.
Of Sleepovers and Squirtig

Chapter Notes

So, I heard y'all like to eat ass?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He woke to sunlight on his face, and lips traveling down his spine.

Contrary to popular belief, this is not something that happens to him often. Julian may have a casual sex life, but it's rare that he wakes with his partner. It's usually a ‘one and done’ type of affair.

(He ignores the empty twinge that comes with the thought.)

It was...nice...to be awoken in such a way. Warm, soft lips dancing from his shoulders down, with a small nibble here or there. Being a young man in his prime, the low warmth in his veins and groin soon becomes more.

He lets out a hum when lips stop at the small of his back, letting out a breathy moan when a hot, wet tongue licks across the expanse. Hands with long fingers palm his buttocks, digging in slightly.

He pushes up on his elbows, turning to glance over his shoulder. Errant waves obscure his vision for a moment, before a toss of his head reveals Tiberius, naked as the day he was born, sight unimpeded of sheets, his hair a glorious curtain tossed along his back and the bed. His mouth was planted in the beginning swell of Julian's ass, sucking a mark onto his skin.

Upon felling eyes on him, Tiberius looked up. He thought Julian looked a vision, hair sleep-mussed and eye sleepy. A dusting of pink was on his cheeks, remnants of his slumber.

Mouth still on him, Tiberius threw a smirk his way, a hint of carnal delight in his dark eyes. He removed his mouth with a faint popping noise, delivering a light smack to one cheek. The sound echoed slightly, Julian’s breath hitching. He made to roll over, but hands on his hips prevented him from doing so.

Moments later, teeth bit lightly into the unblemished cheek. Julian released a moan, growing firm under the ministrations. That sinful mouth continued to drop kisses between bites, with a few sweeps of tongue thrown in at random. Each action brought new sounds from the victim.

Fingers fisting in the sheets, Julian brought a pillow up under his chest, folding it in half. It raised him up, making it easier to watch Tiberius satisfy his desire for flesh.

Long minutes of such treatment turned Julian into a painting mess, his backside covered in marks and teeth prints. He felt thumbs lift his cheeks, exposing him to Tiberius’s lewd gaze. He was prepared for oil and long fingers to make their appearance, more than ready to quench his lust.

What he was NOT prepared for was a hot, wet tongue to trail up from his testicles, and over his hole. Such a sensation brought a loud gasp from him. Shortly after, the tongue returned, making broad sweeps up and down his crack. At random, it would press firmly over his rim, completely, before being dragged off. Julian could feel saliva start to run down him, the trickle rapidly cooling.
He gave a surprised shout as that tongue pointed, and pressed against his entrance. It wiggled rapidly, pulling a shivering moan from deep within him. One that quickly turned into a loud groan as it pressed in. His hips raised of their own volition as he buried his face into his pillow. He felt strong arms wrap around his thighs, broad fingers settling on his cheeks and spreading him wider than before.

He felt Tiberius scoot closer, his nose resting at the crest of his crack, before returning to his business with renewed vigor. His tongue returned, the tip pressing in and catching on the rim playfully before flicking up. It pointed again, before pressing in deeper than before.

Julian could feel Tiberius's jaw drop, as he pushed as deep into him as he could. His tongue was long and thick, and wiggled wonderfully. Tiberius shook his head minutely, like a dog with a bone. He gave a pleased moan as he felt Julian buck back into his face, feet coming up and crossing behind his head, damn near purring in satisfaction as he felt long, supple thighs squeeze around his neck.

(He can now understand Julian’s fascination: long limbs grabbing, twisting on, making you stay where he wanted you…)

That tongue started to thrust in and out, making filthy and obscene noises as it did so. Wet slurping, sucking sounds combined with the trembling moans and gasp they wrought from the poor doctor made for a most lustful soundtrack. He allowed more saliva to pool, thoroughly wetting his tongue and making it easier to thrust. Most of it traveled down, running down a tight sack.

Tiberius was gifted with a loud, drawn-out gasp as he locked his lips around the puckered rim and gave a hard suck. The hard buck he got from the action made a dark part of him buried deep inside sigh with pleasure. He became downright gleeful when his precious Jules raised himself on his arms and began to push back fervently on his still-buried tongue, quiet but sincere mewls dropping from his lips like prayers.

With one hand, he delivered a hard smack. The other traveled to his occupied mouth, fingers joining in in tormenting the now relaxing ring. He withdrew his tongue, thumbing the wet opening. He pressed down and in, meeting little resistance. It easily sunk in to the first knuckle. He slowly pulled it out before re-inserting, relishing in the fine twitch he got every time Julian was breached.

He pulled his thumb back completely, returning his mouth to its previous work. By this point, his jaw was starting to tire, but he promised he wouldn't stop until his lover was thoroughly prepared and begging for it.

His hand traveled thru the sheets, skating up Julian's quivering side. Upon reaching the head, his hand moved right. If he remembered correctly…

A slight *clink* was heard, as glass and nail met. Long fingers curled around a small bottle before returning to their owner, their prey grasped securely.

Tiberius pulled back slightly, chuckling when he felt Julian clench around his probing tongue. He was kind enough to leave the tip. He undid the bottle cap, the scent of something dark and chocolate filling the room. He firmed his tongue and started bobbing up and down, in and out as he slipped a long finger into the oil.

Julian whined at the thrusting tongue. He loved it, but also wanted something harder and thicker, reaching deeper into his core. He started to bounce back on the wicked muscle that played him like a fiddle, trying to get more from it, and growling in frustration when he couldn't. He was so tempted to roll them over and sit on that devious face and ride until he was satisfied.
Tiberius decided to act on his impulse. He rolled them over, and his powerful arms lifted and spun a shocked Julian into a new position. When all was said and done, he was perched on Tiberius’s face, legs folded on either side. His swollen cock rested between defined pectorals, and he had a birds-eye view of a large and succulent dick between long legs.

Julian jolted and moaned long and low, as that tongue made its way back to where it belonged. As it resettled, he bounced a bit, impulsively so. Each bounce helped it go a bit deeper than before, licking trails of heat deep inside. After a few more light bounces, he started to do so in earnest. He felt hard arms curl around the front of his thighs, before hands grasped his cheeks. A slick finger rubbed along his stuffed rim, depositing something wet and slippery.

He leaned forward, resting his palms on strong thighs before spreading and canting his hips, trying to get as close as possible to that evil mouth. He used his new leverage to grind down, slowly at first before moving back and forth. His hips started to make circular motions, letting places that had been untouched until now find out what they were missing.

“Fuck, Ty. How do you make me feel sooooo good…” Julian moved one hand back, smacking his own ass cheek hard, delighting in the wave of pain. His fingers curled, nails digging in before he aggressively pulled them up, leaving long red trails. His leaking cock had provided enough slip for him to rock against a firm chest, being lovingly cradled between firm pectorals.

“Oh fucking gods above, your a fucking demon. You have me speared on your tongue, eating me from the inside out. I want you to pin me down, make me take your dick! Shove my face into the bedding as you mount me and fuck me into submission—” his babbling was cut off as he was pushed forward, catching himself on trembling hands and knees. He gave a started shout as he felt two slick fingers bury themselves inside him at the same time. He trembled in excitement, moaning in anticipation of the rough fucking he was about to receive.

Tiberius was harder than a rock. He was happy to have Julian right where he belonged, before he started sobbing out such filthy. His boy wanted rough and hard, his boy would get rough and hard. After twisting his fingers a few times, he rapidly thrust them in and out, uncaring of the harshness of his actions, knowing Julian fucking loved the treatment by his obscene sounds and words.

He then got the oil, spilling more down Julian's crack and loose hole. He lined up his cock and pushed, moaning at the tight heat as he entered in one, never-ending thrust. He bottomed out with a loud slap of skin, pushing Julian's thighs to spread more as he reached a hand down to wrap around a long neck, pinning him to the bed. With his other hand, he captured tense arms, pulling graceful wrists to the small of Julian's back and holding them there.

He gave a few experimental thrusts, moaning at the grip around his dick. Julian moaned again, the movement rubbing him in all the right places. His feet kicked a bit as he pushed back and wriggled, the hard thrust he got in retaliation for his actions fucking a whine from his chest.

After a few more wriggles, Tiberius started fucking into him hard and fast. The lack of preparation had created a hot and tight ring grasping to his cock, with each thrust making him fight his way back in. Each smack of skin forced a grunt from Julian, his face burning and mouth open. His toes curled, unable to move and do more with the position he had been forced into: face down, ass up, taking whatever Tiberius gave him. The burn at his entrance made his cock and belly tight, wanting more punishment.

He got his wish when Tiberius released his neck and arms, pulling a pillow down and under Julian,
forcing his hips up. Julian added a little pop to his ass, displaying himself for Tiberius’s pleasure. He added a few more pillows for additional support when Tiberius started fucking into him mercilessly, the sound of skin on skin echoing thru the room constantly. A hand settled on his mid back, pressing him firmly and holding him in place to receive his hammering.

Julian buried his face in the cool bedding, moaning and crying like a bitch in heat. His hands fist in the sheets, his ass rising up to get more. He bit into the sheets as the change of angle positioned his sweet spot for constant torment. Each strike pulled an ecstatic shout from him and put a delighted, beatific smile on his face. His dick shot a few drops of precum onto the pillows he was being forced to grind on at each hit.

Tiberius was living his best life right here, right now. He had a hot, screaming redhead on his cock, begging for more. He was warm, will soon be fed, and was working towards burying a hot nut in said redhead. He let out a long groan, relishing in the sounds Julian made. There was no way no-one in the manse didn’t know what shenanigans they were currently engaged in. The thought of others seeing Julian all fuccked-out made something deep within him burn in satisfaction.

He heard the doors open, Julian too deep into a sub drop to notice. Lucille walked in, wrapped in the same robe as last night. She raised her brows, now knowing what had gotten the servants into a tizzy. She went back to the doors, spoke quietly to someone on the other side, before closing and locking them. She walked to the end of the bed, pulling her vanity chair behind her.

The sounds of the chair being dragged finally got Julian's attention. He looked up, seeing Lucille sprawled on the chair, one leg up and perched on an arm, displaying herself. The position left her robe wide open, only staying on her due to the side tie and the crook of her elbows. One hand was gently petting the small patch of hair surrounding her pubis.

He went violently red, and his insides twisted in hard pleasure. The idea of her being there as he got railed to within an inch of his life, not knowing how long she had been there ignited that feeling from the night before, in the baths.

“Oh sweetheart, look at you,” she cooed. Two fingers were buried into her wet folds, the unoccupied hand cupping his chin. Each flex of her fingers made a wet, sucking sound as she worked them deeper. Julian closed his eye in embarrassment, trying to ignore the lusty excitement he felt at another visibly getting off on his stuffing.

“Is the big, bad Ty making you feel good? He’s so good at it, isn’t he? Don’t you just love it when he smothers you, pinning you down? As he pushes his thick dick as deep as it will go, until you think it can’t go further? And you still want more?”

Julian moaned wantonly, voice breaking at the end. There was no way she hadn’t ridden the best ride in town. She knew what it was like, had first hand knowledge.

“Did-did-did he dooooo...that twitch with his hips” he moaned out between thrust. “The one with the ruuuUuub?”

Lucille smiled, one full of heat and promises. “The one where he finds the perfect spot and grinds into it? Oh yessss, let me tell you, every time he does it I have no choice but to squirt alllll over him.”

Julian’s eye rolled back as he moaned, being echoed by Tiberius as he remembered that stream of slick warmth. He jolted when the bed shifted, Lucille moving on to join them. She settled in front of Julian, resting back on an elbow as she spread her legs, her pubic mound scant inches from his flushed face. Her fingers were still buried deep within, her thumb rubbing over her pearl.
“Tell me, Ty...how well does kitten lap?”

“He sucks dick like a champion, has a very *thrust* “talented” *grind* “mouth.” *slam* “You should have seen him, he was beautiful on his knees, more than happy to have me down his throat.”

Such a ringing endorsement filled Julian with pride and no little amount of humiliation. But over it all, his mouth watered, wanting to bury his face into those sweet-smelling curls. Lucille looked so wet and juicy, like a ripe peach. He just wanted to attach his lips and suck...

He got his wish. She withdrew her fingers, spiderwebs of her juices clinging and stretching. Before she could pull back her hand, Julian lunged forward, tangling lips and tongue around her fingers. He moaned loudly, sucking hard to get every drop of her. He got even harder thrusting into him in response.

She adjusted slightly, popping her hips up closer. He dove in like a thirsty man, tongue long and flat. She moaned happily, curling a hand in his hair.

Julian went to work like the rent was due. He wanted to bring satisfaction to both of his partners. As he licked between her lips, he clenched his ass tight, renting a curse from Tiberius. Lucille laughed, which turned into a moan as Julian dipped into her, lapping at her like she was a melting ice cream cone. His tongue pulled up, before laying over her clitoris and shaking his head. A release of more of her juice was his reward, which he slurped up with gusto. She keened as he introduced fingers inside her, curling them up and pressing.

Lucille twitched hard, bucking up and rubbing her sopping wet pussy onto Julian’s hungry mouth. Her eyes met Tiberius’s over the long back of their ride. The heat in her gaze caused Tiberius to hammer harder into his boy, before grinding in and dumping a thick load of cum. He thrust a few more times, hands gripping a firm ass to hold him in place. He continued to thrust even as he became overestimated, wanting to push as much of his cum as deep as possible into the accommodating ass below him.

Tiberius withdrew, gazing down in satisfaction at the fucked out, sloppy mess he left Julian’s hole. A few streams of cum tried to run out, but were caught and pushed back in. He thrust his fingers a few times, loving the moans he got in return.

Julian moaned into Lucille as he felt fingers burrow deep into him. He spread his hips further, arching his ass up even more for ease of access. At a particularly hard thrust, his tongue burrowed into the cunt he was feasting on, bringing forth a shriek and a hot splash over his face. A hand made its way down, rubbing fast and hard over her clit, causing more juice to stream out. It sprayed over his cheeks and chin, some getting caught on his tongue, stuck out of his gaping mouth. With a loud moan, he batted her hand away and dove back in, sealing his mouth and sucking like his life depended on it.

An even louder shriek was her response, with her bucking against his face, a final, thick gush sprouting from her. As he pulled his face back, her juice that he didn’t swallow trailed down his mouth and chin. She laid panting before him, tits bouncing at her heaving breaths.

More fingers buried themselves in his stretched out hole. How many were there? Three? Four? He received his answer when they started thrusting hard and deep, the junction where thumb and palm met getting caught on his destroyed rim. He moaned brokenly when all four fingers wriggled.

By this point, he was the only one that hadn’t cum yet. His cock was so hard it was painful, and each brush against his prostate shot arrows of fire and lightning thru his veins. The sucking sounds his finger-and-jizz filled ass made as they were played with were disgusting and obscene: the filth of it
all would make anyone else cum at the mere thought.

He started sobbing, begging for it to end.

He would do whatever the gods asked to end this pleasurable torture.

Tears streamed down his face as he begged for more. He didn’t know what ‘more’ he needed, just knew that that was what he wanted.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, large hands lifted him up onto his knees. Low, growling whispers filled his ears as something shifted below him. He could just make out Lucille thru his tear-filled eye, scooting under him. He felt her grasp his angry, purpled dick and give it a few strokes. As she was moving to get comfortable, he felt Tiberius back at his entrance. His once-again hard dick easily slipped passed his stretched entrance, making a wet, squishing noise as it pushed thru the cum already in there.

After Tiberius settled, Lucille guided Julian inside her, gasping loud as he thrust hard inside. He folded over, fucking her hard and fast, bouncing all of them on the bed.

Julian moaned high and broken into her ears. This had to be heaven. He had a hard dick in his ass, fucking him loose. And he had a tight, wet cunt sucking him into warm wetness. He groaned loud and open when he felt nails drag down his back. He leaned back, pushing himself onto thick cock, as he rearranged Lucille’s legs, thrusting her knees near her shoulders. It left her pussy wide and exposed, glistening in a combination of her juice and his precum. Her chest was heaving, causing her breasts to move rapidly. He pulled her hands down, molding her palms around her calves to keep them up. He resettled his hands deep into the bed, slamming back into her. This forced a shout from deep within her, one that was drawn into a trailing groan as he jackhammered deep inside. He vaguely noticed as the cock inside him withdrew with a wet squelch, leaving another deposit of hot jizz in its wake, more focused on chasing his release.

Moments later, with one final slam, he released long and deep inside. He moaned wetly as he felt her wet, tight pussy spasmed and milk him. He ground down, squirting every last drop he could into her. As he pulled back, spent, a trickle left her.

He flopped back on the bed, arm flung over his eyes. He could feel Tiberius's earlier shots flowing out of him. He flattened his feet and pulled up his knees, wallowing in the feeling.

He looked to the side, and could see Tiberius rubbing a wet flannel on his cock. Julian's eyes widened in shock. Tiberius was still hard. How!?

He rolled onto his stomach, the maneuver forcing a larger stream of jizz to melt from him. He moaned lightly at the sensation, before returning his attention to Tiberius and his still hard cock.

He must have seen the look on Julian's face. He panted, “The oil must be laced with something. My guess belladonna. What I want to know is,” he turned an accusing stare at Lucille, who still lay spread eagle on the bed, “just WHY do you HAVE SUCH A STRONG FORMULA just LYING AROUND!?”

She just chuckled weakly, fingers spreading her lips apart invitingly. Tiberius took her up, crawling over the bed and pulling up his knees, wallowing in the feeling.

“It was a faaaaiilleedd~ brew;,” she moaned. Tiberius had her legs over his shoulders, thrusting into her with hard but shallow rolls of his hips. “The servants must of -OH FUCK!- replaced the wrong bottle.” She started snapping her hips up to meet his.
Julian was in a prime position to see everything. Every thrust Tiberius made pushed some of Julian's cum out of Lucille's cunt, the now-foamy mix clinging to her curls. Particularly hard thrust caused more to spill out in a wet squelch.

A few thrust later, and Tiberius ground out his release. Their pubis’ were mashed together, with Tiberius grinding them hard together. After a final seating, he wiggled hard and fast, before withdrawing. A thick stream of cum squirted out of Lucille's loose and gaping hole, soaking the bedding. She made to thrust her fingers in, when Tiberius beat her to it. He went four deep immediately, thumb rubbing her clit hard. He thrust in and out so fast that it was more of a rapid shake, her cunt fairly sucking his hand deep within.

With a final, hard shout, Lucille exploded. Her cunt squirt a combination of her juice and two loads-worth of jizz far across the bed. Some landed on Julian and the pillows he rested on. Her legs curled and hung up, thighs trying to close. Tiberius forced them open, his fingers flying across her hood, waving the spray of spunk about.

Lucille was releasing a long, trailing groan. As the squirting started to die down, Tiberius forced her legs open wider, slapping a palm across her wet mound. She jerked hard, a gush following, a high keen caught in her throat.

Poor Julian was hard again, despite his exhaustion. He loathed that oil with every fiber of his being. (That's a lie: he loved it. He may need to make that bottle disappear...into his cloak...for research purposes...who is he kidding, he wants a repeat.)

He crawled across the bed, shoving Tiberius arms aside. Using his strong arms, he kept Lucille spread as he mounted her again. He ground deeply against her, before thrusting hard and long, pulling out completely before returning. A few minutes of this pulled another shrieking, splashing orgasm from her. He thrust rapidly into her gushing cunt, getting more of her juices up his stomach and coating his groin.

With a few more lazy thrust, he released one final time. As he pulled back, he admired his work, Tiberius doing the same over his shoulder.

Poor Lucille won’t be fucking again anytime soon. Her hips and thighs were covered in bruises. Her sopping cunt was swelled from the beating it took, leaking three cumloads onto the soaked bedding below.

Tiberius scooped up some of the running jizz from her cunt onto his fingers. He pulled his hand up and shoved it into Lucille's panting mouth, fingers quickly curling around her jaw to hold it closed. After a shake, Julian could see her swallow, and she opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue with a grin.

“All gone.”

Julian could feel a broad hand at the back of his head, pushing faintly. He followed it down, and rested between Lucille's spread thighs. The scent of sex and cum hung heavily about her. He stuck out his tongue, and started lapping gently. She sighed and spread her legs more, easing the way for Julian to lick. As she shifted, a large pool of cum trickled out of her, landing on his spread tongue. He could feel the hand on his head fist in his hair. He peered up thru his bangs, seeing Tiberius watching him. He imitated what Lucille did a short time earlier. He raised up, closed his mouth, and swallowed. As proof, he opened wide and showed off his clean tongue.

As a reward, he got a soft pat on his hair, and a kiss to his temple.
“Such a good boy.”

With pride in his chest, Julian returned to his work. He realized after a few minutes that there was a lot of...remnants still trapped within Lucille. It would take some time to clean. Slowly, he coaxed her up, and into a sitting position on his face. The new angle made clean-up much easier, the broad sweeps of his tongue pulling more of their releases into his hungry mouth.

During his cleanup, hands started petting his hair. He glanced up, spotting Lucille gazing down at him. She smirked lazily.

“I knew you would look adorable between my legs.”

Julian blushed lightly. In retaliation, he gave a particularly hard suck around her opening, disguising it somewhat as an effort to drink more down. He got a hard squeeze of her hips, along with a dollop of juices.

After some more, long minutes of licking, he had cleaned up everything he could. On shaking legs, Lucille dismounted, dropping a kiss on the end of his nose. A long fingered hand curled about his cheeks, a heavy weight settling beside him. Tiberius chased what cum had escaped his cleanup with his pointer and middle finger, pushing it into Julian's wet and swollen mouth.

A deep and probing kiss followed, lazy and sloppy. Tiberius moved so he was half laying on Julian, hand still curled about the others jaw.

“Do NOT tell me you can still go. Circle member or not, I WILL have you tossed out.”

Tiberius snorted. “I don’t know about you, but I’M giving proper aftercare. Julian was so accommodating. In fact,” Tiberius lent up, looking back over his shoulder, a mildly accusing look on his face, “just why aren’t you doing the same, ESPECIALLY considering how I know that that bottle being there was no accident.”

He leveled her with a dark glare. Julian tensed somewhat, eye going back and forth between the two. He knew that there was more to this than he knew, could feel the buildup of something fill the room.

It was like Tiberius was radiating...darkness and heat, with an impression of a coppery hint. It reminded Julian of the time he came face-to-face with a Principia Standing Hound, while passing thru the Umbral Mountains. It was hunched over a deer, blood on its muzzle; a fresh kill. Julian knew, even with his gift, that if that hound wanted to, he would be dead. It was only his luck that the apex predator deemed him a non-threat.

That same feeling he got from that assessment, was drifting from Tiberius.

Lucille, on the other hand, couldn't hold a candle to Tiberius’s inferno. If he hadn’t encountered both Asra and Tiberius before meeting her, he would have thought her strong. As it is, her warm, fertile aura was buried and weak.

The stare-off continued for a few, tense minutes. The vanity mirror abruptly shattered, startling Julian hard. The balcony doors followed.

Lucille flinched, throwing up an arm and a pale blue shield. The glass shards bounced, now flying in their direction.

Julian tried to lunge away, being held in place by the weight of Tiberius. Before the glass could hit, it shattered into a million shining shards, flowing around them in an invisible current. A sudden breeze flung the now broken doors open, carrying the glass out with it.
The bedroom doors slammed open, guards dressed and ready to kill stampeding in. All had a blade drawn, pointed at the two men.

Julian's brain was turning in circles, trying to figure a way out. He can come back if killed (hopefully), but Tiberius can't.

Speaking of, Tiberius never broke his stare. Lucille held it for a few more moments, before looking away with a sigh. She waved off her guards.

“Merely a misunderstanding. Return to your posts.”

With one last look, what looked to be the leader sheathed their blade, before turning and walking away, the others doing the same.

Once the room was empty, Lucille sighed again.

“Come. Lets us return to the baths. I'll tell you what I know as we get clean.”

Chapter End Notes

I am ashamed of what I just wrote (no Im not). I need to go to church (Im Jewish) and repent (also a lie). What-ever will I do? (write more)
Chapter Notes

Yay, info dumping! Yay, world building! Yay, character development! Yay, porn!
...wait a minute, there IS NO PORN!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Their return to the baths was not as nearly relaxing as their first visit.

After a quick cleanup, Lucille led them back down the hall into a new room. This was an informal dining room, with low tables and couches. The style was similar to that of ancient Atrea, with heavily padded “dining couches” gathered around a circular table.

The balcony doors were flung wide, the early afternoon sun shining in. In the center of the table was a brazier bowl, a few bunches of dried herbs smoking.

Around the bowl, platters of food were spread. It was light fair, consisting of things such as pickled olives and marinated garlic cloves. Julian spotted a rice dish from Prakra, the grains a golden color from saffron. There was a large salad bowl, holding spikes of green lettuce and sliced fruits and slivered almonds. On the far side, he spotted a few stuffed Drakarian Forest Quail.

His mouth watered at seeing them: it had been a long time since he had some. If done right, the meat should be tender from the wine reduction they were cooked in, with the sage sausage dressing stuffed in last before they are baked. Such preparation makes them fall apart.

He had made to sit on his own chaise, but was brought over to Tiberius’s with a gentle hand to his back. Lucky for them, the chaise’s were big enough to accommodate them both, provided they sit right.

Of course, just as he goes to get comfortable, Tiberius just has to make a scene. As Julian was rearranging his robe, he saw the bright red of his lover’s puddle on the ground. He choked when he looked up.

Tiberius was a naked as the day he was born, using the sash closure of his now discarded robe to tie his hair back into a messy bun. Shortly afterwards, he sprawled on the shared lounger, leaning on his left side. His calves and feet entangling with Julian’s silk covered ones.

Blushing harder than a virgin on her wedding night, Julian looked at the table, inadvertently meeting Lucille's eyes. Her face looked quite exasperated, like this was a usual occurrence.

“Really, Ty? Must you do this? We have a guest!” She flung her arm out.

She got a snort in reply. “Considering how you worship your goddess, you have little room to throw stones!” He gracefully accepted a wine glass from a serving woman, before selecting a white from their offerings.

“Speaking of worship, don’t think I didn’t see the Diagramma Heretica etched into the wall behind the vanity. What the fuck do you think your doing!?”
“I was simply using it to gather the energy released from our play...like I usually do.” She rolled her eyes and sipped her drink, a bright pink concoction.

“That is hardly an excuse, and you know it! All magic, regardless of it being passive or active, is not to be done without the full consent of all parties present! You had neither I, let alone Julian’s permission! If you don’t give me a very good reason for your act, I will have you brought up before the rest of the Circle.”

Julian’s eye bounced back and forth between the two, only half-way understanding what was being spoken about. He startled somewhat when the serving woman from earlier gently touched his elbow, quietly asking what he would like.

“How am I supposed to eat, Ty!? For the passed 3 months my usual sources have dried up! My usual clients don’t come as frequently, if at all, and my girls are starving!” She jumped from her couch, throwing her half-empty glass at Tiberius, who batted it from the air.

“And you know that there is a BIG DIFFERENCE between feeding directly from the source during the act, and putting a fucking Diagramma HERETICA of all things in the room! And a shitty one at that! I saw NO absorption conditions! Your lucky that Julian was only left overly tired and not dead!”

“Like you would have been left bereft. You’ve known him how long? A week? Pffft, you’re treating a known murderer like he actually means something.”

Tiberius sat up quick, a snarl twisting his features. As he spoke, the room trembled. “And WE are not in a position of authority to determine who lives or dies! Or did you forget what happened to your beloved Yennifer…?”

At the uttering of that name, Lucille looked ready to leap over the table. She stood breathing hard for a few moments, fist shaking, before closing her eyes and releasing a long exhale.

“....forgive me, your right. I had forgotten.”

Tiberius snorted imperiously. He resettled, this time on his right side behind Julian, wrapping an arm around his waist. He dropped a quick kiss to the others cheek.

“Not that it's any of my business...actually that's a lie, it is my business. What just happened?”

Lucille flapped her hand dismissively, flopping back to her seat. “Don’t worry your pretty little head, sweetie.”

Julian bristled. “Considering how you spoke so casually about my death not even moments ago, I think an explanation of some sort is due.”

“Both Lucille and I are members of the local ‘Magic Circle’. Nearly every large city or town has one. Prominent local magical’s come together to essentially regulate local laws and customs for the different castes, work within our country to ensure compliance, and interface with anything non-human.”

Julian blinked. To be perfectly honest, he was not expecting an actual answer, or at least not one as detailed.

He turned back to look at Tiberius, who was currently perusing what was on offer for lunch. “And what does that have to do with your argument? And how do I fit into everything?”
“One of the **hard** rules is that, unless under duress or other emergency, a magic ritual is **NOT** to be done without the informed consent of all parties. What Lucille just did would be tantamount to assault.”

Julian blanched. The thought of someone using him without permission skated a bit too close to his time in the research dungeons.

Tiberius stood, scooping up a large gilded plate. He made his way around the table, taking bits of this and that. When he returned to Julian, he sat beside him. Julian went to get up as well, only to find Tiberius had made himself at home, curled about him on his hip sideways.

He was confused when Tiberius pulled off a delicate quail drumstick, and offered it to the redhead. After having it tapped against his lower lip, Julian opened and bit down gently until he met bone, pulling back. He moaned quietly, delighting in the delicate texture and rich taste of the meat. Another tidbit was offered, cradled in long fingers. As he accepted the offering, his tongue darted out and tasted the sauce-covered digits.

Tiberius purred in pleasure, using a piece of sliced honey flatbread to scoop up some of the rice, folding it slightly before feeding it to Julian.

This continued for some time, with Tiberius offering choice tidbits for Julian’s consumption.

With a lazy wave, Julian brushed off the last bite of the fruit salad, satisfied. He laid back, accepting the latest refilling of his wine. Color was high in his cheeks from the food and drink, and he lounged bonelessly.

It was only when his date was content that Tiberius moved onto satisfying his own hunger. He quickly piled his plate to near overflowing, and just as quickly demolished it. In the time he took to fulfill Julian, he plated and ate 3 large servings and killed off two magnums of wine.

Both Julian and Lucille stared, brows flying past their hairline. Tiberius was not messy or improper, that was not the issue.

He just...ate like a fucking horse. A massive amount of food just...gone.

Julian is a large man. He knows that as such, he eats more than the average person, and the plate he had was quite full: Tiberius just put him to shame.

(Lucille is quietly calculating the cost. She quickly deduced that, while both men were a good fuck, the sheer amount of food they would need if this became a regular **thing** was **not** worth the dick she got.)

At last Tiberius slid the plate away, listing to the side. He gestured to one of the serving girls, who quickly left the room and returned, carrying a long ornate smoking pipe and a platter.

As she presented the items, Julian noted that indented into the platter were ovals, each holding a smoking mix. Some were traditional shredded leaves, other what looked like powders.

Tiberius looked over the wide offerings, before detaching a small gilded spoon from the pipe. He scooped one of the powders (a dark brown, almost black color) into the cup. After tapping it down, he pressed a recessed button. After a few clicks and sparks, smoke started to meander upwards.

Tiberius pulled a long draw from the pipe, holding his breath for a few seconds. He gave a long exhale thru his nose, smoke billowing forward like a Seong dragon statue.
He let out a loud, pleased rumble, slumping a bit on the chaise. His head lolled back, tied hair moving like a waterfall with the movements.

Julian declined an offered pipe, not being familiar with the mixes. He stared at Tiberius, puffing away lazily. A thick cloud of perfumed smoke had gathered around them, the smell reminding Julian of something...

“Isn’t it a little early to be smoking Nopalian opium?”

“Says the bitch who tried to fuck our guest to death?”

“...you got me there.”

“Thank you. Now, what is this I heard about you and your girls starving?”

Julian sat up a bit, wondering as well. As far as he knew (being a doctor and all), sex was not a necessary dietary requirement. Anyone who said otherwise was lying and trying to shame the other.

(He ignored the voice in the back of his head. That was long ago and he no longer had that person in his life.)

Lucille shifted, looking anywhere but at the other two. She stayed quiet. Tiberius decided to wait her out.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“A few months ago, several of my usual clients stopped coming as often, or just stopped completely. One had died in an accident, and the other became the new Atreian ambassador.

But, that doesn’t explain what happened to the others. Some of these people were long time customers. They came to me and my girls for spells and rituals of fortune and fertility, to be granted dream visions and sight.

You know, Tiberius, that much of my work is done thru Behau, Goddess of Sex and Dreams, Fame and Remembrance. And you also know what she charges for my work, and what I get from Her in return.”

Tiberius puffed out a few plumes of smoke, his eyes having gone heavy. The edges of his lids had colored somewhat, faint rings of purple framing blown-out pupils. At certain angles, Julian swore he could see a faint golden glaze to the pupil.

“The ward-work that I have setup, the protections placed on the rest of my coven: they are starting to fail. If I lose my link with Her completely…”

Tiberius hummed, the fingers of his unoccupied hand tangling in the folds of Julian's robe. He closed his eyes in thought, occasionally murmuring things under his breath.

Lucille started to cry, silent tears running down her cheeks. Her shoulders started to shake as she brought a linen cloth up to her face.

“I can’t keep this up much longer! If I fail my girls, where will they go!? They have nowhere! The Count was a piece of shit, but he at least enforced regulations in regards to 'working' folk. The Countess has done nothing, with the Court dismantling all rights and protections we had! Fucking Valerius said we weren't even people! Just...just broken toys!”
At her last shout, Lucille leapt to her feet, throwing her glass at the wall.

“When did you notice this start happening?”

She started, turning towards Julian. Tiberius glanced his way as well.

“What do you mean?”

“How long ago did you notice the drop-off? A month, two? Was it tied to an event? Did something happen in the city?” Julian looked towards a servant, asking for pen and paper. It was quickly presented to him, along with a lap desk.

“It became more prominent recently, I would have to look in the ledgers to get a better starting point.”

“...three months ago.”

Both turned to look at Tiberius. He had stood by this point, making his way to the balcony doors. He leaned against the door sill, legs crossing over each other. The pose put his backside in stark relief, including the mark over his buttocks.

“Asra and I started to notice a few things to. While we still kept our usual clients, we had a few...new ones pop up. Ones that had odd requests.”

Julian refocused, pulling up new sheets of paper. “What request were they, and what makes them odd?”

Tiberius exhaled another large plume of smoke, eyes roving the streets a couple of stories below. “Like Lucille, we have a usual set of clients, and many random customers with simple request. ‘what do the cards hold in my future?’ ‘What potion do you have to cure my sickness?’ ‘do you have a good-luck charm for travelers?’”

He held out the pipe, a servant quickly taking it from his fingers. As she did so, he ran a pointed finger up the back of her hand. As nail left skin, she flushed; her entire countenance perked up. Color ran to her face, her eyes brightened, her hair gained gloss. She curtsied wobbly, scrambling away with a small giggle. His gaze tracked her, like a predator stalking prey.

“Now, we have request for things that are decidedly...not nice. ‘What will make him fall in love with me?’ ‘My wife refuses to bear another child. What will make her fertile?’ ‘He stole from me, I want a charm of bad luck!’

A week or so before Julian appeared at our shop, a young maiden came to us. She spoke only with Asra. I don’t know what was said, but the condition of her face and the brew he asked me to make told me enough. As she left, we told her of a safe place to go.

Two days ago, the son of a courtier was found slain in an alley.”

He folded his arms, his chuckle dark.

“Our condolences to his family, I’m sure he had a...bright future ahead of him.”

Julian felt a shiver run down his spine. That presence from earlier was back.

But, just as abruptly as it had come, it vanished. Tiberius turned, the back-light from the sun throwing stark shadows across his body.
“The city had been steadily going to the dogs for the last three years, but it seems to be snowballing now. It coincides with the reappearance of the Countess. Whether or not she is the cause or effect remains to be seen.”

Long legs carried him back to the lounger. He stooped, picking up his discarded robe. Julian had an excellent view of the marking now. It was the outline of a wagon wheel with six spokes; two of which were completely filled in.

All too soon, it was hidden away under scarlet silk.

Julian took this time to organize his notes, stacking and folding them together. His brow was furrowed. He was going thru different ways he could break into the Palace, both to gain new information of the night he murdered the Count, and to see what now was going on.

His thinking was interrupted by Tiberius.

“Guess I can't put it off any longer. I’ll make my way up to the Palace tomorrow morning.”

***

Lucille and Tiberius leapt off into talks of the statuses of various other magic groups.

Julian was surprised to learn that there were approximately 30 different major sects located within Vesuvia, with smaller independent groups or individuals filling in the gaps.

“Do we know how Marchessa’s spell-swords are doing? We usually get together about twice a month to talk, but with the avalanche of request we’ve been getting…”

Lucille shook her head. “I’ve heard nothing, which is worrying. Normally I don't need to even try to find out info, one of her people usually ends up on my doorstep, looking for good fortune in the next job.”

Tiberius gave a low hum, sipping on his refilled wine. “Last I heard, a few of her whelps were going on their first big job, something about a group of boars displaying rabid traits. One of her Battle Maidens came to the shop to stock up on healing brews.”

He smirked. “She has quite the little crush on Asra. Became a stuttering mess when he smiled a greeting to her.” He frowned. “I’ll be disappointed if she doesn't come back. I need my entertainment.”

Julian turned, tangling his legs further with Tiberius’s on their shared lounger. “Am I not entertaining enough for you?” He threw on a mock-agonized look. “Am I not everything your desires have asked for? Do I no longer excite you, and inflame your passions!?”

His ‘outcry’ was met with a dark smolder, one that if he were not wrung out from their earlier play, would have him at attention. As it is, his blood warmed, a tingle running down his spine.

Tiberius pulled one of Julian’s feet up, resting it on his lower stomach. He slowly but firmly ran his palm up and down it, a heavy caress.

“Sweetheart, you have by far exceeded my expectations in a partner.”

He got a high, red flush in return.

(Tiberius vowed that, at some point, he would take the time to praise his boy properly.)
After holding the other's gaze for a few moments more, he turned back to a giggling Lucille.

“I take it that your people will be making the rounds to get a headcount?”

She nodded. “So long as you find out what's going on with the other independents. You and Asra are the ones they would be most comfortable speaking with. Let Cressida know what you learn, Enry is taking care of the large groups and looking after everyone would be too much for my Steward to take.”

Tiberius nodded. “I’ll speak with the Necromancers. While I doubt they would throw down with you over a simple ‘wellness check’, we also don’t need a repeat of what happened last Solstice.”

“That wasn't my fault, and Tubor is an unmitigated ass.”

***

The rest of the lunch conversation was much lighter. It mostly composed of gossip between Tiberius and Lucille. Most of it went over Julian’s head, his long absence from Vesuvia rendering most of what he did know obsolete.

(He wonders just how these two know of so many others sex lives.)

The group made it back to Lucille’s rooms. The glass had since been cleaned up, and the sheets changed. Behind what used to be a vanity mirror, scrawled in ink, was a large circular diagram. It consisted of circles within circles, some offset or overflowing from the main circle. Straight lines bypassed and intersected, with a few alien symbols (or is it script?) scattered throughout.

While Julian had no eye or talent for magic, he was exposed to various different kinds in his travels. This was something new altogether.

Upon closer inspection, the lines were very clean and precise. Tiberius called it shitty, Julian assumes that meant it wasn't drawn badly, so much as constructed.

“This” Tiberius rapped a knuckle in the upper right, just outside of the main diagram, “is where you went wrong. Over here should be a lesser ward. I would say a Paragram Lusticia or a Paragram Solaria. Both would act as limiters.

However, a Lusticia only works for a short time. It is meant to be temporary. The upside is that if you are doing something on the fly, like, say, a banishment of a person, then it is easier and less time consuming to do.

Solaria’s on the other hand are more permanent and long lasting. Thing is, they are a bitch to do, because each one needs to be specially constructed for each Diagramma or ritual. Once a Solaria is cast, it cannot be altered.”

Lucille had her arms folded, hip propped. “But, can you not still alter it before tripping the clauses for whatever it is you are doing? Obviously, once something is started, you can't stop until it ends or explodes in your face, but what keeps you from, say, cha-”

“No NO NO NO! No nonononono! Do NOT try that! That, is a really...fucking bad...idea.”

Julian and Lucille jumped back at Tiberius's loud objection.

Julian raised his hand. “Uh, why?”
“THAT is because, a Diagramma, regardless of type or intent, can only be activated if complete. The final circle encompassing the whole setup is what closes the intent, and therefore ability, that is imbued into the diagram.”

During his talk, Tiberius was gesticulating with his hands. With one, he pointed a finger, a trail of gold light following it.

“First rule of diagramming, **Always start with a Grounding Circle.**” He arched his arm, creating a perfect circle.

“Second rule of diagramming, **Set your Clause Boundaries.**” He drew smaller circles within and bisecting the main one.

“Third rule, **Draw your Clauses, with the Main Intent of the Diagramma being First.**” In one circle, he wrote out a few symbols. To Julian’s eye, it was a series of hard, sharp lines, with the occasional curve. He hadn’t seen anything remotely like it, ever.

“Rule the Fourth, **Add Supporting Clauses to guide the Main Intent in the Desired Direction.**” The other circles were filled in with that same script.

“Fifth, **Direct the Clauses and Intent.**” This is where the straight lines came in. Some actually connected the various circles, others the symbols or some combination of the two. A few left the diagram completely for reasons beyond Julian’s understanding.

“Sixth, **Grounding.** This is where you would throw your ward. If you fucked up, it would capture or redirect the released effect. **DO. NOT. EVER. DIAGRAM. WITHOUT. A. WARD.**” With each word, Tiberius clapped his hands.

“Your final, Seventh rule is simple: **Closing.** A Diagramma will only work when a final circle is drawn, *encompassing* everything else. Once this is done, you **cannot** make changes, only activate or neutralize.” He finished his demonstration with a final, graceful curve. As the circle closed, there was a brief flash. As Julian opened his eye, petals began falling from the ceiling. He caught one, just to have it melt into his skin, leaving a kiss of warmth.

He looked around, the room having changed. The walls were taller, a warm golden sand color. Flora such as ivy and climbing roses covered parts of the wall, having crawled in from an open balcony door. Outside the door, a beach could be seen far down, encircled by flourishing trees. The sea was a bright, glassy green, deepening to blue and navy as it raced to the horizon. Bright sunlight caressed red-tiled roofs, a breeze coming in. A few ships could be seen in the bay.

Just as quickly as it appeared, it faded. An illusion. A powerful one, for Julian swears he could still smell the salty air and feel the warm rays.

(His heart twisted: only now did he realize just how much he missed Nevivon.)

He turned back to face Tiberius. The other was twirling his hands in an upright motion, fingers of light trailing. After a few more rotations, a crown of flower and grain rested in his hands.

“Diagramming is both the start and the end for a sorcerer's education. It is the foundation of worlds, and the destroyer of ideas.”

He placed the crown gently in Julian's hair, chasing an errant curl behind an ear. He smiled.

“It can take you to places no mortal has stepped, where only gods have breathed.”
Hands gently cupped a face, lips meeting in a chaste kiss.

“When done right, one can spend eternity in bliss.”

Chapter End Notes

uh, yeah. A chapter on world building. Now introducing: a new magic system! Tune in next time for porn and funnies!
Tiberius escorted Julian to the edges of the Entertainment District, leaving him with a kiss to the cheek. They were going to try for another date later in the week, meeting in the Garden District and going from there.

(Julian looked so damned cute all flustered and blushy. The crown just completed the picture. It made Tiberius want to take him home and make him cry.)

As it currently stands, Tiberius was back at the shop, closing it down for his extended absence. Asra still hadn't returned from his latest journey, but he wasn't worried yet. It wasn't unusual for the Magician to get distracted with something new.

However, if he doesn’t return in another few days...

Tiberius shook his head. He’ll worry about that later. As it was, he needs to put together a bag for a few nights.

After filling it with a few necessities, he went along the shop walls, picking a few things up here or there. He had no way of knowing what casting he would need to do, so he tried to put together a kit that will allow him to do several things on the fly.

He jolted, hands tingling when they brushed over Asra’s Tarot cards. He had little talent for reading the Arcana, his worship lying in a different pantheon and system completely.

But...

He placed them in a pocket. Regardless of belief or talent, you don't ignore an omen like that. Especially when it is veritably screaming at you.

***

He left early the next morning, mist from the night before still hovering.

Even as early as it was, it would still take time to get to the Palace.

He passed very few, with only shopkeepers and stall owners really being out and about. As he climbed the steps from one ring-road to another, he received greetings from many.
“Out and about early today, aren't you Ty? Usually you don't wake until morning has far since passed, you Hedonist!”

“Don’t tell me how to live my life, Bern. Besides, how do you know that I may not be on my way to keep your wife company?”

Baker Bern barked out a laugh. “We all know that for your lascivious ways, you’ve got a bit of somethin’ somethin’ going on. C’mon, spill! Who’s the newest snack?”

The stall owner next to Bern snickered. She was an old crone, bent with age.

“I’ve seen that bit of somethin' somethin’ Ty’s got and all I’ve gotta say is phwoar!” She started fanning herself. “Why, if I was forty years younger, I'd teach you boys a thing or two”!

“Pffft, try sixty years younger, then talk to Ty and his boy-toy about teaching!”

Tiberius came up to the crones stall, pulling one of her chairs out and settling. He had enough time to get in a bit of banter.

If he spins this right, he could probably get free breakfast out of it.

“Soookay...whaddaya want to know?” He winks saucily.

Bern sidled closer, taking up a chair as well. Gilda the Crone turned, throwing a teapot on her small hearth. She pulled out a few clay cups and bowls of sugars.

Gilda started the interrogation. “My dear granddaughter Prew said she saw you at the last Dance Night...and that she’s quite miffed that you turned down her advances,” she guffed. “I love my son and his wife dearly, but I have no idea how they produced Prew. The bint's stupider than a shithouse rat.”

Bern snorted an agreement.

“What I don’t understand,” began Tiberius, “is how she keeps thinking I'll take her out. Her personality is atrocious and she has no brain. I’d say she’s pretty, but she don’t hold a candle to my Jules!”

“Why not just do her and be done with it? She gets what she wants, you get some puss, and she’ll leave you alone?”

Tiberius slowly turned to Bern, a mortally offended look on his face. “Bern, I wouldn’t fuck Prew with a stolen dick.” he deadpanned.

Bern gave a low whistle while Gilda cackled. “That’s a little harsh, innit?”

Gilda cackled again. “Not at all. She doesn’t seem to get that there needs to be something there for attraction to take root, and unlucky for her, our boy here likes personality with his ass!”

She turned, bringing the now whistling kettle over. She poured the boiling water into the cups, dropping tea balls into each. “Bern, get your lazy ass up and contribute! Yain't drinking for free!”

“...why do I need to bring something when Ty doesn't?” he grumbled.

“Because I'm bringing the entertainment, dumbass.”

Bern sighed gustily, before he over exaggeratedly heaved himself from his chair. The portly man
slowly shuffled to his stall (ignoring the exasperated comments from the other two). He laboriously picked up his oven rake before hooking it to the tray in his kiln. He gave a few tugs, pulling the large tray out. On it were a variety of stuffed rolls, filled with various sweets and meats.

With his bare hands, he picked them off the tray and tossed them into a lined basket. Equally as slowly as before, he meandered back to the others, plopping the basket down.

“FINALLY, some good fucking food!”

Bern rolled his eyes hard, pulling up the ingredients to make a fresh batch of pumpkin bread. He smirked, feeling Ty watch him like a hawk.

“So,” Bern began. “Tell us lowly mortals about the naughty bit you had on your arm.”

Tiberius imperiously lifted a bun, taking a large bite from it. At any other time, it would have looked quite dramatic, but seeing as how it literally came fresh out of the oven mere moments ago, the effect was ruined when his eyes bulged dramatically and he started sucking in air in a vain attempt to cool the piping hot apple filling.

Gilda had tears streaming from her eyes, as she pushed a flailing Ty his now-cool tea. She already was pouring a new cup for him as he skulled it, letting out a loud gasp at the sweet relief.

“I knew he was hot, but *damn* Ty…”

All Gilda received in return for her comment was a glare. If she were younger, it would have been intimidating. As it stands, he just looked like a disgruntled kitten.

“Well? I’m too old to chase dick anymore! I need to live vicariously thru you youngin’s. So, how was it?”

“Gilda!” “What?” “You can’t just say that!” “I’m old, I don’t give a fuck.” “She has a point, Bern.” “Don’t encourage her, Ty.”

“ANYWAY,” Tiberius loudly began. “Dance Night was our first date, but not the first time we met.”

“Go onnn…”

“Shut it, Bern.”

“Our first encounter was a few nights before. As you know, the Countess came to see me ‘undercover’ *snort* and had left. Then this bozo just *looms* from the shadows like a character from one of Bardelius’s stage plays, *demanding* to see ‘the witch’!”

By this point, Tiberius was gesticulating wildly, arms and hands being flung willy-nilly. “Guy even had a fucking *plague-doctor* mask on, a cloak, the whole shebang! I’m like ‘whatever man, Asra ain’t here, come back when you’re sober’. He starts getting uppity and I toss a cup at him, knocking the mask off.”

Both Gilda and Bern were snorting like schoolchildren. Ty tells the *best* stories.

“So I’m sitting there, tea all over the floor, and he looks at me. And I’m like ‘fuck, he’s *gorgeous*’… Then he has to open his stupid, pretty mouth. Next thing I know, I’ve got him bent ass over teakettle. The counter’s ruined and scooted across half the shop, far-seeing oil is all over the godsdamned
place, and I’m having the best sex of my life! Like, my offerings to Hedonism are set for the next year!”

Both Gilda and Bern looked incredulous. Saying that the Horned One will be satisfied with a single memory is...a lot to take in.

“We finish up, I clean up my fucking mess-”, “Ayooo”, “-thank you Gilda, and ask him out to Dance Night. He got so flustered it was adorable! I’m just like, ‘awwww’. Then I shut him up with a kiss and kicked him out.”

Bern placed the now full tray back into kiln. “So, let me get this straight: guy breaks into the shop, threatens you, and your response is to get horny?”

“Well, when you put it like that…”

Gilda snorted. “Bern, did you forget that Ty has only three ways to respond to a threat?” She held up a hand. “One, fight,” a finger ticked up. “Two, flight,” up goes a second. “And three, fuck.”

Tiberius stared at her, aghast. “How dare you boil me down to my base instincts!” He threw an arm over his eyes, leaning back. He put on the long-suffering airs of a young, plucky lass caught up in the shenanigans of a handsome rogue. “I come to you, baring my soul, seeking fun and comfort, to be met only with hostility on all sides, unknowing when such a vicious assault upon my character will end!”

He got twin unimpressed looks.

“Well, screw you guys.” Laughter followed him as he stomped off.

(But not before he received a bag of rolls, a large capped flagon of tea, and a promise that Prew will be dealt with.)

***

He reached the Palace gates a few hours later (and just in time for lunch). On either side of the gate, a guard stood. Not seeing anyone else, he walked up to one.

“My name is Tiberius. The Countess requested my presence.”

A raised brow met his proclamation. “And do you just expect us to believe that? Nice try, now be on your way.”

Tiberius tched. “And how do you know she didn’t? She asked for my assistance, and I’m presenting myself. Now, do your job, check me in, and let me be on my way.”

The other guard made his way over. “Hey, you heard him. Beat it, or we’ll beat you.”

Tiberius just stared from one guard to the next. He raised his arm, hovering it just above one guard’s head for a moment. He slowly raised it to his height and back. He did this a few times, illustrating the rather large difference in height between the three.

Both guards were spitting mad at this point, not missing the mocking look they received. One opened their mouth (no doubt to start something they won’t be able to finish) when a clear voice rang out.

“Just WHAT do you two think your doing? Let him in, the Countess has been WAITING!”

They jumped, before shuffling like disobedient schoolboys. A short, curvy female was on the other
side of the gate. She had wild, bright red locks pushed away from her face with a scarf, and large periwinkle eyes. She cut a very non-threatening figure despite the hands on her hips...until you got to her face.

She reminded Tiberius of a Black Footed Dune cat. Their Prakran name means ‘anthill tiger’.

He wanted to pick her up, and smother her in cuddles. He could probably fit her in his pocket and still have room to spare.

A few muttered ‘sorry's’ and quick steps later, and Tiberius was on the other side.

“I apologize for their behavior. They should know better that Countess Nadia was expecting a guest.”

Tiberius waved her off. “They were just doing their job. Badly. But they were doing it.” He could feel daggers being stared into his back. His lips quirked.

She returned his look. “Please, follow me. The Countess just settled for a light lunch, and would love the company.”

***

Lunch was a somewhat interesting affair. He learned the woman’s name (Portia), and that she was the personal maid of the Countess.

The talk was short, but enlightening. The Countess and courtiers were present, giving him details of just why his presence was required.

Investigating a three-year old murder, putting the slippery Doctor behind bars, and his execution being done before the masquerade was to start was a tall order.

It didn’t help that he met their request with a laugh.

After that bit of awkwardness (along with the bit of excitement when Portia dropped the Golden Goose), he was given a set of rooms.

(The relief he felt leaving that room, with its creepy animal portrait, cannot be put into words.)

He followed Portia down a long hallway, listening to her rattle on about mealtimes and where he could and could not go. As they passed another doorway, this one dark and gloomy, Tiberius stopped.

He did not like that hallway. No he didn’t.

It felt like it was...infested with something. Almost rotten and biting, with no little malice.

Something started to thud down the stairs, a heavy sticky sound accompanying it. As it came down the last of the stairs, a pomegranate rolled to a stop at his toes. Scrabbling claws chased after it, two white sighthounds leaping into the light. Their muzzles were red with pomegranate juice.

“Mercedes! Melchior! What were you doing up there!” Portia scolded them. Tiberius recognized them from some paintings with the late Count.

“Shoo! Go on now! Get! I'm so sorry, magician Tiberius. They are not the most well mannered dogs. Only the Count could really control them, and, well…”
Tiberius held out a hand, letting the dogs sniff him.

“Oh please don’t! They don’t like many people!”

After a few more moments of sniffing, one of the dogs whined. It bussed its head under his hand, tongue lolling. He scratched behind their ears, doing the same with his free hand to the other.

“Who’s some good doggies? You are! Yes you are!”

Tiberius was a shameless animal lover, and had the voice to prove it.

Both dogs tails were wagging so hard, their whole body followed. With ears pricked excitedly forward and mouths panting, they rolled onto their backs, tummies ready for rubs.

Tiberius spent a few more moments indulging them, praises of how they were the ‘best doggies ever!’ and the like falling from his lips. After a few final pats, he stood up, catching a look of astonishment on Portia’s face. At his questioning look, she turned to continue their journey.

“They were the Count’s favorite pets, and he indulged them in much. As a result, they don’t like many people, and only responded to him.”

They soon made it to his rooms. They were spacious, a large canopy bed taking up the right side, with a table and chairs in front of the open balcony doors. The left wall beheld a large and open bookshelf, a low cabinet next to it. On the right, just after the foot of the bed was another door. Tiberius assumed that it led to a bathroom of some sort.

“Please, let me know if you need anything.” She made to exit, before a heavy hand landed on her shoulder.

“How do you know him?”

“Who?”

“Julian. You know him.”

Her eyes widened, panic glistening. “I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

Tiberius snorted. “If you think I’m going to rat you out, don’t worry. I saw the both of you out front of my shop. Your obviously family.”

She slumped. “He’s my brother.”

Sigh. “I figured as much.” He rolled his shoulders, before standing straight and offering his hand to shake.

“Hello, I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced: My name is Tiberius Principia, and I’ve been hired to investigate my boyfriend, Dr. Julian Devorak, for the murder of Count Lucio and bring him to justice.”

When put that way, Tiberius realized that his life sounded like the plot of a bodice ripper.

How sordid.

Portia looked at him like he had lost his mind, before breaking down into giggles.

“My name is Pasha, handmaid to the Countess and sister of Ilyushka Devorak, wanted for the
murder of the Count.”

“So, can we agree that we both want to save the Dastardly Doctor, while also figuring what really happened?”

“...how do you mean?”

“We both know that he either didn't do it, or something really bad happened to cause him to commit murder.”

Her face fell. “I don’t think he would have done such a thing but,” tears started trailing down her cheeks. She brought her hands up, trying to staunch the flow. “He-he confessed! They caught him, and he confessed! How can we save him when he has already damned himself!?”

Tiberius crouched down, wrapping her in a hug. “Obviously, there is more to this than we know. I’ll need a list of everyone who witnessed the act, the capture, and the doctors he worked with. There is something missing, and I intend to find out.”

Portia pushed away, looking up at him. “And if he’s still to be hanged?”

A dark grin was her answer. “I take him to the mountains. Let the Vesuvian army try to take on House Principia. Our name is empire, and Vesuvia will bow before it.”

***

After settling in, Tiberius took a quick shower. The two dogs, while delightful and good dogs, had been covered in pomegranate. It had gotten smeared all over his clothing.

He left his stained clothes in a basket by the sink. After re braiding his hair, he put on a pair of dark leather leggings and a long, red tunic. Around his waist he tied a cloth belt.

(Inside the belt’s fold were a few things, such as lock picks and a pin. He may have also included something that could be considered a garrote, if you squint.)

Inside of the long french braid his hair was in, he hid a small, thin dagger. To his thigh, he attached another, more obvious dagger. His thick-soled boots were tied completely, laces stopping just under his knees.

He exited his room, turning down the hallway. Unless the Countess needed him, he was going to explore the Palace. Places as large as these tended to have a lot of little hidey-holes, and with the scandal of the Counts murder still being high despite the time that has since passed…

After a few twists and turns, he came upon a set of open double doors, a large porch leading down to the gardens.

This particular garden had a tall hedge maze. From his vantage point, he could see a gazebo in the center. Outside of it, Tiberius spied a large willow tree, a fountain beside it.

As he made his way down, a woman’s voice hailed him.

“Good afternoon, Tiberius. I was just about to send Portia to fetch you.”

Further along the porch, Countess Nadia sat. A small, two person table was set for tea. At her side stood Portia.

He made his way over, not missing the way her eyes trailed his legs.
He loved the way these leggings showed off his hard-earned musculature. He didn’t do a hundred squats daily for nothing!

He dropped into the opposite chair, giving Portia a quick ‘thank you’ as she served a slice of cake and a cup of tea.

“I was curious, about some of your remarks during lunch.”

“I will endeavor to answer as well as I can, m’lady.”

The Countess pulled a small smile. “Now, if we are to be partners, I must insist that you address me as Nadia. Being comfortable with each other will greatly help in our...communication.”

Tiberius was not impressed. He’s been around the block a few times, and knows when someone’s trying to pull. At any other time, he might have taken her up (banging a hot Countess, and living in luxury? Uh, yes please!).

But, lucky for him, he’s already got a hot piece.

(One he’s working on making a more permanent arrangement.)

However, he can’t just tell her to back off, not interested. There is a plethora of reasons, one being that like him, she’s foreign; it could be a genuine thing over in her native Prakra to offer a close, working relationship between master/servant. And with his shoddy memory, he doesn't want to jump the goose.

It would be awkward to be the start of a war because he ‘noped’ on a trading of names.

(He definitely won't trade his last name. Being a Principia can be dangerous, in the wrong places…) 

“Then feel free to call me Tiberius. Any time I hear ‘Magician’, I look for Asra.”

There, a safe answer.

“I was under the impression that you, too, were a Magician? Is this not true?”

Tiberius sighed internally. He hates political double-talk.

“While I do deal in magic, it is in a different school. While the term ‘magician’ can be applied to anyone who has more than passing aptitude, the title is reserved for a very specific caste.”

(Take that, bitch. Call me a liar after demanding my presence…) 

“Then what assurances do I have that you’ll be able to assist me? I am not questioning your ability, but if you have the desired skills.”

“And what made you think Asra would have the required skills?”

She tsked him. “Asra’s reputation precedes him. All know of his abilities. Even if he could not solve the murder directly, he knows many and has the respect of the populace.”

She leaned forward, propping her hand on her chin. She smirked. “You, on the other hand, are a nobody. What do you have to offer?” Her other hand rose, a Tarot card tucked between two fingers.

Tiberius stared at her for a long time, then barked out a loud, amused laugh. While she did well to hide it, Nadia was clearly puzzled.
This was not the reaction she was expecting.

She sat back at his large, predatory grin, prominent canines on display.

“Oh, Nadia” he chuckled, voice deepening into a low rumble. He met her eyes squarely, grin showing entirely too much teeth.

“You don’t want to know what I am.”

***

Tiberius decided to humor the Countess, and consented to her little chase thru the maze.

While he cares not for the Arcana system, he will not allow for one of Asra’s deck to be besmirched.

(He also would never pass up a chance to chase prey….

...he’ll need to try that with Julian.)

As Nadia and Portia bickered with the two guards, Tiberius took the time to study them closer. The shorter male favored resting on his left leg, shifting between his two feet briefly every 40 seconds.

The taller of the two (though still much shorter than Tiberius’s towering 6’8”) wore his armor a little...off. His pauldrons did not sit evenly. One shoulder seemed a bit more ‘upright' than the other, something quite common in long-bowmen.

If it came down to a fight, he would press on the shorter guards right side, and the others left.

He did not want to get clocked by a bowman’s dominate arm, and a runners leading leg could kick like a horse.

As they were being given their instructions, Tiberius brought his left hand up, nipping his pinky. A small well of blood appeared. After a few moments, he started drawing Umbrian runes over his eyes, nose, and under his mouth.

It was as he started scripting around his right ear that he realized he had an audience. All eyes were on him. He finished his left ear before addressing the others.

“What? Is there something on my face?”

And Asra said he had a bad sense of humor.

“Um...what are you doing?”

His heart gave a little stutter at Portia’s confused face.

Why were the Devorak siblings so godsdamned cute? He just wanted to pick her up and squeeze!

(Faust was rubbing off on him.)

“Why, all I’m doing is preparing for our little chase! After all, the Countess wants to see how I’ll retrieve my stolen property. It would only be fair for me to...demonstrate some of my unique talents.”

That unsettling grin was back. He dropped his chin a bit, creating a small gap between two rows of teeth. The new smile brought to mind the laughing grin of a wolf on the hunt. All others present were blanketed in a well of unease.
“I am assured that my men will remain unharmed?”

Tiberius turned to the Countess. “Why Nadia, I would never harm one who has done me no wrong!”

He turned back to the guards, who hastily affixed their masks.

(Prey animal masks now seemed more appropriate than ever for this exercise.)

“But, I cannot promise that there may not be some bumps and scrapes. After all, I am pursuing them into a maze that has many twists and turn.

It would be a shame if something were to...happen.”

And with that ominous phrase, he walked to the end of the porch.

***

He stood, ready, waiting for the Countess to give him the go ahead. The two guards already had a head start.

“Go.”

He leapt over the steps, rolling as he landed on the grass, springing up and dashing in one smooth motion. There was only one entrance on this side of the maze.

As he came to the first split, he continued straight. Both guards kept together, only splitting at the third fork they encountered.

He swung his eyes, the runes overlaying a new set of colors over what was already there. Trails of heat in various reds, oranges, and yellows demarcated what routes were taken. A deep breath brought scent into his lungs, giving additional info of which guard went where.

He could pick up the faint floral smell of Asra, and the electric tingle on the back of his tongue signified the presence of the Tarot card.

A hard right, and he was running. The sights and smells were getting stronger, and he could hear the faint beats of a heart intertwined with hard and fast footsteps.

Rabbit it is.

Abruptly, the bright heat signature of Rabbit could be seen on the other side of the hedge wall.

Tiberius swung his arm, punching it thru the thick bush. His large hand curled around a neck, and he pulled.

With a choked-off shout, Rabbit was wrestled thru, leaves and twigs scraping.

Rabbit landed on his back with a gasp, the air leaving him at the hard landing on the ground. Large hands scrambled thru his clothes, looking for a card he no longer had.

Just as abruptly as it had started, it ended. With a loud snarl, Tiberius turned back into the maze, face twisted.

Left, right, left, left, right, back...JUMP!
He landed hard, taking Deer down with him. They both rolled, coming to a hard stop as they crashed against the side of the fountain.

Deer swung his fist back, not knowing who had caught him. He froze at the vicious snarl he got for the action, going still at the appearance of his assaulter.

Blood writing covering his face, mouth open and panting, teeth glistening. Dark eyes wide, focused on the fluttering pulse underneath his hand; Tiberius had to stop, the overwhelming need to bite down coming to the fore.

After a moment he calmed. A hand buried itself in a pocket, coming up with a card.

A fake.

He jumped up, running back to the entrance. He barrelled thru some of the hedges, frustration and a lack of time fueling his mad dash.

At the last row, he flew up the porch stairs, going two to three at a time. He came to a hard stop in front of the Countess.

Their eyes locked.

He slowly circled her, breathing in deeply at her back, pulling in the perfumed scent of her hair. As he came back to the front, the predatory grin returned.

All was still.

His hand shot out, dipping between the folds of her dress. Fingers wriggled about her breast, curling under. A sharp gasp pulled from her.

Just as quickly as it started, he withdrew; a Tarot Card clutched between strong fingers.

***

Tiberius returned to his room, satisfaction burning in his gut.

The Countess was clever, he would give her that. With the limited information she had on him, it was a good plan; plant the card, exchange it, hide it where he would not touch.

Any other man would hesitate to put hands on her. One does not manhandle a Countess.

And if he did place hands, use it to her advantage. She was attracted to him, and she knew many lusted after her.

Why not use the hidden card as an opportunity to get a feel, and possibly more from it?

At any other time, Tiberius would have taken her up on it. She was down for it, he’s normally down for it, and he would have scored a sugar mamma. Win-win.

But, he’s already got the sweetest man in Vesuvia. He would be stupid to drop this new thing for something that would be fleeting at best.

(Two doms in a relationship spells nothing but disaster…)

‘Ah well,’ he thought, shaking his head.
He had dinner in his room, needing time away from politicking.

Along with the frankly freakish amount of food he ordered, Portia also brought him a beginning to the list he requested earlier. Mixed in with names were rumors she knew of, along with notes of others who may know some things.

While not what one would call comprehensive, it was a good start.

Now he has to figure out just why this all needs to be done to the impossible timetable set by Nadia.

There is no rhyme or reason to it. It would be poetic justice to close the circle of events on an anniversary of their inception but…

If he remembers his Numerology and Symbology right, the years don't work. A year gap of one, three, or five is definitely desired, but for a positive outcome, it would be best done on the first or fifth anniversary.

A good outcome needs to have a positive flow. One point, a line, to symbolize the movement forward, the future. A singular point means you have no choice but forward. Five points, a pentagon, for a perfect mirror, each side containing 3 points when bisected. Each point representing the start, the action, and the end. Two sets of actions allows more flexibility, and the ability for something going wrong to be righted.

Three points, a triangle, on the other hand, allows for only two outcomes. You do one thing wrong, and poof, that's it.

He also couldn't shake that fucking menagerie portrait from his mind. Every time he saw or thought of it, his teeth itched.

It also doesn't help that Hedonism has been whispering since his arrival. Nothing distinct, but the Horned One does not stir for much other than the pleasures of life.

He tossed the notes to the side. After some food, he’ll investigate the darkened wing.

He stood at the entrance to the wing. After asking a passing scullery made what it housed, he was miffed to learn that it had belonged to the deceased Count.

That explains why he does NOT like it.

If even a pinch of the rumors about Lucio were true, he’ll be wanting to have a cleansing bath after his visit.

Maybe he’ll track down Julian for a cuddle.

Tiberius started down the hallway, making for the set of spiral stairs at the end.

The darkness was oppressive. At each step, the bright light of the main hall became dimmer and dimmer. He could vaguely see portraits along the hall, each one of the Blond Bitch.

Vanity, thy name is Lucio.
He tossed up a ball of Mage-light. It didn't help much.

At the midway point, a breeze blew past. It brought out-of-place scents with it. Musk, rich spice, a whiff of lust…

Just above eye-level, two glowing red eyes appeared. A dark chuckle followed.

~And just what is wandering my halls? Something to...slake my hunger?~

Tiberius fed more magic into the light, expanding its radius briefly before the dark smothered it even more. The eyes disappeared, only for a presence to be at his back.

~Whats a delicious morsel such as yourself doing here?~

A hot breath whispered along his ear. It took everything he had not to turn and rip out a throat with his teeth.

He threw that thought out the window when he felt a clawed hand run up his thigh.

(Oh hell no, bitch!)

“Paws...OFF!”

He got a laugh in reply.

(You want action? I'll give you action…)

He spun, fingers hooking and pulling the dagger at his thigh. He tripped, hand passing thru where a head would be.

Tiberius landed on the floor hard, dagger spinning away. His Mage-light extinguished, and no light from the main hall came down this far. The presence became oppressively heavy, pure malice weighing his shoulders down. A shadow, in the shape of an upright, horned goat(?) loomed over him.

He jumped, running to the end of the dark hallway, vile laughter following in his wake. He catapulted himself up the spiral stairs, going down a second hall.

~Run little rabbit! I said run rabbit, RUN!~

He shoved thru a door, fresh air slapping him in the face. He stumbled down stairs, breathing raggedly.

A stream cut a path thru the garden. He could make-out the hedge maze far to the right. He dashed in, remembering seeing a gate towards the back during his earlier chase.

He took turns at random. His stomach turned when he passed a stone arch, two goat heads framing its apex.

He came to the gate, ripping overgrowth from its frame. Pulling up the latch yielded nothing but a tortured shriek of rusted tumblers. He scaled it, dropping to the other side.

He trotted down the path on the other side, his panic fading as he put distance between himself and that fucking cursed Palace.

If Nadia insists he stay there for the duration of the investigation, he’ll light her on fire himself.
He descended the path, heart returning to a more regular beat. The stream followed on the side. Ahead, the path became less foliated, slowly turning into paving stones. Shabby homes were up ahead.

As he came to a final turn, he looked down. Red flashed in the water.

The fuck?...

His eyes traveled back up the stream, looking for its start. Terror boiled in his veins as he saw the diseased water came from what should be the dungeons.

He stood frozen, uncomprehendingly. The Palace was the source…?

Abruptly, a hard body collided with his, sending the two sprawling. Tiberius was flush on his back. He looked up, seeing his assaulter was none other than Julian.

Julian jerked in surprise, sitting down hard on Tiberius's legs. He opened his mouth, but was interrupted by a shout.

Both looked back, seeing armed guards racing towards them. Julian scrambled up, heaving Tiberius after him. Both men dashed down the pavement, feet slapping hard and fast.

“I'm sensing a pattern, here!” Julian breathed. A breathless chuckle was his answer.

They came to a corner, hard. Unfortunately, Tiberius had little traction, and tumbled into the water. Bubbles surrounded him, shafts of lamplight spearing the darkness. He could hear Julians muffled shout.

PAIN!

A long, undulating form shot out of the darkness, teeth digging into his ribs. A large bubble of air escaped his mouth. Hands grasped the slick scales, muscles bulging as he wrenched the creature away.

A hair-raising hiss was his answer, the vampire eel slinking off. Other shapes loomed.

A hand plunged into the water, long gloved fingers curling around his wrist. A hard jerk followed, hauling him forth. He sputtered loudly, coughing up streams of water. An arm curled about his waist, pulling him up. Strong arms wound about his chest, a few thumps helping him expel the water.

All too soon, those same arms were turning him, dragging him along.

“C'mon, Ty! We have to keep going!”

Blindly he followed. He swept a hand over his eyes, whipping away water. Julian was a few steps ahead, tugging him along by the hand. He curled his unoccupied hand over his side, staunching as best he could the flow of blood.

More twists and turns followed, the pavement making way for grass. They came up to a gated garden, a riot of vines over the walls showing it to be largely abandoned. Julian made to continue passed it, and jerked when Tiberius dug his heels in.

Seeing the opportunity, Tiberius hefted himself over the tall gate, straddling it. He pulled Julian up after him, both sliding down with a thud. They quickly crawled over to an alcove, hidden by a
bench.

The sounds of their pursuers passed them by, the high walls and plants hiding them.

“Well then. That’s that. Are you alright?” Julian turned.

“Fuck! Wrong question!” He caught a listing Tiberius, laying him flat. He got a chuckle in answer.

“We have got to stop meeting like this.”

Julian paused in his fussing, face screwing up before letting out a loud laugh.

(Tiberius has no shame in admitting his heart skipped a beat.)

Julian devolved into giggles, hands shaking as he pulled the ruined tunic away from bleeding ribs. As he saw the damage, he gave out a low whistle.

A large, circular bite lay flat over the meat of Tiberius's ribs. Pieces of flesh were missing, and a river of blood danced downwards. In one spot, bone glinted wetly.

“Well, Doc? What's the damage?”

Julian spent a few more moments looking, using some fingers to palpate the edges. A whistling hiss was his answer.

“Well, you'll live.”

He got a thumbs-up for an answer.

Julian ripped off the now-ruined tunic and belt. He wrung out the rest of the water, and used the scraps of fabric to clean away the now tacky blood. As his hand journeys downwards, he took notice of the leggings.

Those are some really nice leggings. He hopes they aren't ruined.

“Lucky for you, I can easily fix this.”

Tiberius threw a disbelieving look his way. “No offense love, but unless you know healing magic or have a doctor's kit hidden in your cloak…”

“Do you dare doubt my ability?” A brow rose.

“...nooooo?”

Julian sniffed. “Oh ye of little faith. ‘do you know healing magic?’ Tch, I got your healing right here.” He pulled off both his gloves.

He pressed a hand down firmly, palm covering most of the wound. His heart tugged at Tiberius’s flinch. Shortly, a flash of heat traveled thru both men.

Tiberius sat up, running his hands up and down his abdomen. The bite was gone!

He turned to Julian, mouth opened to question. A groan cut him off.

On Julian’s swan-neck, a contract seal glowed white. One of his hands buried itself in his hair, the long, naked fingers tangling. His other hand covered his ribs, in the same spot Tiberius should have
his wound…

Instead, a dark patch blossomed. Tiberius ripped open the coat, staring in disbelief at what he saw.

Julian somehow transferred the wound, and was slowly regenerating.

Their eyes met, Julian returning his earlier thumbs up. “Cheers to our mutual misery!”

Tiberius reached out, covering Julian's hand with his. A smothered moan, and a hitching breath answered his gesture. His brows rose incredulously.

“Seriously?” A hard blush was his answer.

“...I can work with this.”

***

In short order, Tiberius had hauled the both of them onto the garden bench, facing the alcove. He sat, legs spread. Julian sat in his lap, back to Tiberius chest and legs hooked over Tiberius thighs, stretching them open.

Tiberius had his fingers resting over the still oozing wound, his other hand petting a clothed thigh.

Julian was biting down on his hand, trying to muffle his moans. They weren't going to get caught because of him.

Tiberius buried his face in that still glowing neck, nuzzling. His hand started rubbing up and down, fingers hooking into the fabric of the canvas trousers. His other fingers danced on the wounds edge.

His palm danced up and down, each pass bringing it closer to the hardness between Julian's legs. As a heavy hand grasped the erection, fingers dug into the wound.

Julian’s eye went wide, a high and long gasp expelling from him. His ass dug into the lap he sat on, grinding deeply. He shuddered, reveling in the lightning bolts of painful pleasure shooting thru him.

Tiberius returned the grind gleefully, his bulge resting in Julian's cleft, butting up against the back of another. He palmed the captured erection in his fist, getting more muffled moans and hard grinding.

Julian relished in the harsh treatment. A particularly hard fingering of his bite made his back bow, his thighs spreading more. He dug booted toes into the ground, using the traction to wiggle and twitch his ass over the hard bulge he rocked on.

A few more wiggles and adjustments, and he started hard, circular movements over that dick. He got more pain as a reward.

Tiberius slapped his palm over Julian’s cock, loving the stutter that wracked the others frame. He cupped his palm, working his hand up and down as he moved his fingers in and out of the bite. Julian had become a wild, unhinged force. His breathing was hard, with muffled cries escaping him. Every time the bite was rubbed, his hips bucked hard, rubbing a delicious ass over Tiberius.

Tiberius soon removed the belt, and undid the fly of Julian's trousers. His hand dipped in, grabbing hold of a weeping cock. He got another buck for his efforts. His thumb dug into the head, gathering beads of cum from the crown. He started working his fist up and down, in counterpoint to the wound fingering. Soon, he just covered the bite with his palm, pressing down hard.
Julian shouted hard, hand doing little to cover the sound. One hand covered the one around his cock, the other pushing down his trousers even further. Soon, his bare cheeks were grinding against soft leather. He started to bounce between fist and cock.

“Oh fuck, sweetheart! Look at you...we’ll have to do this more often.”

Julian moaned, grinding down hard on the bulge he sat on. He growled in frustration, wanting to be grinding down on hard cock.

As he made to rise and make his wants a reality, the palm on his ribs squeezed, pulling him to an abrupt orgasm. He shouted loud and hard, repeatedly, leaving no mistake to anyone that may be nearby just what was happening.

Tiberius’s fist milked him, long ropes of cum landing in green grass. What little lamplight that found its way into the garden glistened off the cum, making it look like a string of discarded pearls.

The fist continued to move, soon rendering cries from the overstimulated redhead. His legs curled up, trying in futility to close his thighs. He rested his shaking hands on bulging muscles, grinding down hard.

Despite his release, he wanted more. He wouldn't be happy unless he had Tiberius buried deep inside him.

He ripped off his boots and trousers, pulling Tiberius’s free hand down. He forced viscera-covered fingers between his cheeks with a whine.

Lips covered his ear, breathing out hard. “Are you sure? I’m perfectly happy as I am. The memory of you, untamed, is satisfaction enough for me.”

Julian will deny until the day he dies, that a spark of warmth ignited inside his cold, dead heart at that sentence.

“I just-, I just want-”, he began, letting out a small sob. “Fuck! Just give me your dick!”

Tiberius barked out a laugh.

Julian was picked up, manhandled to lay on his left side on the bench. Tiberius straddled it, one arm lifting Julian's leg up and high. His other opened his leggings, releasing his cock with a breath of relief.

Tiberius scooted up, eventually straddling Julian's other leg. He rested a finely turned ankle upon his shoulder, a hand traveling towards blushing lips.

Julian leaned up on his elbow, sucking the offered fingers into his mouth, slurping with enthusiasm. His tongue danced, and he didn't miss the small twitch of Tiberius hips.

Feeling enough had been deposited, Tiberius withdrew his fingers. As he brought them back, Julian was panting, his tongue darted out, making kitten like passes to wet his lips. Feeling a hand cup and pull his cheeks apart, he raised his leg more, easing the way for Tiberius.

He moaned loudly when he was breached, head lolling. He grunted when the digit made its way deeper quickly. He flexed his hips, trying to get more friction. He growled when the finger was withdrawn.

As two fingers touched him, he flexed down hard and fast, groaning as both were forced deep inside.
As Tiberius went to pull back, Julian's free arm shot out, burying fingers into thick locks and pulling, forcing Tiberius's face close to his own.

“Did you not, just minutes ago, finger fuck my wound? I'm not a delicate flower, get your dick in me and fuCK-”

Before Julian could finish, Tiberius had taken him up on his word. He slid up and jerked their hips together, forcefully mounting the now writhing redhead. He wrapped his arms around a now twitching leg and went for it.

“FUCK...yes...harder....ohgodsyessssss!” Julian started bouncing back on dick, the sounds of flesh meeting loud. He dug his fingers into the bench edges, using the newfound stability to fuck back.

“Jules, you fantastic slut. Look at you, you filthy fucking cockwhore.” A hard smack was delivered to a jiggling cheek. “You're such a painslut. I bet you'd do anything to get smacked around just right…”

Tiberius rolled the other, forcing Julian onto his back. On large hand forced a long, lean leg up, knee near ear. The other wrapped around a still glowing throat. Julian continued to get hammered by dick, bouncing at each hard thrust.

“Do it, fucking choke me.” He covered the hand around his neck with his own, squeezing his consent.

Tiberius didn't need to be told twice. He slowly started squeezing, watching his partner. He kept going to just this side of tight, feeling the racing pulse against his palm as surely as his own.

After a particularly hard thrust, Tiberius ground. He took this opportunity to rearrange himself a bit, getting closer to the moaning whore below him. After a few wiggles, he picked up where he left off.

Both started when the garden gate rattled. Julian gave a hard twitch, part of him excited at the prospect of being caught getting dicked. Tiberius didn't slow his pace, but he did…

“OY, FUCK OFF! I'M TRYING TO GET LAID HERE!”

“HALT! It's the Watch!”

The gate started pushing inwards. Tiberius leaned down, picking up one of Julian's discarded boots. He winged it, forcing the gate closed and locked.

“DIDN'T YOU FUCKERS HEAR ME! I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF DOING SOMEONE!”

Shuffling could be heard on the far side, before a different voice spoke-up. “Did, did you, did you see anything suspicious?” Their blush could be heard.

“FUCK NO! NOW PISS OFF, UNLESS YOU WANT TO BE NUTTED NEXT!”

Several pairs of feet could be heard making their way away. A third voice, female, spoke up.

“Uhhh, you guys go on, I'll just...stay here. And question them when they’re, y’know, finished-OW!”

Julian gave a choked-off, moaning laugh. He moaned louder as Tiberius hit him with a hard thrust. On the next thrust, Julian's hands flew down, cupping the flexing ass pistoning into him. His legs pulled up more and spread obscenely wide, using his arms to force Tiberius to grind his cock against
that wonderful sweet spot.

“Fuckfuckfuckfuck me hard. Make me come crying on your dick.”

Julian has no idea what has gotten into him.

(Well, aside from Tiberius).

Tiberius curled over him, thrusting slower but deeper. He squeezed his fist tighter. Julian started gasping, his already red face getting redder. His ears started burning, and his vision started buzzing.

“All...most...there…” he grunted between thrust.

Tiberius picked up the pace, before grasping his fist tighter. After a few seconds, he released the neck in his hand completely.

Julian’s head dropped, and his eye rolled. The fast rush of oxygen coming in reduced him. A long, trailing moan turned into a shout as his second orgasm was ripped from him. He shot off so hard, he hit his own jaw and left trails up Tiberius’s abdomen.

Tiberius held spasming legs open wide and back, fucking into a twitching ass. He rammed up and in, each meeting of hips pushing a loud, grunting shout from the doctor. The hips under him did their best to buck up, wanting more.

He finally came with a thunderous sigh when fingers clawed down his back. He collapsed onto a still-twitching Julian, his own hips making shallow thrust, trying to draw the milking out for as long as possible.

Eventually he came to a stop, the piteous whine from his mount signaling an end. Both lay there, exchanging sloppy kisses.

On the last kiss, Julian caught a full lower lip between his teeth, giving a tug. He quickly let go with a soft cry at the hard buck he got in retaliation.

Tiberius pulled back, hands holding up and back abused thighs. He withdrew, humming in satisfaction as his load dumped out of a spent ass.

“You look entirely too satisfied with yourself.”

A shit-eating grin lit up Tiberius’s face. “What can I say, babe? You bring out the demon in me.”

Julian sighed, rolling his eyes. He couldn't keep up the exasperated facade, and started giggling. Tiberius joined in, bumping their foreheads together. Soon, they were collapsed upon the bench, cum drying into tack between their bellies as they laughed hard and loud.

“HEY! SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO SLEEP! SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

Tiberius pushed himself up, chest expanding as he drew a deep breath.

“SUCK MY ASS! YOU’RE JUST JEALOUS I GOT TAIL AND YOU DIDN’T!”

Julian covered his mouth with both hands, snorting. Tiberius looked down with a grin. He’ll have to make him laugh more often…

“WILL BOTH OF YOU STOP YELLING!?!” That was a new voice...
“FUCK YOU, BITCH! THESE TWO ASSHATS KEPT ME UP, NOW I’M KEEPING YOU ALL AWAKE! IF I CAN’T SLEEP ‘CAUSE OF YOU, YOU WON’T SLEEP ‘CAUSE OF ME!”

“I JUST WANT TO KNOW, ARE YOU GUYS INTO THREESOMES?”

“OH MY GODS, ANISE. YOU CAN’T JUST ASK IF SOMEONE WANTS A THREESOME!”

Julian looked up at Tiberius, grin stretching his lips wide. “Congratulations, Ty; you have started a neighborhood shouting match.”

Tiberius opened his mouth to answer, stopping as an old woman shouted out a frankly impossible sex-move involving a dog, a rubber duck, and a hand bellows, mixed in with colorful commentary about the first shouters dubious parentage.

Both men sat in awe of the insult. Julian cleared his throat.

“MADAM, MAY I SALUTE YOU IN YOUR MASTERFUL USE OF LANGUAGE AND YOUR LURID COMMENTARY ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY! MAY I BUY YOU A DRINK?”

He got a cuff upside the head, the seriousness ruined by a snorting Tiberius.

“I DON’T KNOW, CAN I RIDE THAT DICK!?”

The two blanched. “NO!” “NO THANK YOU!” “NOPE!” “NONONO!”

They scrambled to throw on their clothes as cackling rang out, Julian hopping about on one foot trying to wrestle a boot on, his untied pants sagging down his hips. Tiberius tucked himself away, searching for his scarf. Pulling out his goodies, he unfolded it, revealing a much larger rectangle.

Julian was spinning around in circles, trying to locate his gloves. He scooped them up, reaching for his cloak. As it settled about his shoulders, he looked up at Tiberius, mouth open in the start of a question.

“...what the fuck, Ty?”

Tiberius looked at him, arms raised, hands tying a knot behind his neck. His lock pick set was clenched between his teeth.

“Whut?”

Turns out Tiberius's cloth belt was actually an obnoxiously big and long scarf. He wrapped it around his abs and chest, tying it behind his neck in a halter style.

It should have looked ridiculous.

The smug asshole made it look good.

(Julian thought it made his tits look fine…)

Tiberius chased down the missing boot, it not having gone far from its initial flight. Julian made a disappointed face when he discovered a scar dancing down the fine leather.

Tiberius boosted him back over the gate, scurrying up after. Both landed with a hard thud, startling the guard who did stay behind.
“WAIT-”

Both men booked it down the lane, hooting and hollering as they went. Their long legs made quick work putting distance between them and the guard. She fell behind near instantly. Just to be safe, they pulled things such as rubbish barrels and rain catchers down behind them.

Their legs ate pavement, quickly spitting them out to a main road. Stalls and revelers surrounded them, sounds of a good time filling the air.

Tiberius reached out, grabbing Julian’s hand. He laced their fingers together, heart tight as palms met.

They pushed thru, smiles upon their faces and color high on cheeks.

Tiberius turned, breath catching when he saw Julian.

He had a wide smile on his face, his eye crinkled in humor. His cheekbones stood out in stark relief, a hearty blush on them. A light sheen of sweat dusted his brow and over his lips, his hair a ruffled mess. The picture was completed by a heaving chest, shirt and jacket framing a thin strip of skin.

He had to remind himself to breathe.

“Hey, Jules?” He squeezed his hand.

“Yes?” A gleaming eye met his.

“You know of any place to crash? I have no desire to return to the Palace, and I’m...reluctant to leave your side.”

Julian went scarlet, eye popping open.

“Oh, um, well- uh YES! I um mean” he coughed into a fist, before straightening. “Yes, I do have a place we can go. A friend lives nearby.” He coughed again, a bashful look on his face.

After taking a moment to re-center himself, Julian started forward, tugging the hand around his gently.

“Mazelinka lives about 10 minutes walk from here. I’m sure she won't mind us dropping in.”

Chapter End Notes

Updates will be less frequent, but longer, bigger, and thicker. Like dick.
Finally, the infamous Mazelinka makes an appearance!

It didn’t take too long to get to Mazelinka’s. The townhouses, tall multi-story homes with small yards, eventually gave way to smaller homes and larger yards. These too, then turned into small single floor homes with thatched roofs and large plots. Each home had a large garden in front. A few had turned their ample backyards into farms.

They passed a few of these homes, before Julian tugged them to the right. Just like the others, it had a front garden. The back looks like at one time it had been an organized garden, but was left to run wild. Tiberius could make out a few ground-crawling vines. Interspersed were large berry bushes, with all sorts of flowers blooming in riot. A few paths cut thru the chaos. A curl of smoke rose from the chimney, warm light shining from the open windows. All in all, it made for a cozy picture.

Tiberius took an instant liking to it.

Julian opened and passed thru the front gate. However, he pulled them to the left, around the front corner. As they came to an open window, Tiberius could see a kitchen, with a soup kettle hanging in the hearth.

Julian turned, finger to smirking lips in the universal symbol of ‘hush’. To Tiberius’s confusion, he palmed the window frame, slowly pushing the pane further up. Once high enough, he swung one long leg thru, crouching.

“ILYUSHKA! WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU!? DOORS EXIST FOR A REASON!”

Julian startled with a squawk, ramming his spine into the pane. At the same time, he lost his footing, sliding into the room and landing with a loud ‘THUD’. In concern, Tiberius leaned in. The sight that met his eyes was nothing short of comical.

Poor Julian had landed on his shoulders, wedged between the floor and wall. His legs were flung up and over, his toes touching floor above his shoulders. In his tumble, his cloak ended up getting flung over his head and face.

He was the dictionary definition of “ass over teakettle”. If Tiberius had not personally witnessed it, he would say Julian did this on purpose. As it is, Julian just seems to be a trouble magnet.

“Maze! How lovely to see you!” Julian flung his arms about, flailing, in his efforts to ‘unmask’ his face. He gave a roguish grin to the short, plump woman when he succeeded. She raised an unimpressed brow at his antics, wooden spoon clutched firmly in hand.

Mazelinka was an older woman, looking like a stern and loving grandma. She wore mostly dark colors, with a widow’s shawl secure around her head. She was comfortably plump, and looked like she would give great hugs.
She shook her spoon a few times, before delivering a firm swat to the Doctors upturned behind. She started laying into him between smack’s.

“How *smack* many *smack* times *smack* have *smack* I *smack* told *smack* you *smack* to *smack* use *smack* the *smack* door?"

“MAZE! STOP! IM SORRY! WE HAVE A GUEST!”

“And if it’s who I think it is, he’s probably seen how ridiculous you can get already, so it's nothing new!” After a few more smacks, she turned to the window.

“I can come in thru a door.”

Mazelinka pointed.

Tiberius made his way back, smirking lightly when he heard the two start bickering again. When he got to the farmhouse-style door, he rapped on the wood with his knuckles. He smirked harder when a blushing Julian opened the door. He snickered when he got a glare. He walked passed Julian, bumping him with his hip and dropping a kiss to a burning cheek. He could see a few pairs of shoes lined up along one of the walls, before the little entryway opened into the kitchen proper. He bent over, leaning against the wall as he unlaced and removed his boots.

He looked over his shoulders, feeling eyes on him. Julian was leaned over slightly, head cocked as his eyes glued themselves to Tiberius’s backside. He grinned unabashedly when he realized he was caught.

Tiberius rolled his eyes, returning to his boots. He set them to the side, before abruptly spinning and grabbing one of Julians feet. Julian flailed, giving a bird-like shriek as he tumbled. His arms latched onto the free standing coat rack, holding himself parallel to the floor by only a few inches.

“TY!”

Tiberius brought the captured foot up, wedging it between his hip and arm. Using his free hand, he undid the laces at the top of the boot, before grasping the heel and arch, tugging. After a few hard, vigorous tugs and twists, it came loose. He dropped the boot with a loud ‘thunk’, before doing the same to the other. Julian let out a squeak as his foot was released, along with a hiss of disapproval as his heel met cool flagstone.

Julian scrambled, trying to right himself quickly. Unfortunately, his long limbs got in the way. By the time he rolled over and up, Tiberius had already sat himself at the little kitchen table, accepting a cup of tea from a smarmy Mazelinka. He pouted, before slouching to the table and sitting. His pout lessened a bit with a peck to the cheek. It was completely wiped from his face, replaced with outright embarrassment and a fierce blush when Tiberius picked him up with ease and plopped him in his lap. He buried his burning face in Tiberius’s chest, pointedly ignoring the chuckle he got.

“Sorry babe, you just look so damn cute with that red face.”

Julian grunted in reply. He stayed still for a few moments, before decidedly sitting up, turning to face the table in a dramatic spin. He gracefully ignored the twin snorts he got, before addressing Mazelinka.

“Mazelinka, this is Tiberius. Ty, Mazelinka.”

Tiberius smiled. “Lovely to meet you, ma’am.”
“So, you're the ‘Tiberius’ my boy wouldn't shut up about. From the way he natters on about you, you must be something special.”

Tiberius felt his chest warm, even as Julian facepalmed. It was nice, to be so special that you were talked about. He felt proud of the fact that he made Julian so happy, he wanted to share it. He was so elated, he buried his face in Julian's neck, dropping kisses up and down the smooth flesh. Ignoring the indignation this wrought, he wrapped both arms around a svelte waist, squeezing hard.

Julian was a wiggling, blushing mess. He had no idea of just what got Tiberius into such a state.

It’s not like he makes Tiberius that happy, right?

***

After they had all settled down from that bit of excitement (complete with a chuckling Mazelinka), they went in for a late meal.

It turns out, Mazelinka had had a soup on the fire, and it was nearly finished when the two men decided to crash there. She removed the cauldrons top, giving it a stir. Tiberius took a deep breath, bring the sweet and savory scent deep into his lungs.

“That's quite the potent brew you’ve got there. I smell… valerian, mordel, and…lavender?”

Julian quirked his brow. “Brew? That is simply a delicious soup! One made with summer squash, a bit of chicken and root vegetables, and her homegrown herbs. Quite filling. It's also one of the few things that can help me sleep.”

Mazelinka snorted.

“I know what I’m smelling, and that's a sleeping tonic mixed in with a meal.”

Julian scoffed. “Not everything made in a cauldron is a potion. As a magician, you should know.” The words would be unkind, but the effect was ruined with the faintly curious look on his face.

“Not everyone needs to have a full magical education to make things. If you want, I can teach you a few things that may help you with your medical work. For a lot of brews, it is merely having extensive herbology training. Some very advanced things may require astronomy training, but still entirely possible for a non magical such as yourself.”

By this time, twin bowls brimming with soup were placed in front of their shared chair. Tiberius reluctantly released Julian to his own seat.

Mazelinka sat, then sighed, moving to get back up. Tiberius shooed her back into her chair, rising himself.

“What can I get you?”

She faced Julian. “Look at this nice young man! So kind and helpful, helping this old, frail woman! You can learn a thing or two!” She shook her finger in disapproval.

“And we both know you are neither old or frail! And, if I did insist on trying to help you, I would have gotten even more swat’s from that damned spoon!”
Mazelinka snorted. “Hmph.” She turned to Tiberius. “In the cupboard to the right of my kiln, there should be a basket of bread and rolls. Be a dear and bring it over. There’s also some freshly churned butter in a covered jar.”

Tiberius did as told, setting them down in the tables center. He went to uncap the butter bowl, spotting the stasis rune carved in the lids underside. He gave a nod in approval at the neat etching.

“So,” began Julian, buttering a wheat roll. “What do you mean by my being able to brew?”

“There's more than just that that you can do, and not all 'magical' things can only be done by a magician. You've probably had some extensive chemistry training, and a few potions, tonics, and draughts are simply a form of that. We're just working with the original source that houses the chemicals, and not just the raw extracts.

You can also do some pretty complicated rune work and rituals. Quite a bit of that actually relies on the ambient magic in the area. You would only need to worry about having a magical on hand if you need a truly obnoxious amount of energy.

On top of that, some of those things can be augmented by the sun, moon, and stars. If done right, you can actually make a rune circle and imbue some of your tools with cleansing properties if done during certain times of the day. High noon would be best, now that I think of it…”

Tiberius drifted off, muttering under his breath. It was low enough that Julian had to strain to hear, and even then he only caught snatches here and there.

Julian let this go on for a few minutes, finding it quite cute.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. Tiberius snapped himself out of his rambling stupor.

“Course, you can also gain Patronage. Just...be careful on who you choose.”

Mazelinka snorted. “Be very, VERY careful on that. Years ago, I met a girl who went that route. She didn't do as extensive research as she should have. When a part of her bargain came up that she objected to, she tried to forfeit.” She lifted her bowl, sipping at the remaining broth.

“...what happened to her?” Julian was leaning in intently. It's not often that he gets a ‘front row lesson’ to some of the more obscure aspects of High Magic.

“She had contracted with Baali.”

Before she could continue, Tiberius started choking. Julian started slapping his back in alarm, concerned at the dark red traveling over his face. Mazelinka hurried off for a glass of water, shoving it into his hands. After several, long minutes, Tiberius’s fit passed. After a few more chest clearing coughs and fortifying sips, he waved them off.

“That is a mildly concerning reaction. I take it this ‘Baali’ is not one to be crossed?”

Mazelinka snorted. “Not in the slightest.” Tiberius turned to face Julian fully. “His followers are called ‘Infernalist’ for a reason! Other Patron Deities can be bargained with, when it comes to exiting their service. The price is steep, but not entirely undoable. Not so with the Infernal Father. A bargain made is a bargain struck. No take backs. His followers commit some of the most atrocious acts one can, all in their exaltation of Him.” He sat back, shivering. “Most likely, the woman who broke promise will spend all of eternity…’servicing’, willing or otherwise, his armies.”
Julian shook in revulsion. “Who would dare make such a pact with one like that?” Just imagining what he would be required to give in exchange for power made his skin crawl.

“People who either have nothing, or everything to lose...or who crave power without any personal sacrifice. The thing is”, Mazelinka stated, “is that there is ALWAYS a price. He just takes His time collecting. Often times, many of the literal sacrifices are just to keep the connection open. The actual payment to cement the contract can take place anywhere, anytime.”

They were quiet for a moment, before Julian looked at Tiberius, stare hard.

“What?”

“Who’s mark is on your back?” If he trucked with something as bad as Baali…

“Oh that? I'm an Initiate of Hedonism.”

With the nonchalant way he stated it, it didn't sound too bad.

“Pull the other one: it's got bells on it.”

Tiberius muttered under his breath, “I’ll put a bell on you..” before grunting. “Hedonism is a literal Force of Nature, but he isn't going to make me eat babies or anything. Ass maybe, but not babies.”

“Ty!”

Mazelinka started cackling at Julian's mortified face, not realizing that his fierce blush was from what happened earlier in the week. He slapped both hands over his face.

“Just saying babe, give me some cherry syrup and I’ll go to town. Gladly.” He wiggled his brows, grinning like a dirty old man.

“Not at the dinner table, Ty…” Julian moaned. He hunched over in his chair, elbows to knees.

“So, Mister Tiberius,” Mazelinka began, a lecherous smile on her lips. “Just how long is that tongue?”

Julian made a sound akin to a dying whale, hunching over more. He ended up rolling off his chair, curling up into a ball on the floor. “Maze, please don't. I don't need to hear my grandmother-figure talk about sex with my-”

“I'm just saying, young man, that I was a young, healthy woman once! And, I had my fair share of rolls in the hay. Kids these days…”

Tiberius propped his chin on his knuckles, a filthy grin on his face. He smiled open and wide, dropping out his tongue.

Mazelinka whistled. “Damn boy, no wonder Ilya loves you.”

“MAZE!”

***

They made quick work of the rest of dinner. Taking pity on Julian, they refrained from more talk
of his and Tiberius’s sex life.

Tiberius shooed Julian away, pushing him towards the bathroom. True to his word, Julian had indeed started feeling groggy after his soup.

As Julian tidied himself up, Mazelinka and Tiberius started straightening up the kitchen. Between the two of them, what little leftovers were packed up and stored in the cold chest.

Multiple times, Mazelinka tried to shoo Tiberius out of the kitchen, only to be rebuffed.

“Boy, you are a guest in my house! And guest’s don't clean up!”

She got a loud snort in reply. “And if my mother were still alive (may she frolic in Rapture for all Eternity), she would tan my hide! Guest or not, I clean up after myself.”

She picked up a kitchen towel, smacking him on the bicep. “And she failed in teaching you to listen to your elders! Stupid male…”

“Cantankerous female-”

“Impudent child.”

Julian popped his head in. “Old hag?”

“ILYUSHKA! You are not too old to be turned over my knee!”

“You’d have to catch me first! And I’m quite the slippery man!”

“You just watch yourself, boy…”

“Watch what? My ankles?”

Mazelinka growled. Tiberius kind of agreed with Julian on this one. Her small stature and the growling put him in kind of an angry, yappy dog.

She grumbled under her breath, before turning and smacking Tiberius on his arm again. “Go on now, git. Clean yourself up. I'm not so old I can't wash a few dishes.” She gave a startled shriek: Julian had crept up behind her and picked her up. After setting her to the side, he snatched the towel and started washing the dishes.

Tiberius took this time to escape to the bathroom, seeking shelter from the storm. He shut the door before they started their bickering again.

The door was quite thick, and the running water of the sink muffled their verbal kerfuffle even more. As he was trying to finger comb his hair, there was a light rapping on the door.

“It's me. I have some night clothes for you.” Julian's arm curled around the door, soft clothes in hand. A nightshirt and simple sleep pants. He was either lending his own, or they were spares Mazelinka had.

“Thanks.” Before the door could close completely, Tiberius caught it. Leaning out, he dropped a quick peck to the tip of Julians nose with a smile.

He finished changing, cursing the fact he didn't have a brush. He left his hair unbound for the moment, needing to try 'brushing' it a bit more before braiding it for bed. He exited, seeing Mazelinka pulling up a trapdoor in the kitchen. She stopped, seeing his confused face.
“I've got a cozy little setup down here. I figure, let you long boys have the bed up here. It's no trouble for me to get into the hammock.”

“Ma’am, I am NOT kicking you out of your bed.”

She flapped her hand at him. “Oh hush! There’s nowhere else to put you two that won't wreck your back. Besides, it feels quite nice for these old bones.”

A loud snort was heard from what could only be her bedroom.

“Don't make me come over there.”

Another snort.

“I'll bring the spoon.”

Quiet.

“That's what I thought. As for you”, she rounded on Tiberius, “get in there and give my boy sweet dreams.” Indignant squawking.

“With pleasure, ma’am.”

***

Tiberius entered the bedroom, the soft light of a single candle giving off a warm glow. Julian was already curled up on the bed, bleary eyed.

As Ty sat, his back to Julian, he could feel a long fingered hand brush thru the ends of his hair. He gave out a low hum, enjoying the sensation of the gentle tugs. He separated out a section of hair, running stiff fingers thru the tangled curls. Ty knew that without an actual comb, nothing much would improve, but it was better than nothing.

Luckily for him, the issues were mostly near the bottom. Unfortunately, much of his hair was still damp from his earlier dip in the river. He would need to leave his hair unbound for it to dry properly.

He turned, laying down on his right side, waterfalling his hair down his back into a pile on the floor. Julian laid curled up on his left, fighting and losing horribly the battle against sleep. It put Tiberius to mind of a sleepy kitten, trying to stay awake. His eye kept fluttering, head jerking as he 'woke' back up. With a smile, Ty dropped a sweet kiss onto sweeter lips, curling his arm around a thin waist.

“Get some sleep, Jules. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Some shuffling and murmering met his statement, with Julian ducking his head under his chin. A bit more shuffling, and Julian buried his nose in the neck below him.

“Don’ wanna wake….’s nice dream…”

***

Tiberius jerked, something having woken him. After a few moments, he realised it was Julian.
Still asleep, his twitches and shuffling had turned from the movements of natural, deep rest to something more disturbing. After a few twists and turns, he let out a pitiful whine.

Tiberius started running a hand through disturbed locks, cooing quietly. No wonder Julian always looked a bit sleepy; poor boy isn't getting a good night's rest.

After a few moments he seemed to calm, before letting out a heartbreaking cry.

Tiberius shifted onto his back, gently tugging Julian to lay on top of his chest. After a bit of shifting, he laid Julian's head over his heart. This seemed to soothe the other. His snuffles petered off, nuzzling into the deep chest he rested on.

However, instead of falling back into deep sleep, he roused more. He slowly lifted his head, blinking confusedly. Slowly, his eye focused on Tiberius.

“Did I wake you?”

The soft, sad murmur tugged at Tiberius’s heartstrings. He didn't want to make Julian feel even worse, but he also didn't want to lie…

“Yeah, you elbow something fierce.” He rubbed his ribs, putting his acting skills to the test. “I kind of deserve it, teasing you earlier.”

Julian pinked. “Ah, sorry. I'm not used to sharing a bed…”

Tiberius’s heart clenched. How no one could want to share a bed with this absolute gem of a human being was so...sad. Waking up every day next to such a kind, caring, and genuine man would be a treat.

If he plays his cards right, Ty might be able to make that a reality.

“Their loss.”

“Hmm?” Julian scooted up a bit, laying his head on Ty’s shoulder. He curled an arm over a thick chest, and entangled his free leg with the others.

“Just saying, those who don't want to wake up next to you are missing out. Then again, not everyone is ready to savour simple pleasures such as that.” Tiberius dropped a gentle kiss on messy locks. He smiled when he felt a warm face get buried in his shoulder.

“Mgdghrjlhd…”

Ty snickered. “Luv, I don't understand mumble.” He hooked a finger under Julian’s chin, bringing up a glowing face to drop soft kisses. After the first few, Julian started to kiss back. Eventually, Tiberius’s kisses traveled across the lips below his, migrating to a smooth jaw. He skinned below the apex of that gentle curve, leaving a breadcrumb trail of warmth down a graceful neck. Once he met the adam's apple, he showered it in affection.

Julian was breathing hard. He started trembling faintly, the mouth upon him making him weak. He turned more onto his side, running his hand up a firm jaw and cheeks to tangle in sable curls. He arched his neck, giving more room to the wicked instruments set upon his person.

Tiberius took advantage, kissing and gently sucking down to the soft dip between fluted collarbones. As he laved at it, a quivering sigh was his reward. Wanting to hear more of that sacred sound, the hand on his resting side moved up, fingers dancing as they buried themselves in spun
amber. His other hand appeared on heaving ribs, before floating down to restless hips. Once alighting, it rubbed slowly but firmly on flexing muscle.

Julian was a gasping mess, not used to such gentle touch. Pain he was used to: it flowed thru his veins like the best drug. At one point, he did...horrible things to himself to chase that high. He *let* people do horrible things to him. He’s not proud to admit it, but he allowed *that* person to treat him in unimaginable ways, both mentally, physically, and emotionally, to feed his addiction.

(That time he spent with pirates helped him immeasurably. He would probably be dead without them.)

His hand flew up, muffling the choked-off moan he released as Tiberius tugged their hips together. He threw his leg over a scrolled hip, grinding as he did so. The hand gripping his thigh flew up to his backside, helping in his motions. On a particularly hard roll, he let out a quiet ‘ah!’.

Tiberius slowly trailed down a firm chest, his tongue coming out to play when he reached a flexing stomach. He returned to a mewling mouth when a weak ‘kiss me’ was offered. He wouldn't dare leave the other wanting.

Julian panted into the mouth meeting his. He gasped as a hot tongue slid inside. Firm lips closed on him, muting any sounds he made. His hips twitched as Tiberius took his time exploring, deeply and leisurely. As Ty withdrew, Julian gasped for breath. He let out a low groan as his lower lip was caught between hard teeth.

Tiberius was in heaven. His *delightful* partner was so, endearingly responsive to simple, fleeting touches.

(It angered a dark, deep part of him that his boy was never spoiled of such touch. He considers it his *duty* to rectify that, starting now.)

He rolled, caging a beautiful mess between his arms. He dove back to swollen lips with great gusto, tongue licking flame. His hips settled between firm thighs, undulating and rubbing himself against firm cheeks. A low, rolling growl escaped him as blunt nails buried themselves in his back. He slid down, being sure to drag himself against a sensitive front. He came to a stop at a quivering belly, dipping his tongue into a tantalizing navel.

Julian covered his mouth with both hands. He arched his back, trying to get more of that sinful tongue. He jerked slightly, as that slick muscle followed behind his now-descending waistband. His breath hitched at the playful nips left on the skin of his groin.

Tiberius guided shaking thighs over his shoulders, the sleep pants being stripped of them. He spent long moments planting heated, open-mouthed kisses everywhere *but* where Julian wanted. His teeth were nipping a hip ridge when he heard it:

“Please…”

He looked up, wanting to see the face that made that plea. He was not disappointed.

Sweet Julian was red, from his face to his chest. One hand was thrown back, long fingers twisted beside his head in the pillowcase. The other one was fisted, his teeth buried in his knuckles. His face was screwed up in pleasure, breathing hard and deep. The way his ribs were constantly flexing was doing *wonders* to show off his physique.

The way his hips were moving, twitching, was beautiful. He wanted touch so badly, his body
was voicing the wants that he was too embarrassed to speak.

Tiberius planted his lips in a kiss, giving a slight suck to the leaking head of the cock below him. Thighs snapped tight around his ears, and he could feel Julians hands join together to muffle his shout. He drew back, licking his lips.

Julian was fucking delicious.

Bitter and sweet, and a bit of salt. Ty has sucked enough dick and eaten enough pussy to not believe the lies that those lusty fluids taste like anything dessert-esque. True, some things like spices and tropical fruit can add flavour, but if anyone claims they taste like cotton candy, they are naught but messengers of deceit.

(The taste on his tongue reminded him of ocean waves: full and rolling, with a salty spray. Warm.)

He startled a loud, trembling gasp from his midnight snack when he deepthroated, no warning given. It took more willpower than he would care to admit, to not go as hard and fast as he could to get his victim off. He swallowed a few times, loving the twitching bucks he caused.

Julian buried a hand in the hair between his legs, fingers scrabbling against the head bobbing there. He bit the meat of his palm, trying desperately to not make a sound.

(He would never live it down if their antics woke Mazelinka. He would hear it until he was sixty.)

His legs shook at each pass up and down his cock. Ty (the utter monster) was alternating between sucking hard as he slowly went up or down, his bedeviling tongue sandwiching the dick in his mouth against a hard upper palate. At random, he would swallow when his nose met skin.

Tiberius released, pulling back. A small line of saliva had escaped a corner of his mouth, his tongue racing to catch it. He attached his lips to the thick vein running down the underside of Julian’s cock, sucking it hard as he went down the shaft. As his mouth met the root, he nipped, leaving a red mark. He received a hard jerk and a drowned cry for his effort.

With a heavy heart, Tiberius knew he would have to end his torture soon. Any longer and he would not be able to resist mounting such a delectable morsel.

(His precious boy needs sleep, not more dick. He will get his ‘sweet dreams’.)

Taking a deep breath, Tiberius deepthroated one last time. As he bottomed out, he started swallowing repeatedly. Each successive gulp pulled a hard jerk of the hips, slowly getting more and more pronounced. Soon, Tiberius was having to press his hands down on those hips, to keep from gagging.

Soon, Julian had both hands buried in thick hair, trying so hard to not buck. He bit his lip, a small drop of blood escaping from a shallow cut. He was breathing hard, doing everything he could to be quiet.

After a few hard swallows in rapid succession, Julians back bowed as his hands pressed down hard on the head between his legs. His jaw dropped in a silent scream, inhaling long and hard. It took everything he had not to make a sound. His hips jerked as he shot off, quickly moving into overstimulated territory as a wicked tongue moved up and down. He choked-off a groan from between clenched teeth as Tiberius rose, lips sucking hard up the entire way.
Tiberius disconnected with a wet sound, his mouth full. He swallowed his treat as he observed a trembling Julian, feeling a deep satisfaction as lethargy traveled over his face.

With a job well done, Tiberius shifted long legs down from his shoulders to the bed proper. He leaned up, rearranging a drifting doctor to be more comfortable, gently pushing a hand away. He smirked at the incoherent babbling he received as a result.

It was sweet, Julian wanting to return the favor, but also completely unnecessary. His boy needs good, quality sleep more than Ty needs to get off.

He settled in for some quality snuggling, heart melting a bit as Julian turned into his side, burrowing into the warmth provided.

###

It was to bright sunlight and loud cawing that Julian awoke. Disoriented, he shook his head, wondering just why he felt so...satiated? He wasn't used to feeling so satisfied. Like a cat wallowing in a sunbeam, belly full and well rested.

(Julian is not familiar with being well rested, it being so long since he had been.)

He would be quite happy to lay in bed all day, if not for the fact that the sources of the cawing had hopped thru the open window.

A crow perched, head cocked to the side. It let out a raspy ‘caw’ as it hopped to the end of the sill. After a few more twists of its head, it jumped down onto the pillows, walking awkwardly to Julian's head. Once there, it started preening his hair, making the occasional grumble.

“Good morning, Malak.” He scritched the crow’s head, smiling softly as it let out a deep ‘wab'. He smiled more as lids crinkled over beady eyes, beak clacking.

After a few more minutes and ‘wab's, Julian sat up, ignoring the offended ‘wark!’ he got at the motion. He swung his legs over the bed, planting bare feet on the cool wood. He yawned, stretching as he did so. He felt deep satisfaction as he felt and heard snaps, joints in his back resettling.

He stared off a bit into the middle distance. The flutter of wings and the pinpricks of talons gripping his shoulder went unnoticed as he ‘woke up’.

A dressed Tiberius opened the door, greeted to the sight of a fuzzy, sleepy Julian, with a large crow on his shoulder trying its best to fix his hair.

“I'm afraid that not enough preening in the world will fix the mess of his hair. You may need to wait for him to use a proper brush.”

If a crow could look offended, this one nailed it. It gave out a loud ‘CAW’ of objection, the sound startling Julian from his state.

“Malak!” He closed his fingers around the crows beak gently. “What have I told you about squawking in my ears, hmmm?” A quiet ‘arb' was all he got in response.

“A friend of yours, I take it?”

“Mmmrp.”
A newly woke Julian was a discombobulated Julian. Tiberius noted this, looking forward to using it against his Jules in the future.

“Freshen up. I’m cooking breakfast, and Mazelinka’s still asleep. If we’re quick, I can have everything done before she wakes and snarks at us.”

While burrowing back into a warm, soft bed would be nice, food was nicer. As Tiberius turned back to the kitchen, Julian yawned one last time before heaving himself up. As he walked to the bathroom, Malak flew from his shoulder, alighting on the back of a kitchen chair with a softer ‘caw’.

Julian returned to the kitchen, washed and dressed for the day. His eye bulged when he saw the amount of food on display.

Tiberius had to have visited town, there was no other explanation. He had a few bowls of chopped and peeled fruit, and a plate of sliced cucumber and tomato. On the stove was a large skillet, the sound of some sort of meat sizzling away. To the right on the counter were some sort of fried cakes, too thick and small to be a traditional pancake. On the back of the stove was a slim, tall pot; a rich scent wafting from it.

Tiberius shuffled a few things in the skillet around. Satisfied, he walked over to the cold chest. He pulled out a small glass jar of cream, a whisk in hand. He added powdered sugar, beating them together into whipped cream.

He moved what he had already prepared to the table, a large plate of fried breakfast steaks joining. He turned back to the skillet, adding onion and diced potatoes to the juices left in it. After a few stirs, he added a dash of salt and pepper before he covered it, letting time and heat do their work.

“Hey dollface? Can you do me a favour and pull the trays in the kiln out? The loaves and rolls should be done.”

‘Loaves and rolls’ was a bit of an understatement. He had a dozen plain wheat rolls, two loaves of bread (one rye, the other pumpernickel), and some galets. The sweet, fruity scent told Julian there were a few apple, blueberry, and strawberry(?) galets, the dough folded gracefully into a rim.

“Why did you make so much food? There is no way we can eat all of this?”

“Luv, did you forget how much I ate at Lucille’s?”

Julian snorted. “Still, this is a lot of food.”

“I wanted to make sure there would be leftovers for a few days. That way, Mazelinka doesn’t have to worry.”

As he was saying this, rustling from below could be heard. A few heavy steps, and some shifting metal followed. The trapdoor rose, revealing a disheveled Mazelinka. As she climbed the last few steps, Tiberius put a plate of beef scraps and fruits on a window sill. Malak fluttered over, examining the offering. After giving a loud ‘CAW’, he dove in.

Mazelinka was stood in the middle of her kitchen, looking at the amount of food with amazement. Her eyes panned, going from stove to table, table to cold chest and back again.

“...I don’t recall having this much food.”

Ty flipped the potatoes, stirring in a few tablespoons of reserved beef drippings. “You didn’t.”
“Where did this all come from?”

“I woke early, starving. Hadn't eaten anything too filling the last few days, and Hedonism wanted Tribute. Popped back into town and did some shopping.” He failed to mention that he fully stocked her pantry and cold chest as well, redoing or adding to her various stasis runes to ensure she wouldn’t have to worry about food for a good long time.

Julian was looking over everything again. The steaks were of a quality cut, thick with rich marbling. The fruits and veggies were also large as well, incredibly ripe and juicy. And if his suspicions were correct, on the back of the stove was a coffee pot, one used to boil the whole beans in the traditional Iriq method.

From what he remembers, Maze doesn't have one of those pots. Hell, Julian doesn't have one, and he loves coffee. It's just too expensive, and while he isn't hurting for money (being a Doctor brought him in quite the tidy sum), making coffee in house was very expensive. It was much more practical to have a few cups a week in a coffee house.

Tiberius plated the fried potatoes, bringing them to the table. They all sat, looking at the large spread. Tiberius was already loading his plate, an extra thick steak taking up nearly half the plate.

“Dig in! I didn't spend all this time cooking just so we can look at it.”

The other two startled, before going in. By this time, Tiberius had a full plate. A large steak covered in pan gravy, a large serving of the fried potatoes, and a few slices each of cucumber and tomato. On a smaller plate was a large spoonful of the diced fruit, a heaping dollop of the fresh whipped cream on top. Sharing the same plate was a few of those cakes, cream on top as well.

“What are those?” Julian pointed his fork at the fried cakes. They smelled both savory and sugary, the outside having a golden crust. They looked firm but springy.

“Sërniki. Essentially a fried cottage cheese cake. Use equal parts cheese, flour, and sugar to start. No need to add milk or anything, because you use the cheese whey as the binder. Just fry them up in some butter, and smother them in the topping of your choice. I’ve found that whipped cream or maple syrups work best.”

Mazelinka stacked three of the cakes on her plate, nearly losing one in her haste. She piled the fruit and cream on top before cutting into them, a happy sound escaping her.

“It’s been so long since I’ve had these...not since I was last in Mokba. These are excellent to have in the cold, especially during the Winter Solstice at the Midnight Market.”

“Glad they meet your approval.” Tiberius was on to his second plate. Another steak, with a steaming roll split open. More potatoes were added. On his other plate, an apple galet was split into fourths. The thick sauce and filling were slowly oozing, the scent of cinnamon filling the room.

Julian had just finished his first plate, contemplating what he wanted next. He picked up a Sërniki, smearing cream on it. As he took a bite, it truly was what Tiberius said: cottage cheese, flour, and sugar. It was dense, but not hard to bite thru. As he chewed, it didn't stick to his teeth (like some particularly dense goods could) and was easy to swallow. The taste lent itself to both sweet and salty, and left no weird aftertaste. It also didn't sit heavy.

He approved.

As he went back for seconds, Tiberius felt a well of satisfaction burn in his belly.
“So,” Mazelinka started. She was slicing her steak, stuffing it into a roll along with some potatoes and gravy. “This is quite the quality spread. Must have cost a pretty penny.”

Tiberius hummed.

“And, this bread is fresh. No running off to get something pre-made or baked.”

Tiberius hummed again, going for a third steak.

“Makes a woman wonder, just how you can afford all of this. Your quite the big guy, and Hedonism does not settle for any mere meal. This would rack up your expenses quite a bit.”

Julian sighed, setting aside his fork in exasperation. “Really, Maze? Must you do this?”

“I just want to make sure my boy will be taken care of.”

*groan*

“Yes, we already know he can make you do that.”

A stuttered ‘Maze!’ met her answer.

“While I am a Magician’s Apprentice, I am also a Journeyman Sorcerer. No disrespect to Asra, but my caste handles a lot more dangerous stuff over his.”

Tiberius sat back, looking at the galets, before shaking his head. “That's not to say that he doesn't face danger as well, but being a Sorcerer is inherently more so. In the last year, I’ve had to commune with two Greater Demons, and over a dozen Lesser. Last summer, some dumbass was playing around with Gates, leaving one open. Lucky for us, all that popped out was a Common Incubus. A few words, some raunchy dick jokes, and he went back to Rapture.”

Tiberius stood, strolling to the stove and checking the coffee. With a decisive nod, he removed the pot from the stove, pouring the contents thru a strainer placed over a wide-mouthed carafe. The strainer had a few small lumps of raw sugar, which melted quickly under the onslaught.

“That reminds me, I need to contact Abraxas. See if he can check on Ma for me.” He returned to the table, carafe and mugs in hand.

Julian was fixing his coffee. “Isn’t your Ma...passed?”

“Hm?” Tiberius looked up, scooping a spoonful of whipped cream into his coffee. Julian looked offended, whipped cream had no right to be mixed into coffee!

“You mentioned that your Ma had died. How can she be checked on? Unless you mean her burial site?”

Ty blinked for a few moments, before catching on. “Ah! Yes I can see why you would be confused! She had died, but on the mortal plane, she was the High Priestess of Hedonism. He rewards his Followers and Children with eternal life in Rapture, His Plane located outside of Mortalis.”

Mazelinka was sitting, sipping her coffee. “I've met some of his followers. There's a whole Clan, isn't there?”

“E-yup. House Principia. One of the Thirteen Clans, born of the Union of Hedonism and the
“This sounds more of myth than reality, no offense.” Julian wrinkled his nose. Tiberius thought it was adorable.

“Ehhh, it kind of teeters between the two. Basically, an Umbrian woman set out a bargain: whoever kills the people who raised her village, killed her family, and raped her, would have her as a wife. This was open to any who could fulfill it.

Many tried, only to fail. It was only when a being came to her, a bag full of the heads of all who wronged her did she settle. Over the years before her conditions were satisfied, many called her unrealistic. She would never get another man if she didn’t temper her expectations. Several elders tried to sell her off, for she was still young and talented in homesteading and magic.

Lucky for her, and unlucky for them, they were right: she would never get another man. Instead, she got a daemon.”

Tiberius sipped his drink, smirking at Julian’s disgusted frown.

“The Lord and Father of Incubi, the Deflowerer of Daughters and Personification of Life, met and exceeded her expectations. They wed, and she bore him thirteen children: twelve daughters and one son.

House Principia came from that son.”

***

After story time, talk turned to lighter fare. Julian snarked about Ty’s coffee, threatening to never kiss him again for putting such a vile concoction in his mouth. Mazelinka called him on his bullshit, and Julian got smooched anyways.

Both forced Tiberius to stay seated, stating that since he cooked, they’ll clean.

He got a front-row seat to some quality entertainment. Twice Mazelinka tried to bat Julian away from the sink, attempting to take over dishwashing duties. She also tried to push him away from the stove, also attempting to take over food storage duties.

Basically, she tried to take over everything, while simultaneously complaining that she ‘has to do everything around here.’

“Except for you, Ty. You’re a model guest.”

Behind her, Julian stood, mocking/mimicking her words and gesture. Without looking, she tossed her spoon behind her, beaning him on the head. She smirked at the yelp she got.

As Julian rubbed his head, she picked up several covered dishes, turning to put them in the cold chest. As it opened, she froze.

“Maze? Are you okay?”

Julian looked over her shoulder, thinking something may have spilled or gotten in. What he WAS NOT expecting was a overstocked chest. Somewhat suspicious, he walked to the pantry. Opening the door, his thoughts were confirmed: fully loaded.
While Mazelinka didn't hurt for money, to simultaneously fully fill both food storage spots to overflowing would be very expensive.

They looked at Tiberius, who sat sipping his coffee and looking at a newspaper. Nothing new to report, except for a body found floating in the Flooded Quarter.

“Ty…”

“Yes, m’luv?”

“Where did all this food come from?”

“The market.”

“We know that. How did it get here?”

*Sssllluuurrrpppp* “I put it there.”

*Sigh* “And why did you put it there?”

“Because I bought it? And you put the food you buy into cold chests and pantry’s.”

Mazelinka huffed, cutting to the chase of Julian’s (bad) interrogation.

“Listen here, you little shit,” she brandished a spatula at a smirking Tiberius, “I don't need charity-”

“Because your a strong independent woman who don't need a man?”

Tiberius was doomed. Julian already started praying for his poor, unfortunate soul.

“And before you try it, my good woman, I can run faster scared than you angry. My uncle can confirm this, to his great dismay.”

Mazelinka hissed like a teakettle, deflating. She dropped her spatula wielding arm, sighing as she did so. “I can see that like Ilya, your stubborn.”

“An astute observation.”

She propped her fist on ample hips, frowning at him. “So, why?”

Julian was wondering the same. That was a lot of money Ty dropped on food just for funsies.

“A few reasons, one being that I literally would have eaten you out of your home. Another being I like cooking. A third being that I just, really, really like being a provider.”

“Oh great gods, Ty…”

“What?...oh Julian, you nasty! Not like that, you strumpet! I just like seeing others well fed and worry free when it comes to money!”

Mazelinka coughed into a fist, it sounding suspiciously something like ‘sugar daddy’.

“I come into ya home, cook’s ya food, and ya kinkshame me! Fine, I see how it is, you, you...harlot!”
Mazelinka snickered, schlepping away to her pantry. Julian joined a chortling Ty back at the table.

Tiberius has a nice smile, he thought dazedly. He leaned in, planting a chaste kiss to flexing cheekbones. He dodged the return kiss, knowing Ty had just chugged the last of his disgusting coffee.

“Thank you for caring about Mazelinka…”

“She’s a doll. How could I not?”

“Mmmm…” Julian rested his temple on Tiberius’s shoulder. “But, how much did something like this cost you?”

“If your worried I’ll run out of money, don’t. Sorcerers make quite a bit. I also got some really good discounts from several vendors, Asra and I being held in high esteem. I also have a few side projects, and being a healthy young man, I get a **sizeable** stipend from House Principia for the purpose of…‘procreation’.”

“…they pay you to get laid?”

“Wellllll, when you put it like thaaaat…”

“The Umbrian Empire has a very low birth rate of males. In efforts to stabilize the population and make them less dependent on ‘foreign bodies’” Mazelinka snorted from the pantry, “they have a very comprehensive Office of Genealogic Affairs that tracks everyone’s lineage. You can’t have a kid with another Umbra without it being cleared by them.” She walked back into the kitchen, flour coating her front. She dusted her hands off.

“But, an Umbra and a non-Umbra union doesn’t have to worry about that’, Ty continued. “Throw House politics in the mix, and I’m a fucking catch. Several Great Houses would kill for me!” He winked.

Julian looked pensive; if he and Tiberius were to try and continue this relationship…

…it would be better to nip this in the bud.

Chapter End Notes

And here we can see a prime example of Julian being a dumbass and not communicating his troubles and fears.
Things are heating up underneath Vesuvia, and Date Night is cancelled.

Y’all are gonna fucking hate me.

“Fuckin’ Necromancers. ‘Hey, what’s a good place to set up shop? The merchant district?’ ‘Nah man. We’re Necromancers. We should be in, like, a Necropolis.’ Fucking dramatic, vampire wanna-be’s. Get your liver pecked out by vultures Tubor, you second-hand slut.” Tiberius grumbled as he schlep thru ankle-deep stagnant water.

He had (reluctantly) parted company with Julian and Mazelinka a few hours previous. Remembering to do a ‘Wellness Check’ for a few of the magic guilds, he stopped at Lucille’s to get a current list of who and where still needed to be seen. Poor old Enry nearly fainted, thinking Ty was going to ask him to check the groups himself. Once learning that he was getting helped instead, the spry old geezer threw his logbook at Ty, bouncing in glee. After taking an hour or so to look over it, Ty pulled a list of the ones that still needed to be seen, or who’s status is completely unknown.

He returned to the shop briefly, looking to replace his missing knives and get some proper clothes. As he exited, a courier came up, a few letters in hand. One from the Countess, wanting to know where the fuck he went; One from his brothers, looking to visit; and one from the local Citadel Head, requesting a meeting.

As far as he was concerned, the Countess could go fuck herself. There is not enough money in all of Vesuvia that would make him step inside that Cursed Building willingly again.

The letter from his brothers took him short, though. Ever since Ma passed, Tybalt and Belial were staying with Uncle, Germanius. With everything going on currently in Vesuvia, he would try to push their visit off. But reading between the lines…

The visit with Chapter head Martel needs to be addressed soon. Like within the next few days. When Martel wants to meet, you meet. This may be related to the goings on with Marchessa and her group.

(He’ll need to request housing assistance from the Guild. If he read Tybalt’s letter right, Serenissima may no longer be safe.)

He popped back into the shop, penning a reply to two of the letters. The one for Martel set up a meeting for the day after tomorrow, explaining his current task of doing a headcount. For the
Countess, he requested a face-to-face away from the Palace.

He left the one from his family to the side, needing more time to give an answer. Once done, he’ll send it by hawk, not trusting it to get delivered on time if shit goes down. After paying the courier for a new delivery, he made his way to the Outer Ring of Vesuvia.

This area was largely abandoned. It was the final section of Vesuvia proper you got to, before the wall separating the city from the outside. At one point it had been fully inhabited, but cities grow and change, with many of the residents moving further in after The Great Rebuilding spearheaded by Count Ferrous about 200 years ago. Now, flora had largely reclaimed the area, with a few stone and brick walls still standing.

Part of the Outer Ring, in the northwest, became the Main Necropolis shortly after The Rebuilding. It quickly filled up, however, at the height of the Red Plague. From what he remembers, it hadn't even been called that yet, most thinking it was Drakarian Hemorrhagic Fever.

Ty shook his head, walking further up what was the Main Boulevard. About 5 years ago, the new Master Necromancer decided to set up the guild’s new digs (hehe) in the Necropolis for shits and giggles. Tubor may be an butt-munch, but he has a sense of humor. The previous Master was a crank, Lobellia if he remembers. Old bat knew her craft but damn was she sanctimonious!

He continued walking, looking for the Mark. It wasn't a mark, but a Mark. Something that can only be seen by other magical's or those who actually needed necromantic services. If he can just find it... There! Some ivy had climbed over it, but there was no mistaking it. Ty always laughs when he sees it. Whoever designed the sigil was trying way too hard.

(The person who decided that ‘Hey! Let's use an in-profile boar skull with dead roses underneath!’ to be their symbol probably also tried to impress girls with their shitty poetry.)

Turning left, he walked up to the third mausoleum. Inside, he pulled the handle of the forth casket over, second down. The wall opened on a hinge, the sound of stone grinding on stone making Ty’s ears tickle. He walked down a spiral staircase, torches of blue flame ignited every 6 feet. Distantly, he could hear rushing water.

At the bottom of the stairs, he followed the hall straight, not taking any turns. At the end T-junction, he went left. He continued walking, ignoring the guard skeletons that occasionally popped up. He took a right midway down, going into a short alcove. Inside was a boarded up well, the water sound being louder than ever. Lifting the top showed a simple ladder. Skittering down, his feet hit water-covered stone.

He summoned a ball of Magelight, the golden glow chasing away shadows. He was now in the Old Aqueduct, the original system from when Vesuvia was first built. The water originated from the Frostback Mountains as snow runoff. Now, it just runs thru Vesuvia, no longer being used. Instead, the New Aqueduct brings in water from Lake Ero, along with all of the problems it has. Readjusting his pack, Tiberius gave another look around before settling in for a looooong walk.

The Necromancers Guild, while entered thru the Necropolis, is actually located in an old overflow cistern. He’ll need to go down a few levels to actually meet one face to face, the guard skeletons above usually being an intermediary.

He sighed. At least he didn't wear anything that he would miss.

***
He was tromping thru the final level, cursing a blue streak. He HATES this area! This is where some of the old sewer-works meets the Old Aqueduct, carrying away waste. While that too has been replaced, 200 years is **not** enough time for the smell to dissipate. What's worse, a section sealing off the old and new sewers may be failing. The stench is **ungodly**!

Tiberius has never been as happy to see a moldering iron and wood door as he is now. Fairly skipping, he wrenched it open, breathing deeply sweet, fresh air.

“Get the fuck outta here, Ty.”

“Righty-o. Tell Tubor he needs to suck a dick, and I’ll see you corpse fuckers next month.” He let the door slam shut, turning to look for the shortcut out. Before he could take more than a few steps, the door was flung open, slamming into the wall. Standing in the doorway, back-lit by the cisterns light was Tubor himself.

He was fairly young, being only a few years shy of forty. Shorter than Tiberius (but then again, so are most people), he had a slim build. Long straight black hair framed a pale face, dark eyed and one that had features that would make most women envious. Clad in the robes of a Master Necromancer, Tubor cut a striking figure. Multiple times Tiberius debated trying Tubor on for size, but can never remember why he never followed through...

“Get in here, meat sack. We have work to do.”

...aaaaaannnnd there is his reminder. Tubor was a ass.

***

Tiberius left the meeting with a lot on his mind, most of it not good. After settling in at the in-guild pub, Deadman’s Respite, Tubor and his lieutenants Raul and Grell gave him the lowdown.

Turns out, a few of the Independents and small Guild outfits were either turning up dead, or leaving Vesuvia. The few corpses that the Necromancers could get their hands on yielded little information. Things like tongues and hands missing, or the body being in such decayed and destroyed condition that a raising just couldn't be properly done. A few of the Initiates tried to commune with the spirits over the Wall, but were met with only screaming.

Something has been offing magical's, and doing so quickly and painfully. The Necromancers had already been doing their own investigation, and traded what they knew of the other sects with Ty. Between the two, the status of a further 10 groups and individuals were cemented, and another three, while not confirmed, were placed in the ‘left Vesuvia’ pile. After telling Tubor to send any new info Lucille’s way (ignoring the grumbling that *that* remark caused), Ty left.

Marchessa’s group was still unaccounted for.

***

The ‘shortcut’ out of the sewers was located an extra level down. To get there, you had to go back out of the cistern and continue straight. At the end was a door, with a long ladder down. Once there, you emerged into a large overflow block. In one of the corners was a platform with a transportation *Diagramma*, which popped you out near Gilda’s tea stand.

The smell from earlier was back, and got stronger as Tiberius went further down. He’s definitely convinced that there’s been a sewer breach. It has to be nearby and recent, seeing that the ‘shortcut’ is used fairly often by Initiate Necromancers until they earn their Journeyman status. If the *Diagramma*
had been compromised, he would have been told.

Feet settling on stone, he looked around. The overflow block was huge, the ceiling so high up it couldn't be seen with anything other than a large ball of Magelight. On the far side, where the platform would be were a few glowing candles. When holding out a thumb at arm's length, the aura of light from these candles was only half the size. Littered throughout the room were stone columns. The floor was mostly dry, with only a scattering of a few shallow puddles and leaves. There was little in the way of refuse, the Necromancers liking a clean work space.

Walking, Ty looked around. As he got further and further in, the smell got worse and worse. Something had to have died, the sickly sweet cinnamon smell of decay being so strong. He covered his nose, turning this way and that. It's possible that a Initiate was practicing, even though this chamber is off limits for it. He'll dispose of the body and send Tubor notice-

He stood stock still, the sound of something thick and heavy being dragged echoing. Squatting, he pulled one of his knives from his belt. The sound was too..wrong to be the shuffling of a corpse. Too wet. An animal?

Wet squishing, combined with the sound of dragging. A few whistling chirps, followed by a weird groaning sound. A heavy *WHUMP* echoed, the floor shaking.

...that was no animal. Pulling up and tying a bandana, Ty took a deep breath before conjuring the largest ball of Magelight he could. It flew up high, before going as bright as the sun.

A horrid, caterwauling screech blasted thru the chamber. Hands covering ears, Ty stumbled, going to one knee. The deafening sound continued, and he was hit by a large rubbery appendage, flying thru the air before landing roughly on his back. Shaking, he pushed himself to hands and knees. His front was covered in a thick slime, stinking to high heaven. He looked up in the direction of his attacker just to have his heart stop.

On the other side of the chamber, writhing from the light, was a huge fucking thing. That is the best way Tiberius could think to describe it. It's huge, and it's a fucking thing. Over 30 feet long, and wider around than a Seong Sequoia tree, the beast was pale and grubby. On what should be its head was a collection of black, bulbous eyes, surrounding a ghastly mandible. Long strands of drool dripped down, the mouthparts making high clicking sounds.

Once it stopped its motions, it swung its head around, resting on him. Another screech emerged, followed by a torrent of liquid. This seemed to be the cause of the stench, as the few specks that landed near him made him gag. The monstrosity raised up, head swinging and dancing like a cobra before lunging. Ty leapt into a dodge-roll, missing the tackle by mere inches. If he had been a moment late he would have been dead, if the cracked condition of the column that was behind him is any indication.

"Fuck." He took off running, arms and legs pumping. Trying to exit using the Diagramma or the ladder was out of the question, he'll be dead before getting halfway up. He spun, blade singing. He dug the tip into the worms side as it passed, rendering a long cut down the side. More disgusting filth poured out, along with another wail. As it passed, it's head pulled up. It continued up, making a loop-d-loop, jaws wide. Another jet of foul slime shot out, coating his left arm. He danced away, hissing.

Smoke started drifting up, a burning sensation accompanied it. So this thing spits acid. Nice to know. With a snap of his fingers, a small dense rain cloud formed over his shoulder, letting out a deluge. The slime washed away, leaving beet-red skin. He flexed his hand, not feeling any damage.
Tiberius jumped, the worm coming at him from behind and low. He couldn’t clear it before it started rising, and hung on for dear life as it got more vertical. His heart beat faster and faster the closer and closer they got to the ceiling, worm screaming the whole time. Trying to distract it from its current course, he flipped his knife, plunging it into the rubbery skin as deeply as he could.

The worm jerked with a roar, trying to turn back on itself. The rapid twists and turns it made made Ty’s stomach turn and head swim. On a particularly hard turn, his legs lost their grip and he swung out, his hold on his knife being his only anchor. Another jerk and he swung in the opposite direction. He struggled to grasp another of his knives, slowly losing grip. Lunging down, the worm turned. Ty thinks it’s going to try and bash him against a floor or wall. He tried to swing further up the worms side before impact. The worm slammed itself against the wall, roaring the whole time.

Unfortunately, he didn't get high enough before the worm started thrashing, smushing him. After the fourth or fifth slam, he felt his left arm snap. Then his head connected with the brick. Blood started flowing down his temple, dripping into his right eye. A third slam, and he could hear several of his ribs go. Coughing, blood splattered his chin. Another cough, and he hacked a gob of red phlegm.

The worm spun back, an enraged snarl trailing. Using the momentum of the spin, Ty grabbed another knife, broken arm screaming. Grunting, he speared it into the beast, before withdrawing and stabbing the other knife. Each jab wrought a screech from the beast as he ‘walked up’ its flank.

At its head, he stopped. Debating, he decided to use his broken arm. Raising it high, he sent out a Prayer, hoping anything would heed his call. Feeling burning gather in his palm, he slammed it down into the nest of eyes with a shout.

The worm went berserk. The sounds it now made could not be described, so high and inhuman they were. The thrashing it now made was incomprehensible, slamming into the walls, ceiling and floor at random. It writhed, trying to destroy the cause of its pain. Soon, it had started snaking around the room, bashing into columns at random. A few were even outright destroyed, large blocks of rubble raining down. One such piece slammed into Tiberius’s back, knocking the wind out of him. It was only through sheer bullheadedness that he held on.

He wouldn't last much longer, a haze of darkness clouded his vision. He needed more magic, more flame. If this thing isn't killed now, who knows what it would do once it got loose. As the worm raised straight and high, his mind raced.

Taking a deep breath he hacked, the blood trailing from his mouth now a constant stream. An idea born of desperation, he rubbed his left hand along his chin and jaw, gathering a palm-full of blood. He slammed his hand back down, shouting in pain from his broken arm.

§...Thissss....will suffice....§

The worm’s head exploded in flame. A geyser of yellow and white, shining brighter than a supernova erupted, columning into the ceiling. Tiberius clenched his eyes shut as tight as he could, but the cleansing light was all encompassing. Under his hand, he could feel ash crumble and break away. His ears were ringing, both from the roar of the flames and the supersonic wail of a dying worm. The ringing abruptly cut off, blood trickling from his ears.

Minutes or years later, the flames extinguished. The sudden return of dark made Ty’s stomach churn. Despite not being able to hear, he could feel the silence.

The worm’s body stood raised, straight and tall. Then, is started listing. Like a marionette with its strings cut, it collapsed. Slowly at first, before going faster. After a few short moments of
weightlessness, Tiberius was pulled with it, right hand frozen around the handle of his knife.

It met the ground with an almighty slam, kicking up a tidal wave of dust and leaves. The sound echoed, reverberating along the stone. Tiberius choked, his chin smacking onto the burnt-out edge of what was the worm’s head. He heaved, vomiting blood. The shards of his ribs were forced deeper into his lungs, bloody foam collecting at his lips. He tried pushing himself off the Fell beast, breath whistling as he did so. If he could just get on his side…

He rolled off the worm, landing hard on his side in a puddle of slime. His vision swam, unable to focus. He pillowed his head on a stretched out arm, remembering that it’s important to keep his airways clear.

(How well that will work, is unknown. If no one finds him soon, he’ll die here.)

He gave short, hacking coughs. Gagging, he spat out a large chunk of lung. Trying to suck in a breath, he cradled his chest in his free (broken) arm.

Before he blacked out, he could see a pair of large golden eyes from across the room, and hear a deep, pleased purr.

***

The Southern Bazaar was packed. Stalls and standing merchants stood shoulder to shoulder and side to side. The combined hawking of their wares was a loud, constant thing. Mothers could be seen, baskets on arms. Errant children danced between adult legs. A few strays could been seen on the crowd outskirts, begging for scraps.

Julian loved places like this, where the pulse of life was overflowing. He browsed about, looking. Not for anything in particular, just keeping an eye out for something nice. He wanted to get a gift for Ty, as a ‘Thank You’ for treating Mazelinka so well.

(He may also want to say ‘Thank You’ for treating him so well, too. But he’s ignoring that voice in the back of his head.)

Stopping at a baker’s stall, he looked to grab a snack. He got quite the knowing grin from the rotund man behind the table, before making his selection. After paying for a few stuffed buns, he went to the next stall. Sitting down, the crone manning the counter offered a few choice teas to complement the buns.

Pulling over a few sugars and honey’s, she gave him a good hard look. He looked at her, puzzled over the sudden scrutiny.

“Hmmm, can I, ah, help you ma’am?” He hopes she doesn’t recognize him, he still has things to do before the end.

She leaned in closer, sniffing away. Soon, she was scant inches from his blushing face. Taking a deep breath, she leaned back, thinking.

“For fuck’s sakes, Gilda! Leave the poor boy alone! He’s too young for you anyway, and your not mean enough to try and set him up with Prew!”

Julian jumped, the bellowing startling him. Turning, he realized it was the baker. The man had his arms crossed, scowling at the woman.

“Suck my flaps, Bern! Besides, I think I know who this is.” She turned back to Julian, ignoring
the over-acted retching her comment caused. “So, you’re the one Ty’s been all starry-eyed over. I’m Gilda, and that useless lump over there is Bern.” A loud ‘oi!’ could be heard from the stand.

“Ah, I’m Julian. It’s lovely to meet you.” He flashed her roguish grin. She snorted.

“You don’t have to butter me up, boy. Anyone who’s a friend of Ty is good in my book. What brings you out here?”

Julian shrugged a shoulder. “Just browsing. Looking for something to catch my fancy. Although,” he waggled a brow, “I seem to have found it.”

Gilda crowed. “No wonder Ty is smitten with you! You both turn on the charm when you want something! Don’t worry, sonny, your tea is free!” She guffawed a few more times.

“I didn’t, that is to say, I’m not-”

She cut off his blubbering. “I’m just messing with you, hun. You’re a good boy who makes my Ty happy, so I’m treating you.” She leaned up, patting his head. “Just keep making him happy.”

***

He killed off a few hours at Gilda’s tea stand, delighting in sampling the teas. Some were familiar, their taste a welcome kiss. Others were new, the flavors and textures both exciting and alien.

Gilda was loving this man. He was a great conversationalist, was very, very easy on the eyes and, from a few of his remarks, well traveled. She already knew who he was (who in Vesuvia didn’t know Dr. Devorak?) and was thus already assured of his intelligence, but learning that he was just as special as Ty made her feel all warm and fuzzy on the inside.

Looking around her counter, she smirked. Seems like she’s not the only one to recognize a good-looking man. Over the last few hours, her clientele had doubled. Bern’s too. She may need to see about giving the good Doctor free tea more often, if she sells so much to customers looking to snag him.

She looked at the end of the counter, where Julian was perched. He was surrounded three-deep, and working it. Smirking like the scoundrel he is, compliments flowing like water. In front of him, he had a small pile of cards and trinkets. Seemingly every five minutes, she or Bern had a request for a goodie to give him. Soon, he won’t need to pay for anything from them for a fortnight.

Passing by, she looked down, wondering just what the cards were. She grinned. Calling cards! Genuine, Upper-Class calling cards! And mixed in were things like necklaces and rings, a few brooches here and there. And on the side…

...holy shit. Just to the right of the main pile, was a small cluster of precious gems. Glittering ruby, twinkling sapphire, a diamond the size of her thumb. If Julian ever decided to quit medicine, he could easily make it as a Companion.

Soon, the sun set. Slowly the crowd dispersed, getting back to their homes for warm dinners and soft beds. Gilda sat, feet sore from all of the running around she did. Bern, bless his soul, looked dead.

Hearing a scraping sound, she looked. Julian had pulled out his money bag, pushing the monies and trinkets he was gifted into it. He took his time with the cards, shuffling them into an orderly pile. Holding them, he debated keeping them before shaking his head and pocketing them.
Seeing Gilda’s look, he grinned. “You never know when you’ll need allies. Especially if it’s the early hours and you need someone to come down to the constabulary and post your bail.”

Barking, she shooed him off. “Okay, jolly roger. Get you home and into bed. Wouldn't do to disappoint Ty by falling asleep on him on your date, eh?” She wiggled her brows. “Although, how you’ll be able to sleep when he’s putting his dick in yo-”

“God fucking dammit Gilda!”

Julian fled, the sounds of a cackling witch and exasperated baker ringing in his ears. He’s so thankful that Mazelinka wasn’t here to see this.

***

Sleeping restfully was a surreal experience. Julian has always had problems sleeping, both going to and staying asleep. The fact that he had been able to catch a good amount, waking well rested, was a good portend of the day.

He sat at his little table, freshly brewed cup of tea in hand as he looked out his window. He had a little loft apartment, small and patched. While not located in a good area, it was the only place he could procure without being ratted out.

Looking down at the newspaper, he sipped his tea. It was a blend from Gilda, and heavily reminiscent of a strong coffee. He turned a page, reaching over for a slice of Bern’s pumpkin bread. He hummed as he chewed.

Now that he had time to think, his earlier thoughts about breaking things off with Tiberius may have been too hasty. Yes, Ty may be required to provide children with another Umbrian woman. If their male population is low enough, it would be unavoidable.

But, that doesn't mean they can’t have a relationship. There are many tribes and peoples that have vastly different definitions of the word ‘marriage’. It is entirely feasible that Ty would not be required to be married, just to match up and make babies. He could also be married to multiple people.

They need to sit down and have an actual conversation before going any farther. If it turns out that Ty will be required to enter a monogamous relationship with an approved woman, Julian wants to know.

There are many things Julian would be willing to do. Being the ‘other woman’ so to speak, is not one of them.

(He walked that road once. All it lead to was heartbreak.)

Nodding to himself, Julian folded and set aside the paper. Tonight, he and Ty were going to meet in the Main Square, before heading out for dinner at this lovely little hole-in-the-wall restaurant Julian had found. They would then go out for drinks at his favorite tavern, The Rowdy Raven. Depending on how the night went, they may be able to figure out just what their relationship is.

He blushed slightly, remembering how...enthusiastically Ty had kissed him when he announced that he was going to dictate the next date. The swats they got from Mazelinka after they nearly destroyed some of her crockery left on the table did little to disguise her snickering.

Picking up a pen and paper, he started jotting down a list. There were a few things he needed to take care of before they met for the night.
Julian had gone back to the merchant district, this time visiting Textile Alley. He felt bad about ruining Ty’s shirt the other night, and wanted to replace it. From the feel, it was a woven material, the weft belying a thinly spun yarn. Heavier than sheer, but still light.

As he walked, the fingers of his gloved right hand kept rubbing together. He would say that the tunic was silk, but it felt just different enough that he wasn’t positive. Maybe a blend? Or was the weave just different?

He had gone and inspected several different stalls and shops, walking away disappointed every time. Every time he saw a flash of that same bright, intense scarlet, his hopes leapt up just to crash and burn.

He ended up in an open-air shop, bolts of fabric stashed everywhere. He walked up and down the isles, dodging other shoppers. Coming to a stop, he pulled a bolt down, unrolling it a bit. Tilting it to catch a shaft of sunlight, he made a happy hum. Looks like he struck gold. Unable to locate a price, he walked to the front.

...what the hell just happened?

Julian stood outside of the fabric shop, blinking in confusion, the sound of laughter behind him. He’s still trying to make sense of what happened, and just why he’s holding a bolt of cloth worth hundreds of gold that he didn’t have to pay for.

He choked when the Seong counter-woman told him the price (“20 gold per yard!”). He was grateful when she offered to lower the price when he spoke to her in Mang-woh (“Your pronunciation is horrible. Who taught you, a drunken sailor?”). He sputtered when she offered to lower the price even more if he married her granddaughter!

He mentioned his involvement with Ty, and next thing he knows, this old biddy is shoving the entire bolt in his arms, asking for him to tell Ty thank you? And he gets shuffled out the door via her cane.

He rubbed his forehead, the start of a headache making itself known. A light touch at his elbow drew his attention downwards.

At his side was a young, blue-clad woman. She was petite, with Fae features. Her skin was pale, her coiffed hair such a fair blond that it was nearly white. She had large blue eyes and a pink, cupid bow mouth. Julian would have to be blind to not admit that she was very beautiful.

“I couldn’t help but overhear, sir, that you know Ty?” Her voice was soft and breathy. He had to lean down to hear her.

“Yes miss, I do. And so do a lot of other people, apparently!” He smirked, quirking a brow. She flushed prettily.

“Ah, yes. Yes he does. He also knows a lot of people.” Her eyes flicked coyly down, before meeting his again. “I just don’t want his next ‘conquest’ to be hurt.” She rested her hand more firmly into his elbow, leaning in a bit. “Quite a few of us have been burned by his...flighty ways.”

Julian fixed her with a steely glare. “While I am sure that you are being genuine in your actions, I would thank you to please mind yourself.”
“Ah! My apologies! I did not mean to overstep my bounds. Please forgive me, and have a pleasant rest of your day.” And with that last remark, she turned away, melting into the crowd.

Julian shook his head, turning back to his loft. He had a date to get ready for.

***

He sat in a corner of the Rowdy Raven, multiple shot glasses scattered before him. His face rested in his palm, the other clenching a Salty Bitters.

Julian felt as though his heart had been torn out.

After that encounter earlier in the day, a worm of worry had burrowed into his chest. Tiberius is a striking man, it would be stupid to assume that he didn’t have his share of lovers. The talent he has in the bedroom had to have come from somewhere!

He had bathed and dressed, looking forward to their night. They had arranged to meet by one of the perimeter fountains in the Main Square after dark. For the occasion, Julian had forwent his usual suit, instead going for a slightly dressed up look. He kept the boots, wearing them over closely tailored trousers. He wore a crisp, white dress shirt under a tight black double-breasted vest with a cravat. In the breast pocket was a folded white kerchief, and lower down the chain of a pocket watch could be seen. To finish the look, he had slicked back his hair, and wore finger-less gloves.

Worry and doubt simmering in his gut, Julian swung on his cape before locking up. Intellectually, he had nothing to worry about. He and Tiberius were adults, and thus would have had several ‘relations’ before meeting each other. How many other people had slept with your partner before coming to you has no bearing on your mutual ability to have a loving relationship.

Julian well and truly knows that this ‘thing’ they have may go nowhere. Hell, he expects it at this point. He’s largely an unlovable mess, good for a few rolls in the hay, but that's about it.

(He is pointedly ignoring the part of him that holds genuine affection for Ty, and would like an actual relationship.)

Be that as it may, it still cut him deeply when their meeting time came and went. First by a few minutes, then fifteen. He held on, knowing that Tiberius had been tapped to help at the Palace, and probably just got held up.

After an hour, he had to give up the ghost. Ty wasn’t coming.

He probably wouldn't ever come.

(The pain in his chest was unbearable.)

He trudged slowly to his pub. Alcohol makes everything better. It’s great at making you just...not feel.

Sitting down in a corner, he ordered his first round. The first few had to be choked down, but that's a Salty Bitters for you. The next round went down much easier, and was quickly followed by a third.

He doesn't know how much time has passed. The table slowly but steadily grew cluttered. A few Widow Makers were scattered here and there, the acrid taste like paint thinner. The warm feeling brought by the booze did little to numb the pain, but it’s hard to numb a heart.
Soon, Last Call was announced. Julian had slumped over, face pillowed in folded arms. He heaved himself to unsteady feet, wobbling like a newborn colt. Cape sloppy thrown on, he made his way to the bar, buying a bottle of their strongest. Stumbling out the door, he swayed down the alley, wandering aimlessly. Occasionally he tripped, landing hard on the wall. Each opportunity he could, he took a long swing from the bottle clenched in his fist, coughing at times from the severe burn. Once or twice he stopped to retch, self-loathing and drink churning deep in his belly.

Eventually he made it to the docks. Awkwardly he sat, feet dangling and elbows on his knees. He looked off over the water, a few streaks of false dawn shining. A few gulls cawed overhead.

Julian doesn’t know how long he sat there, until it all hit at once. He let out a loud sob, covering his face in large hands. Hiccuping, he lent forward.

“Why am I always the one left behind?”

Chapter End Notes

so, uh, yeah...we boo’s?
Of Surgeries and Sanguinity

Chapter Summary

The plot thickens, we meet Prew, and Julian has to pull himself together to perform an impromptu surgery.

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up, there is some medical gore. Like, slicing and dicing and wriggling bodyparts that are not normally seen by the average human eye.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gilda didn't like the satisfied look on her granddaughters face. She scowled as she ran a rag up and down her counter.

She and her dear husband had had six children, five of whom went on and had kids of their own. The eldest had already started giving her great-grand babies. She loved them all dearly, doting on them as a proper Nanna does. Each child, grandchild, and great grandchild was different and unique. Some liked dark colors, others hated broccoli. But all grew (or are growing) up into hardworking people.

However, every family has that one relative. You know, that one. Maybe they’re a wanted criminal, or a drunkard. They can't hold down a job. Occasionally, they get a little too...physical.

(One little shit made that mistake as a teen. She reminded him just why you do not mess with Nanna.)

For her family, her granddaughter Prew was That One. She doesn't know what her son Herb and his wife did wrong, but Prew just did not turn out. From a young age, she had an overblown sense of entitlement. Always had to have the best dresses, the best ribbons for her fair hair. It got worse as she got older, the attention boy’s gave her for her comely features and clear blue eyes setting her on a power trip.

She would start with one man, and as soon as someone better came by she would drop him like a hot potato. Sometimes it was money, other times looks. A few times she snagged a guy who had little of either, but was a very respected person. When she had 'procured' enough resources to move out into her own flat on Carriage Way she got worse, being used to the lifestyle of the rich and influential.

When she set eyes on Tiberius, no one was surprised. He was young, fit, and magically talented. Once it got out that he was the eldest son of the High Priestess of Hedonism, a Journeyman Citadel member, and a powerful Warlord in his own right, Prew looked like she had just been offered the position of Countess. And being that Prew was a very beautiful woman, it would only be a matter of time before she ensnared him in her web.
Everyone was surprised when he blew her off completely from day one. He was having none of her bullshit. Gilda still laughs when she remembers seeing him ‘nope’ away from her. The look of pure disbelief on her face was worth bottling. Over the years she tried over and over...and over to get his attention.

(After he had that accident, she tried the whole ‘help nurse back to health’ bit. Asra flayed her to bits for that.)

But now...Prew looks a little too happy with herself. The only time Gilda has seen that smile is when Prew has absolutely destroyed another person’s life.

“Prew. Sweety. Come say ‘hello’ to yer Nan.”

“Not now, Nanna. I have someone to see.”

Gilda ground her teeth hearing the simpering tone. “You seem to be under the impression that I’m giving you a choice. Come. Here.”

With a sigh, Prew did as told. She flounced over to Gilda’s stand, throwing herself into a chair. The other patrons gave her a wide berth, the steel in Gilda’s voice a warning. “Well? What do you want?”

“Impudent child. That’s the tone you choose to take with me? I’ll skin you alive.” Gilda drummed her fingers on the counter, doing so until she got a quiet ‘sorry Nanna’. “Now, I’m going to ask you this once, and only once,” she leaned in close. “What. Did. You. Do?”

***

A loud knocking woke him up. Julian snorted, pulling the blanket up high over his head before turning over. If he ignores it long enough, they’ll go away.

The sound continued for a few minutes more before stopping. Eyes drooping, he went to return to sleep before a series of loud *SLAMS* barraged his door. He jolted, growling in frustration and his head throbbing. As he sat up, the sounds ceased. Thinking that was that, he was totally unprepared for the door to be kicked in. Wood splinters flying, the door slammed against the wall as a group of people entered. Three men, two taller and bulkier than the third.

“So Dr. Devorak, do you make it a habit to ignore house calls?”

Julian did not like this guy. Pale skin, dark hair and eyes, a face many would consider beautiful. He wore a short open robe over a tunic and trousers with knee-high boots, all black. He had a few necklaces and rings, the metal being too pale and clear to be anything but platinum. His two companions were also dressed well, though not nearly as ostentatiously. One was blond, hair in a long undercut. The other bald with a tattoo of knot-work crowning his head in woad.

Julian went to lunge from his bed, dagger in hand. It was for this reason that he never slept far from one. Upon pulling the blade free, he made to stand. Unfortunately, he had been drinking heavily for the last few days, and slipped on a discarded bottle. He flailed as he fell, landing hard on his hip. The jolt of his landing upset an already sensitive stomach, and a hand flew to his mouth as he dry heaved.

The leader of the group wrinkled his face in disgust. “And to think,” he pulled out a cigarillo from his robe, lighting it with a Summoned lick of flame, “that you’re the horse that Tiberius is hitching his carriage to.” He blew a stream of foul-smelling smoke into the face of the mess on the floor. “What a
disappointment."

Julian barked out a laugh. “Funny you should say that. Haven’t seen Ty-, Tiberius since day before last...I think?” It’s always hard to keep track of time when he hits the bottle. Then again, that’s the idea.

Tall, Dark, and Rude snorted, squatting. A hand shot out, harshly grabbing Julian's chin. He twisted the captured face back and forth, tisking.

Julian was a fucking wreck, and he knew it. Face puffy and dry, with a ruddy undertone from his sudden bout of alcoholism. His eye would be bloodshot, and lips chapped. He probably looked thinner as well, having not eaten since the afternoon of the disastrous date. Add in the fact that he hasn't showered or shaved the entire time, and he was the poster child of depression.

Releasing his grip, the other man stood. He brushed of his clothes, sneering. “Well, regardless, get your ass up and cleaned. We have a patient that requires urgent assistance. Price is no worry.”

Julian snorted. “Sorry to tell you, good sir, but I’m not open for business today.” He slumped, arms hung over his thin mattress. “Try someone who can actually give a damn.”

“*sigh* Guess I’ll just need to find someone else, then. Oh well,” the stranger turned. He started inspecting the nails of one hand, pulling a stiletto from his belt. “Such a shame that Ty won’t be able to see his sweetheart first thing when he wakes. Alas, alack.” The entire remark was made in the most dead, uninterested tone he could muster as he manicured his nails. He frowned when a particular bit caught under his thumb refused to be dug out. “Just means that after he gets over his heartbreak, I’ll get to set him up with cousin Ophelia.”

Julian’s head shot up, eye zeroing in. “What.”

“Oh, didn’t I mention? The reason Ty missed your date was because he got caught up dealing with a Fell Worm. Juvenile, from the size. The fight nearly collapsed our guild quarters.” Still picking at his nails, his dark eyes met Julian. “His ribs are shattered, one lung collapsed. The other shredded by pulverized bone. His left arm was broken in two places, and he has a concussion. Part of his scalp was sheared off. The broken arm also has light acid burns, and he has lost a lot of blood.” Deciding his nails looked nice enough, he re-sheathed the blade. “It took us several hours to excavate him. We had to call in help from three other guilds. Asra has been notified, and Lucille and her coven are producing talisman’s of good fortune as quickly as they burn out. Lucille herself had to pull a lot of strings to get the ingredients for a Stasis Diagramma, which she herself is acting as the sole anchor for.”

After sitting frozen for a few moments, Julian exploded into motion. Flying around the flat, he pulled out a doctor's bag, throwing anything even vaguely medical inside. Spinning in place, he dropped to his knees, digging under his bed.

The leader motioned to the blond one, shoo-ing him into the kitchen nook. The other he directed to the free-standing wardrobe. “Looking for something?”

After a jerk and a loud thunk, Julian withdrew with a curse. In his hands he carried a canvas carry case. As he moved, the sounds of glass and metal clinking could be heard. “Just-, just looking for this!” He placed it into his bag with great care. “I’ll need a list of things. Ether, an IV bottle of saline, multiple sets of surgeons tools. Some chloroform, sedatives…” he stuck his head back under his bed before reemerging, a round-bottom flask in hand. Inside was a dried powder, rust colored. “OH! And leeches!”
Three heads turned to him. “What? Wonderful creatures, leeches are! Their saliva has amazing anticoagulant properties, and they are an excellent way to siphon blocked and clotted blood from damaged limbs! Plus, untold other benefits!”

A few beats of silence. “Riiiight. I’ll take your word for it.” Everyone was ignoring Julian’s rambling, knowing a coping mechanism when they saw one.

Baldie had pulled out some clothes, setting them at the end of the bed. He entered the water closet, returning shortly with a steaming basin, a towel, and basic grooming supplies. Blondie had thrown together a quick meal of tea, bread, jam, and sliced apple.

Swiveling his head, Julian looked at his few shelves before being forcibly sat. Instantly, he was covered in hands. One set brushing his hair, another quickly lathering his face. He could only sit dumbfounded, the hands leaving just as quickly as they came. He pat his face, stubble gone. Running a hand thru his hair saw it both brushed and styled. Before he could say anything, food and drink were shoved at him.

Looking up, his eyes met amused dark ones. Mr. Leader was leaning against a wall, cigarillo nearly spent. To his left was a charcoal outline of a door with some symbols. Taking one last drag, Leader flicked his fingers, the butt disappearing in a shower of light. “Now that you’ve been fed and watered, get dressed. We’ll be going thru here,” he thudded a closed fist onto the drawing, a door shimmering into existence upon contact. “We’ve already moved Ty into a makeshift operating theater. Our in-guild doctors had done all they could, but they don’t have the skill to remove fine, slivered bone. The Stasis Diagramma has him, allowing us the needed time to fix everything.”

“Great. Now, uh, let’s get going.” Julian finished dressing. He picked up his filled bag, turning to the door. The other man twisted the conjured door handle, opening out into a short, dark stone hallway. The group stepped thru, door fading from existence.

“So, what’s your name?”

“Names Tubor. Now, Dr. Devorak, let’s get to work.”

***

Nadia sat slumped in her chair, pinching her brow. Portia fluttered about her side, bringing a cup of tea and a few bits of nibbly on a fine china plate. “...Run that by me again?”

Across from her sat several people. The Courtiers Vulgora, Vlastomil, and Volta, with Consul Valerius on one half. At the other half of the table were several of the local guild heads, being lead by Citadel Chapter head Martel. The older gentleman had a somber look, his face showing lines of exhaustion that made him look far older than his sixty years would belay.

He ran a hand thru his close-cropped hair, the snowy strands standing up in licks from the actions. “As stated, a juvenile Fell Worm was found in residence under one of the old cisterns. A Citadel member on reserve encountered it while checking in with the Necromancers guild. They fought, and while he won, he may not make it from his injuries.”

“Oh NO! The poor thing! How could such a thing happen!?” The one known as Vlastomil whimpered, eyes wide. He wrung his hands, looking quick between Vulgora and Volta.

“That is what we are trying to find out. Fell Worms don’t just appear from thin air. Hopefully, a doctor who comes highly recommended will be able to help.”

“Yes yes, how tragic! We must help that poor, poor worm!” The remarks from the darkly clad,
grubby courtier drew looks of ire from the guild heads.

“Worm? WORM!? That’s all you care about, Vlasty!? I want to meet such a skilled warrior! The strength! The speed! The sheer tenacity! A worthy opponent for such a beast!” A second courtier, red clad and introduced as Vulgora had leapt to their feet, gauntleted hand raised in a fist.

“Oh please! Don’t fight! You always frighten me when you get this way!” Simpering with her face in her hands was the third courtier, Volta. “Oh, I hope he’s okay! Just thinking of being unable to get better, or eat delicious, scrumptious treats makes me feel ill!”

With a sharp gesture, Nadia cut off the bickering. “What, exactly, is a ‘Fell Worm’, and how did it get in MY city?” She ignored the snort of derision her usage of ‘my city’ brought forth, more interested in an explanation.

Martel leaned forward, the light shining in thru the windows gleaming off his beard. “It is a Fell beast. Adults grow to monstrous size, with females able to lay thousands of eggs at a time. They spit acid, with a few varieties able to vomit forth streams of fire. They also spread pestilence, usually crop blight, but a few specimens that have been dissected were found to carry things that affect animals and people as well. A sample from this one has been sent off for study. However, preliminary tests run on the mucous that covers it shows that it’s a clean one.”

Nadia let out a breath, sending out a quick prayer of thanks that another plague has been avoided. “And how did it get here?”

A different guild head lent forward. “That is unknown. As it currently stands, what area’s we have been able to examine in the chamber show no signs of a Gate or other magical means of transport. The Necromancers also state that this worm is a new addition, being that that chamber is one they use fairly often. It’s possible that either A). The worm physically came there from another location or B). Another eldritch form of magic was used to Summon it to our plane.”

Consul Valerius cleared his throat. “So, what are our options? Are there more in the city? How quickly do they grow?” He sipped his wine. “Also, how can the premier magic guild heads not know how or where such a creature got here!?” His upper lip curled, a sneer of derision painted upon his face.

Martel leapt to his feet, slamming his palms to the thick tabletop. “Silence, whelp! I have dueled and lost against men far greater than you to be here today. I have spat in the faces of kings as I stood before the executioner's block, and bowed before beings of great power and beauty! So if you think,” the light outside changed rapidly, the rooms temperature dropping, “that you have earned the right to speak to me in such a manner, Whore, you are very, very wrong!”

Martel sat, satisfied with the pale parlor now fixed to the Consuls face. As he made himself comfortable, sunlight returned. All of the others in the room not of the guilds took a deep breath, unaware until just now how heavy the atmosphere had become.

“We have other notable magicians, sorcerers, and witches coming to the city to assist in the investigation. Many others who are unable to make the journey will be sending us what they know. The family of the injured Citadelian has been notified, and one of their Warlords will make his way here shortly.”

It took everything for Nadia to not let the look of shock she wanted to express to appear. Her...relationship with the guilds had grown tenuous at best, her long absence causing their bonds to weaken. She had not realized until this point that she had become such a non-entity that she wasn't even consulted or asked permission for such notable peoples to enter Vesuvia.
What had the Courtiers and Consul been doing during her sleep?

Knowing a losing battle when she saw one, Nadia let the overstep of power slide. As it is, she had more important things to worry about.

(Like fucking worms.)

“If you require additional assistance or resources, do not hesitate to ask. Portia,” she gesture to her right, “has my trust, and I will give her permission to act in my stead when it comes to some of the more...minor requests. For anything else, I wish for us to deal directly.” She ignored the whispering from her Court the declaration caused. They had been shown to be unreliable in the past, she won’t allow them to fuck this up.

Before anyone else could speak, the double doors slammed open. Trotting quickly up to the guild side of the table was the Magician Asra. Hat crumpled in a fist, his face was flushed. He had run all the way to the Palace from his entry into the city.

“Where is he? Is he okay? I came as soon as I heard! Oh, galaxies I should have come back sooner-” he ran his free hand thru his pale curls, mussing them up more than usual. His eyes looked on the brink of tears, and every deep breath he took shook. Nadia’s heart wrenched at the sight.

Martel stood, striding over to the distraught young man. Lifting his cloak, he curled an arm around slender shoulders. “We have him in stasis. A highly-recommended doctor will be with him shortly. When possible, several Healers will be doing everything they can to speed up his recovery.” He steered Asra from the room, turning back momentarily to nod at the remaining group. “We will keep you updated. M’lady.” The other guild heads stood up, taking their leave. Soon, only Nadia, Portia and the Courtiers were left. Portia topped-up her tea before fetching a small slice of cake.

“Your Ladyship.”

“Leave. All of you.”

Soon it was just Nadia and Portia. Nadia sighed deeply, lifting her cup and sipping.

It would seem she has more things to worry about than the capture of Dr. Devorak.

***

On their way to the operating room, they had to pass the overflow block that the Worm battle took place in. Julian was walking on the side of the hall closest to the original ladder down. This part of the floor had collapsed, creating a gaping hole approximately 30 feet in diameter. The amount of light that filled the now-open room allowed him to gaze unimpeded, and the sight made his heart stop.

Rubble was everywhere. Entire support columns were laid waste. Large puddles of a thick looking goo were scattered throughout the chamber. He could make out large swaths of a dull, coppery brown, knowing instinctively that that was Ty’s blood. His body went cold when he saw the grisly remains of the Worm. Through it all, groups of people walked, taking notes and moving things.

How did Tiberius survive that?

It took Tubor nudging his back to get him moving again. Inhaling shakily, Julian turned his face forward, resolutely ignoring the sight below. His pace quickened, hand clenching his bag.
After a few more twists and turns, Blondie opened a door. Light flooded the dark hallway, making Julian squint. The antiseptic scent that all clinics and surgery rooms had drifted out. He breathed this in deeply, using such a routine and familiar smell as an anchor. After centering himself, he fixed his gaze on Tiberius.

Julian knew what to expect; Tubor’s assessment was blunt and straight to the point. That still didn’t keep doubt from flooding Julian.

Ty’s head was turned to the side. His mane of beautiful curls had been partially cut away, with several long lines of stitches running in arcs on one side of his scalp. A drainage tube was threaded thru the longest one, the skin in a large swath a bright pink. His entire face was puffy, with dark bruising all over. Going into one nostril was a skinny, clear tube. Julian could make out the flow of a pale liquid. Some sort of feeding tube? His left arm was placed in a thick cast, going from palm to shoulder. It was strapped down, going straight out from the bed and onto a padded bench. His neck was in a modified brace, more to keep his head to the side. His chest was covered in a thin sheet, but that couldn’t hide the malformations under it.

A tugging on his arm pulled his gaze away. To the side stood a red-clad physician, hair captured under the two-in-one mask and veil, rendering them nearly impossible to identify. The individual led him over to a popup decontamination shower. He stripped quickly, pulling the curtain. He scrubbed up, skin tingling from the harsh and abrasive cleansers. Shutting off the water, he stepped to the other side of the cubicle. Another red-clad doctor entered, shorter than the first, assisting him in drying and dressing. Holding his hands away from his body the entire time, he ducked and turned during the dressing process. At some point, the previous doctor returned. Between the two individuals, his mask and veil were donned and gloves slipped on.

Stepping out, Julian walked to the bed. The room had been arranged slightly to allow better maneuverability. Standing on Ty’s right, he lifted and pulled down the sheet. His stomach turned at the sight.

The chest and ribs below him were mush. That was the best way Julian could think of to describe it. A normal chest is somewhat convex, cradling the heart and lungs in protection. Now, it looks like a baby eating mashed potatoes for the first time decided to play instead of eat. Then, said baby finger painted the resulting mess in blues, greens, and reds. How they found Ty still alive is a miracle.

Turning to his right, Julian picked up a bowl with iodine. Using some cotton balls, he slathered it gently all over. Once finished, he chose a scalpel and made the first cut for a standard y-incision. With no hesitation, he went clavicle to sternum, before doing the same to the other side. Once his second cut met in the middle, he pulled straight down, not stopping until he hit the pubic bone.

He gently pulled back the layers of skin, using the clamps handed to him to keep the incision open. The inner sac that kept the digestive system in place had ruptured, causing a massive hernia. Picking up a suture needle and kit gut, he started sewing the gaping hole closed, being careful to not twist any of the intestines. At one point, he had to pull back out some of them, hanging them on a mobile rack. Pieces of Ty’s rib cage had been forced down and Julian needed the room to remove the shards. As he pulled out bone with forceps and tweezers, it took everything he had to ignore the slithery, snake-like movements of still-working intestines. He jerked when a particularly sinuous movement caused a slick length to smack his arm.

He finished his excavation shortly afterwards. With assistance from one of the doctors, he threaded the digestive muscle back into the sack, closing it up quickly. After ensuring that there were enough tension-distributing stitches, Julian turned up to what remained of the ribs.

“So, how are we doing this? Removal is all well and good, but there needs to be something put in
“Tiberius has regenerative ability. But, you are right. It is not strong enough. We have fleshcrafter on hand. She can make new rib from old. Tubor is nice, and gave us new, what is word? Ah, material.” The heavily accented words came from the taller doctor. In her hands she held a wide and shallow bucket, the fragments of freshly harvested whole bone glimmered wetly. “She can make bone sink and grow. But must do fast, old bone is bad. Can we do in few hours?”

“And what of his lungs?” It was only recently that an organ transplant was done, by his mentor in Prakra. He has no idea of how to go about such a procedure.

“Lucille. She is in ritual. Talking to Hedonism. He like Tiberius. Will be given Kiss.”

Julian would just have to take her word for it. He has no talent for magic, no belief. But at this point, he really has no choice. He doesn't think his Gift would be able to handle such extensive injuries. Turning to look at the destroyed chest cavity, he thought. “Will the Kiss repair only the lungs, or will it also repair muscle? What can’t it do?”

“It can fix anything. One of the perks to being an Initiate to a Force is that Ty will get much more out of the Kiss than most others. If required, cut away the top of the chest. Hedonism will repair what was lost. We just needed as clean a slate as possible to start.” This was a different voice. Deeper but no less feminine. The fleshcrafter.

With a decisive nod, Julian started cutting. The rib cage was soft and mushy, not taught and firm like it should be. It was difficult to cut through, with him having to remove everything unsalvageable in large strips. He peeled what was left of one side back, grabbing medical pliers to pull out the sharp spines of bone. He doesn't know how long it took him, but eventually he moved on to the other side. He markedly did not look down to the ruined meat of what was once a healthy lung. Soon this side, too, was as cleared as it would ever be.

Putting his tools aside, Julian zoned out. The steady beating of Ty's heart, something he should have never been able to see, was somewhat comforting. Each wet, slapping pump was music to his ears, reminding him that Ty was still alive.

(When all was said and done, he would get on his knees and apologize for ever doubting Ty’s affection for him, undeserved it may be.)

He stepped to the side, making room for the two others. The shorter picked up the tangle of new bones. Fitting the three large pieces into place, she picked up a few thin clamps, spinning them into pace with a well-practiced hand. Once satisfied, she placed spread fingers on the bone, muttering briefly under her breath. Nothing happened for a few long minutes, before she started moving her hands about. All bone she touched reacted like putty, stretching and smoothing.

Eventually, old and new bone were fused. Taking a few moments to pay attention to a few problematic areas, she planted her hands one last time. With a look similar to running water, the new skeletal construct set. She removed the clamps before helping Julian re-layer the flaps of skin. Behind them, the second doctor could be heard counting tools, placing them into a sanitation bucket. Soon, she moved on to clearing the various different tables and racks utilized before hosing down the red-splattered tile.

Exhausted, Julian stumbled over to a corner. Wedging himself into it, he fought to stay awake. He would not leave until Lucille came in.
The fleshcrafter doctor ambled over, dragging two chairs. Julian sunk into one, leaning forwards with his elbows on his knees. The other sat next to him.

“So. How did you meet Ty?”

Julian snorted. “I broke into his shop, trying to pump him for information.”

“Let me guess, he pumped you instead?”

The sound he made was inhuman, trailing off into a sleep-deprived giggle. “Oh gods, your just as bad as he is!”

“Hey, you know what they say: Great minds think alike. And if I was in his shoes, I would have done the same thing.” A wink followed that decidedly un-chaste statement.

Before they could continue, the door burst open. Lucille strode in, blazing like a captured star. She softly padded up to Ty’s bed, cupping his cheek as she did so. She leaned down, before hesitating. Turning, she spotted Julian. She nodded, before dropping a chaste, innocent kiss to the cool lips below her. She lingered, the glow she had diminishing by the second. When gone completely, she exited the room.

A beat of silence. “Now what?”

His companion turned to him. “What do you mean? Now we wait.”

“Ohmmm…”

“You haven’t had much exposure to magic, huh? Done properly, it’s not an instant fix. At least, not without a lot of sacrifice. It may be a few days, but he’ll wake. Right as rain, ready to be a pain in our collective asses.”

With another hum, Julian started listing. Slumping against the other’s side, he started drifting off.

“C’mon on, puppy. Let’s get you to bed. You did well for such short notice.”

“How long?” Was slurred from his mouth. He stumbled as he stood, before being caught around the waist. He whimpered as others entered the room, wheeling Tiberius out.

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“Don’t worry. He’s just getting moved to a clean bed with warming runes. And for your question, you were on your feet for almost 20 hours. Good job, squirt.” She shuttled him over to the shower cubicle, helping him strip. He sat curled up on a little stool as she rinsed him off, paying special attention to his hands. It was a struggle to dry and dress him, as his exhaustion made him slow and sluggish. Eventually she got him into some soft clothes, simple hard-soled slippers on his feet.

Guiding him down the hall, she entered a room. On one side was Ty, chest moving more fluidly that the hour before. Across from him was a bed, piled high with blankets. Guiding Julian onto it, she pulled off his slippers before laying him down. She spent a few extra moments tucking him in, before leaving.

She quietly shut the door on the two sleeping men, before power walking down the hall. Tubor needed an update on the procedure, and she needed to get washed and cleaned herself.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry not sorry for the lack of porn the last few chapters. Development first, then dick.
Of Kids and Kids

Chapter Summary

Incoming famjam, help arrives, and Julian get's to put on his smarty pants.

...oh, and Tubor continues to be an ass.

Chapter Notes

Next update, we will return you to your regularly scheduled pornography.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the days after Tiberius’s surgery, Julian hadn’t left his side. Every snuffle, every twitch Ty made woke him from what little sleep he could grab. In short order, the dark circles that were a permanent fixture under his eyes before meeting Ty came back with a vengeance.

“You look like shit.”

“Thank you, Tubor. As eloquent and thoughtfully spoken as always.” Tubor is an ass.

“Get up and out. You look like a drowned corpse, and I know very well what those look like. Head up to the bone garden, get some air. Don’t come back for at least an hour.”

Julian, knowing a losing battle when he saw one, sighed heavily before lumbering to his feet. Spending a few moments fiddling with Ty’s bed covers and IV line, it took Tubor physically turning and shoving Julian at the door to get him to start moving. Sitting in the now vacated chair, Tubor snapped his fingers. In a spark of light, a lap desk with several sheaves of paper appeared. Floating off to the side was a pen in an inkwell. Wetting the nib, Tubor started writing.

“Some of Ty’s family will be here either later today or tomorrow. You may want to get yourself cleaned up a bit. T’would be a shame if you were less than presentable when meeting the in-laws.”

Frowning lightly, he crossed something out before continuing his scribbling.

“What-, but we’re-, I’m not-, just, ughhh... I need to get away from you.” Rubbing a hand over his face, Julian grabbed and threw on his cloak. Shutting the door behind him (ignoring the amused snort his sputtering caused), he slowly made his way up the hall.

About 20 feet down the hall was a makeshift transport room. A temporary Diagramma and glyph circle were painted onto the floor, offering a quick way up to the Necropolis above. Standing in it, he disappeared in beams of shattered light.

(It speaks volumes of just how wrung out he was that he just didn’t care about walking into something magic.)

Nigh instantly he reappeared in the Necropolis. The other glyph was located along the wall, nestled between two degrading mausoleums. As he walked out, he chanced a glance at their doors,
curious to see if he knew the family name, but exposure to time and the elements had eroded anything discernible away.

He turned out onto the main path, heading right. After a few minutes, he perched himself on an old stone coffin. Sitting on the flat slab, he reached into his cloak. Futzing around momentarily, he withdrew a thin metal wallet, pulling out a cigarette. Striking a match, he took a long drag. After a few moments puffing away, he leaned back. Swinging his legs up, he crossed them at the ankles, pillowing his head with his unoccupied arm.

(Pasha would kill him, if she saw him right now. Good thing smoking is something he indulges in rarely, she’s small but packs a mean punch.)

He spent a long time laid out, drowsing. The sun was just passed noon, and it was slightly overcast. It was comfortably warm, and this time of year he had little worry about mosquitoes. If he hadn’t had Ty to worry about, it would be quite pleasant. As it stands, being left alone with his thoughts was a bad idea.

Any other time, he would be worried about being left behind. He’s slightly neurotic, and has a clingy personality. He knows he’s a mess, and is very well aware that he’s not the type you bring home to Ma. Add in the fact that he’s running on borrowed time, and it’s just not worth getting attached to someone. Why start to make a life with someone, just to take it away from them? How could he inflict himself onto some sweet, kind and caring person just to drag them down to his level? In the long run, he has little to offer in a relationship aside from a few rolls in the sack.

With Ty, though, it was different. Being a Journeyman Sorcerer was a dangerous, high-stakes job. You dealt with demons and spirits, Summons gone wrong, the works. Very few live long enough to gain a Mastery, and those that do are ridiculously overpowered and in demand. They travel constantly, flinging around enough magic to put the gods themselves to shame. When it comes to a job, they need absolute focus, with nothing to worry them or hold them back from making a tough decision.

How can he foist himself off on one, demand that they pay attention to him? How can he justify them expending time and energy on his needlessly needy self? With everything he could be, Tiberius truly doesn’t need someone lacking such as he.

So lost in thought, the sounds of footsteps on gravel caused him to startle hard. Dropping his now-spent smoke, he sat up quick.

Standing only about a dozen feet from him was an older gentleman. Very tall and stocky, his hair was silver and short, pushed back messily from his face. He face was somewhat wrinkled, with a very stern countenance. Dressed all in black in a modified set of scholar’s robes, he cut a very imposing figure.

“Ah, can I help you sir?” Julian wasn’t worried about a fight, with multiple fighters from various guilds spread around the Necropolis. With what happened to Ty, no one was taking any chances.

“You must be Dr. Devorak.” The visitors voice sounded like gravel, Julian could feel it in his chest. “It was my understanding that you were asked to assist in the...situation?”

“That I was.” He stood, brushing dust from himself. Walking over, he offered a hand to the taller gentleman to shake. He continued as they shook, “I admit I’m at a bit of a loss. How should I address you?”

Dropping his hand, the stranger smirked. “You can call me Cordelia. I am here with the rest of my
Julian lit up somewhat. “You wouldn’t happen to be the Cordelia who penned ‘An Understanding of Internal Electrolysis and its Influence on Brain Function’, would you? Fascinating read! Being in Epidemiology myself, some concepts just completely left me in the dust, but your postulation that low-levels of judiciously applied arcs of electricity to specified areas of the cranium could be used to lessen or reverse the onset of dementia, could be modified for use in pathological investigation of bacterial infections that crossed the brain/blood barrier! We’re all very excited!”

Cordelia brightened, a wide smile transforming his face. “Really? I admit, when doing my initial research and testing, I had entertained the possibility that some of these techniques could be modified for use in other medical pursuits, but never thought Epidemiology could be one! How would you go about doing so?”

Both sat down on Julian’s previous perch, turned toward each other. “A colleague noticed offhandedly that certain bodily humors actually weighed more or less depending on how healthy the subject was. As you know, all phials and test tubes have a standardized set of sizes and weights, but started tearing out her hair over the fact that our centrifuge couldn’t be spun evenly. It was only as she set some samples on a set of scales before reloading that she saw that the samples from a patient were quite heavy. Withdrawing samples from known healthy persons proved her theory correct. Last I had heard, she was creating a setup to separate infection from the base humor using a short-run circuit of electricity. Then, we could use the isolated sample to better examine and diagnose in a fraction of the time!”

“How delightful! I’ll need to get in touch with this person, see about some collaboration. However, that will need to wait for later, I’m afraid. What can you tell me about what happened?”

Julian sobered quickly. “I don’t know everything that happened, even with multiple people talking. You’ll be better off speaking with Tubor for the fine details.” He retrieved his cigarette case, offering one to Cordelia. Both were lit up in short order. “From what I gathered, Tiberius was doing some sort of touch-base. Some guilds and noted individuals were going missing. After meeting with the Necromancers, he went to leave and encountered the Worm.” He took a deep drag, exhaling shakily. Running a hand through slightly greasy locks, he continued. “He fought it, and won. But, ah, not without paying for it. Multiple broken bones, a pulverized rib cage...a fleshcrafter had to replace it. It was...not fun cutting him to pieces.” A lump appeared in his throat, and he took a deep breath. “At one point I held his heart in my hands.” He had had to actually move Ty’s heart to the side, to pull out fragments of bone that had gotten under it.

(Somethings he only remembered doing after the fact, so focused he was on his objective. He fears sleep, dreading what else from the procedure he would be forced to remember.)

He startled when a large hand clapped his shoulder. “You did well. You did what had to be done, and kept it together. I think your overdue for a break.”

“Can’t. He hasn’t woken up yet. I don’t know how long he was out before he was found, if he lost oxygen, nothing. I’ll fall apart when I know he’s okay.”

Cordelia arched a brow, face blank. “Hmmm. Looks like Rus has found a good partner.” He stood, flicking dust off his long cloak and disposing of his spent butt. He turned, slowly making his way to the glyph.

Julian hopped to his feet, eyebrows to his hairline. He trotted to Cordelia’s side, stumbling once. “You know Ty?”
They had reached the glyph, Cordelia stepping into it. Spinning to face Julian, he grinned like a devil, face shifting into something familiar. “Of course I do. He’s my grand-nephew.”

And with a flash of light and a low chuckle, he disappeared, leaving a gaping Julian behind.

***

By the time Julian made it back down, Cordelia was gone from sight. Cursing himself for acting like a fool, he shook his head before going down the hallway. Reentering Ty’s room, he decided to do another exam, the effects if the Kiss from a few days ago still going strong.

Starting with the stitches and tubing in Ty’s scalp, Julian decided it was healed enough to tidy up. After washing and gloving up, he snipped off an end of the drain tube before pulling it out the other exit, being careful to not snap it as it came to an end. Afterwards, it was only the work of a few minutes to snip the stitches and dispose of them. Palpating the new skin, he slathered another layer of iodine on the fuzz-covered surface before moving down.

He bypassed the neck brace, wanting to prevent any muscle spasms from healing muscle knocking off the cranial scabs. It would also prevent any further damage to a severely bruised face. Pulling back the sheet covering a stitched chest, Julian decided to leave everything as is. He marveled at the feel and progress of new muscle and bone under skin, and how there was a definitive difference between rib that had it and that didn’t. Replacing the gauze pads under the ends of the drainage tubes he installed and checking the tension of the stitches, another slathering of iodine was done.

Late the day before, he touched base with the doctors that had done most of the so-called ‘minor’ procedures. Lucky for him, they were the same ones that had assisted him during the surgery. The fleshcrafter said the cast could be removed tomorrow (today), and a simple wrap could be done instead. She warned that there was a possibility of hematoma over the breakpoints, but not to worry unless there was very noticeable swelling.

Walking over to a medical cabinet installed in the room while he had slept off a 20 hour surgery, he rummaged about. With a quiet ‘aha!’, he pulled out a set of medical cutters. Looking more like something to cut through locks and bolts, he slid the angled blade between cast and palm. Slowly, he cut thru the thick plaster, the soft inner lining puffing out like puss from a wound. He worked up a sweat, arms bulging as he made slow progress up from wrist to shoulder. Once finished, he used a plaster cast spreader to bust it further open. His nose wrinkled, the sour scent of dried blood and sweat wafting up. After a few shimmies, the old cast slid off.

Ty had had two break points. One high up the upper arm, in the bicep; another lower down, going thru both the radius and the ulna. While there was quite a bit of bruising all around the arm, a blood pool seemed to have set up shop in the upper arm. Lucky for them both, Julian had just the fix.

Going back to the cabinet, he withdrew a large glass urn. In it, flitting shadows could be seen. Uncapping it revealed medical leeches. Fishing one out, he set it down over the bicep. In short order, it had attached itself, abdomen swelling. Adding another one, he replaced the urn. “Okay boys, do your thing and make me proud.”

With waiting being the only thing left to do, he flopped onto his bed. Grabbing a book from the side table, he continued where he left off. In a few hours he’ll remove the leeches, and depending on how well the hematoma is dealt with, may replace them.

Until then, he wants to see if Mariella will succumb to Pavel’s lusty charms.

***
A few hours and several steamy chapters later (full of physically impossible sexual athletics), Julian looked over his work. Both leeches were fat, one detaching as he watched. From the looks of it, the hematoma had definitely shrunk, but he would feel better if it were a bit smaller. Swapping out the full leeches, he decided some dinner was in order.

Heading over to Deadman’s Respite, he got a large bowl of lamb stew and a buttery, crusty roll. Sitting in a corner, he was joined shortly after by Tubor who sat with a heavy groan.

“Careful, Tubor. Or we’ll send people talking.”

“Any other time I’d sass back, but fuck me, Cordelia is a monster.” Breaking apart his roll, Tubor sopped up some stew before popping it in his mouth moaning.

“I must say, I know I have that effect on people, but please, buy me dinner first!”

“Like Ty did before ravishing you on Asra’s counter? By the way, he’s back in town and knows Ty did something on it. Might want to keep your head down, the guy can smell sexual shenanigans a mile away.” Both men had a few bites, before continuing. “He was bitching up a storm after meeting with Martel. Something about a knife in his wall and missing far-sight?”

Julian reddened in answer.

“Damn…” Tubor whistled. “The fuck did you guys do? Asra’s in a snit and I want details! Anything that puts a bug up his ass is guaranteed to be good entertainment!”

“Nothing! We did absolutely nothing.”

“And I’m the Virgin Mother.”

“In fact, our meeting was so wholesome and pure, we said prayers. Naught happened but the words of the Son’s Gospel passing our lips!”

Tubor snorted. “Right. So that’s what the kids are calling it these days. Prayer. Um-hmmm.”

“Honest to goodness, that was all!” Julian held up a hand. “Would I lie to you?” Musterling his most innocent look, Julian batted his lashes.

“In a hot fucking minute.”

“Rude.”

***

After dinner was a much-needed shower. Taking up a stall in one of the cleansing rooms, Julian made quick work. Slipping on some flannel sleepwear, he journeyed back to their room. The second set of leeches had done well, the hematoma virtually gone. Restoring them, Julian wetted a soft flannel and worked it up and down the arm. He ended up wringing it out multiple times, changing the water twice. When he finished, he decided to give a full sponge bath to what he could. Swapping the shallow basin, he got two buckets of warm water, one of them filled with a very mild soap. Over the course of the next hour, he went back and forth, the wash bucket getting steadily emptier and the rinse one dirtier and dirtier. He felt satisfied when finished, Tiberius looking leagues better.

As he went to empty the buckets, he encountered Cordelia again. The man was scowling something fierce, facial features twisted into something decidedly unpleasant and animalistic. If he hadn’t had a full, civil conversation with the man earlier in the day, Julian would have turned tail and
“Copper for your thoughts?”

Cordelia looked up mid-snarl before smoothing his face. “Ah, Julian. No no, no need. I’m just coming back from meeting with a few of the other Necromancers. What I had heard from them and Tubor is very...disturbing. It’s good that Germanius and I left Rus’s younger brothers behind. Tybalt may have been able to handle it, but sweet Belial would have turned into a sobbing mess.”

“I hadn’t realized he had siblings. With everything that’s been happening lately, we haven’t been able to really talk.”

Cordelia smirked. “Oh, I have no doubt that the two of you have been talking, just with your bodies.” He chuckled at the flush he wrought.

“We do more than that! Um, a- a lot more than that! Oh my, that hasn’t really helped my case at all, has it?”

A barked laugh was Julian’s response. “No, not at all! But then again, Rus has that effect on others.” Cordelia’s snickering trailed off. “Ha, but I am keeping you. Tidying Rus up? He’ll appreciate it when he wakes. Shame about his hair, though. Out of the three, he was the only child of Ionith to inherit that unique coloring.” He resettled his cloak over sturdy shoulders. “I’m retiring for the evening. Germanius and I are actually down the next hall. The other members of our party are upside, scattered amongst the other guilds. We’re hoping that by adding House Principia’s resources we can solve this problem quickly. A few of our party may ask you some questions over the next few days, trying to get a better picture of just what is going on in this city.”

Julian’s shoulders relaxed, unknown tension he had been carrying lifting somewhat. Knowing members of such a powerful House were taking an active interest in the situation doing wonders. It was an action that did not escape Cordelia’s notice.

Cordelia continued passed the tired Doctor, bumping shoulders lightly before continuing. Unbeknownst to Julian, he had planted a flare, one that any passing Principia would be able to pick up. If Julian ran into any difficulty during this investigation, House Principia would provide aid. It was the least Cordelia could do.

***

Germanius was not pleased. Upon arrival to the Palace of Vesuvia, he had announced himself and his assistant Valora at the gates. The...reception they had received from the guards was less than stellar, bordering upon downright rude. Between the shorter one ogling Valora and the taller one (still very much shorter than Germanius’s full height of 7”) taking his sweet time to check them in, all whilst making backhanded comments about them, he wanted to rip their throats out with his teeth and bathe in their blood.

(How dare they speak of Valora in such a manner! He will be having words with the Countess. Valora was an indispensable member of his Coven, having earned her right to be his Right Hand thru blood, sweat, and death.)

Upon gaining entry, there was no one to escort them. He looked about, incredulous. Was there no one to manage the Palace and its functions? Where was the Steward? A Chamberlain? Hell’s Fire, even a Captain of the Guard!?
Exchanging looks with a steely-faced Valora, they continued passed the Antechamber. As they walked down the Main Hallway, people passed them without care, no one stopping let alone looking at them in askance.

What the **fuck** was going on here?

***

After wandering for nigh on an hour, Germanius and Valora finally encountered someone who could take them to the Countess. However, just **who** this person was left a bad taste in their mouth.

They had met with Martel earlier in the day, collaborating and pooling resources. The old Master Sorcerer was worn thin, the research into Worm Sign being less than revealing. Add in his worry over young Tiberius (whom he himself had taught as a tiny Apprentice), and Martel looked dead on his feet. The conversation the three had had about the current state of affairs in Vesuvia was less than admirable.

An absentee Countess, an incompetent Court, the city literally falling apart. It was incomprehensible. Add in the fact that Consul Valerius was **very** nonchalant about his duty as Regent in Absence, Lucio looked like a respectable royal in turn. (The man had been a walking trashfire, but had genuinely listened to his constituents. Weather or not he actually **solved** the issues raised would be up for debate, but he did seem to authentically care.)

Seeing little Rus laid low, having barely survived his battle, was like a punch to the gut. Germanius had two children, Theodosia and Gothicus. Both are beautiful, smart and strong, and were raised side-by-side with Tiberius, down to feeding from the same breast. He had promised to look after his sister's children, and this made him feel like a failure.

Now, looking at the back of the Lush Consul, rage burned in his belly. If he does not receive satisfactory answers to his questions, he will burn the city down himself.

***

Being shown to a Drawing Room, Germanius and Valora sat upon a plush couch. The darkly complected woman gazed about, eyes bright. Every twist of her head caused her kinky locs to sway, like a dandelion in a summer breeze. Bedecked in Iriqan armor plating and quilted clothing, scimitar at her hip, she cut a fierce look. Add in her ceremonial facial scars and paint, and she looked like an ebon War Goddess.

Gazing at her from the corner of his eye, Germanius thanked the stars every day for sending Valora his way. Sharp of mind and keen of eye, gaining her as his Right was the best thing to happen to him. When he steps down, she would be more than a sufficient replacement as the Warlord of Serenissima.

(She would have to fight for it, like all Warlords would have to do. But her opponents will have a tough time of it, many being the soft and spoilt children of other, lesser Warlords.)

“What do you see?” He rumbled softly. It’s always best to have two sets of eyes for a problem.

“The Countess had been absent for a long time. Gossip says she had only recently re emerged. Her Court has failed to Rule in her absence. Very sloppy. Why were they appointed?”

“The late Count designated them their titles before they married. What they brought to the table,
however, is a mystery.”

“Some of the doorways and wings we passed were very much unused. Whoever the Steward is, they have failed. If Housekeeping is this bad, I would hate to see the state of Vesuvia’s external affairs.”

Their quiet murmuring were cut off when a short red-headed female entered. In her hands was a notebook and a pen. As she looked about, she made notations and spoke under her breath. Turning, she froze when she saw them, eyes wide.

“Pardon me, but have you been seen to?” Germanius applauds her composure. In the face of the striking Valora, many would be shaking. Add in himself with his wild salt and pepper mohawk, bisected eye and scarred visage and seven-foot-tall, bearlike frame and many would faint.

(He’ll need to poach her, his current Senechal was feeling his age. A few years of training and she would be quite formidable.)

“We were lead here by the good Consul. After wandering the Palace directionless for a few hours.” Their visitor jumped slightly. Not many people could imagine such a deep voice coming from Valora. His brow quirked at the light blush upon the other female’s cheeks.

“Oh my goodness! Please, follow me! Her Ladyship had just sat for lunch. I am sure she would be glad for company!” The two guests stood, one internally grinning at the incredulous look their height got them. The curvy redhead had to crane her neck back quite a bit, brows crinkling slightly before she sighed. “I’ll be sure to remind the kitchen staff to prepare plenty extra for our guests.”

Valora grinned, white teeth a sudden slash of brightness against her dark skin. It became sharper as the other blushed hard. “I see you have... experience with the appetites of mega-fauna.”

The other’s face morphed into one of aggravation. “I have a brother who’s a large pain in my rear. I learned early on to protect my dinner plate from sneaky fingers.” A smile bloomed in its place. “But not to worry! Our kitchens are experienced in the preparation of feasts! On the menu for lunch today is seared swordfish steaks, herbed rice pilaf and ambrosia, finished off with freshly churned vanilla ice cream with a drizzle of strawberry liqueur syrup!”

Walking to the door, she held it open. Germanius and Valora followed her down the hall. “Oh, forgive my manners! My name is Portia! What are yours?”

“The vision beside me is Valora Matin’qu ul Principia, my Right Hand. I am Warlord Germanius Aurelius Principia. We hope to have a progressive meeting with Countess Nadia Satrinava.” They had to walk at a slightly slower pace, not wanting to make the much shorter Portia jog to stay ahead.

A few twists and turns later, they entered the Dining Room. Sat at the table were the Courtiers, with the Consul sitting at the Countess’s left. If he had sat at her right, Germanius would have had words with him.

“M’lady, may I present Warlord Germanius of House Principia, along with his Right Valora.” Extra place settings were quickly provided, soon followed by large plates of softly steaming food. Portia stood at their side, pouring a plentiful glass of a white wine. After, she stood to the right of Nadia, a step or two back.

“Lovely to meet you, Countess. Let us hope we can have a fertile conversation.”
Lunch was an awkward affair. The Countess and her handmaid Portia were excellent conversationalist, slipping in with great ease some cutting barbs about the other Courtiers present that went over said subjects head.

Germanius concluded that it wasn't negligence of rule from the Countess, but neglect of duty from the Courtiers being the reason of disrepair for Vesuvia. As capable as she was, Nadia just doesn't have the time to oversee every aspect of the city. That is what a courtier is for.

Now the question is, why was she absent for so long, and why did Lucio appoint these obviously incompetent individuals to such important jobs?

(Germanius knows the reason for Valerius’s appointment: his relationship with Lucio being an openly public thing. He just hopes the man is more competent than he currently comes across as, but he doubts it.)

After a delightful lunch, they joined the Countess for refreshments. Following her down a well-lit hall, they made to pass a series of portraits. In an obnoxiously gilded frame was one of the Count, resplendent in a crimson coat, heeled boot beset upon some sort of animal skull. Both Germanius and Valora stopped. After a few steps, so too did Nadia.

“Ah, yes. The portrait. It is one of the last ones surviving of the Count. It normally hangs in his old Chambers, but I thought it would be nice to bring it out. Quite a few members of the public remember him fondly, and this hallway is the main one leading to the Receiving Room.”

Most of it went over Germanius’s head. He has seen that face before. He knows that face. A borderline hysterical snicker bubbled up from his lips, before becoming a full-bellied laugh. He started laughing so hard, he grabbed onto Valora’s shoulder, wheezing. She wrapped both arms around his thick waist as he tipped, only laughing harder at the concerned ‘Sir?’ he got from Nadia.

‘Oh my,’ he thought. ‘Ty's not going to believe this!’

***

Julian lay curled on his side, gazing across the room at Tiberius. Every night since the surgery started to same: watch in worry, wondering when Ty would wake until he fell into a fitful sleep, being woken interminably by the others twitches and sounds.

This night was different. No matter what he did, he couldn’t sleep. He read a few chapters of the driest medical text he could get his hands on. He had drunk a cup of chamomile tea. He even tried the meditation exercise his mentor had taught him when he was a young medic. Nothing was working.

With a gusty sigh, he sat up. Scrubbing a hand over his face, Julian decided there was nothing for it. Swinging his legs over the side, he slipped on some slippers and pulled on his robe. Making sure his eye-patch was secure, he left the room.

Hoping that some fresh air would help, he went to the transport glyph. Once outside, he sat on the steps of one of the mausoleum’s. Elbows on knees and face placed in palms, he looked up. The night sky was slightly more vibrant this far from Vesuvia’s center, but the blush of nightlife was apparent. However, a few constellations could still be seen.

Going over his lore about the Maiden, the Lions Three, and the Warrior, he only stopped when his eye started drooping and his head bobbing. Standing, he staggered over to the glyph. Stumbling down the hallway, he made extra sure to softly open and close the door, not wanting to disturb Ty.
Sitting heavily on the bed, he struggled to shrug off his robe. Flopping to the side, he was asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

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He blinked, eyes bleary. It took several long moments for his eyes to focus. With it, came a bone-deep ache. His ribs felt like they were on fire, with an indescribable itch all over his torso. Trying to turn his head, he found something keeping him from doing so. Frustrated, he fought with the clasps keeping his brace on before pushing it to the side.

Breath softly hitching, he went to rub his stomach when he felt a rubber tube. In confusion, he pushed himself up. An array of half-healed stitches, scars, and tubes decorated his abdomen, the skin several different colors.

Bladder complaining, he slowly swung his legs over his bed. Gasping in air, his arms shook in the effort to spin. In several spots, sharp pains blossomed. It took several long minutes to get the energy to push himself off the bed into a standing position. Swaying with his arms out, he took several short steps in the direction of a door, certain it held a wash closet.

Lucky for him, the door hadn't been shut completely. Nudging it open and then closed, he flicked the switch. Soft gas lighting glowed, giving him enough light to locate the toilet. Standing to breath, he fortified himself, pushing down the waistband of his pants. He winced, not knowing until now just how far down his stitches went. Why he had stitches he doesn't know, but he’ll wonder about that later after taking care of more pressing issues.

(He has to piss so fucking bad.)

Taking as deep of a breath as he could given his current state, he pushed his bottoms down just far enough for him to start. Letting out a relieved sigh, he relaxed. Emptying a overly full bladder ties with a mindblowing orgasm, and he’ll fight anyone who says otherwise.

He took his time washing his hands, having issues grasping the soap. Cursing under his breath, he eventually dried his hands. Leaning against the counter, he took several deep breaths, preparing for a long walk back to bed and the sweet oblivion of sleep.

Baby stepping back into the room, he spotted a conked-out redhead. He frowned, not liking his sprawled appearance. With how his back had twisted and his legs hung off the bed, he would feel it tomorrow. Making his way to the bed, it took great effort to bend and lift long legs, and then to place them on the bed. Amongst soft (and cute) snores, he shifted broad shoulders before pulling up blankets. He took a moment to remove the others eyepatch, running shaking fingers thru red strands.

Satisfied, Tiberius turned back to his bed. After struggling on and getting comfortable, he went back to sleep, hoping that things would make more sense when he woke up.

Chapter End Notes

tried my hand at forshadowing. How'd I do? (terribly, im sure)
Chapter Summary

Ty finally wakes up, drugs can change your life, and Worm slime is bad for your hair.

Chapter Notes

Oh, look. I'm holding a big bottle of Porn in my hands. It would be a shame if something were to...spill (drops bottle. Porn gets all over the floor). Whoops?

There was a low, reverberating buzzing, and Julian would strangle whoever or whatever was making that sound. Sitting up with an annoyed look on his face and hair destroyed, he turned to the side. After a few moments to focus, his eyes locked on a sprawled Tiberius. Limbs akimbo, neck brace on the floor, his jaw was dropped as he made the most horrendous snoring sounds Julian had ever heard.

It took him a few moments to connect the dots. Ty had woken up! It may have only been briefly, just long enough to get rid of the brace, but he woke! He fairly jumped out of his bed, feet doing a little jig. Coming to Ty’s side, he rearranged his limbs to make him more comfortable before checking the stitches. They looked a bit irritated, skin tight around the threads. Dashing into the bathroom for a quick wash-up, Julian got gloved and removed the drainage tubes and stitches. Cleaning the removal areas, he damn near dunked the used supplies into a waste basket.

Ty gave a loud snort, before turning onto his side. The change in position cut off the loud, beastly sounds he had been making. The abrupt loss made the room sound loudly quiet. Julian noticed a puddle on the floor, Ty having torn out his IV line at some point. Quickly cleaning it up, he decided to nip out for a hot cup of coffee and a galette.

(Dead Man's Respite had good food, but Julian has firmly decided that nothing tops Ty's cooking. NOTHING.)

Throwing on a light sweater and spare pants after hunting for his patch, Julian trotted out, fairly skipping. He ran into Cordelia and another man on his way down, quickly falling in step.

“Well, you certainly are in a good mood.” Cordelia's voice was rumblier than usual, most likely having just woken up. “Can you tell us the good news, Doc?”

Julian was so excited that all he could do was sputter happily for a few moments. Fairly vibrating, he squawked. “Ty woke up!” He spun in a circle, grinning wide.

“WOOOOOOO!” The unknown man raised both hands in the air. His loud bellow echoed down the hallway, pulling startled heads from other rooms. He started to dash down the hall, to only find himself tackled.

(Julian had best be careful on using that tone. It makes something dark sit up and take notice with most Principia.)

Cordelia was chuckling, before lifting an irate Julian from Germanius's back. Holding the malcontent Doctor by the scruff of his sweater, he gently set him back down. “You'll do well in our Family. Not many would have the guts to tackle a Warlord of Germanius's caliber. By the way, this is Germanius Principia, Rus's Uncle.” A tentacle of glee curled along his spine as Julian's face went pink, then white, then red, back to white, and settled on green.

Julian made a sound akin to an animal dying of a stomach wound, covering his face before sinking into a squat. “I, uh...that is to say...oh, dear. That wasn't the best of first impressions now, was it?” Peeking through some fingers, he offered a hand to shake. “Uh, Dr. Julian Devorak, at your service. Please don't squish me.” The fierce mohawked man could easily snap him in two. What are they being fed to be stacked like Atreian gods?

Snickering, Germanius shook the offered hand. “Don't worry about it. Rus would have done the same, if not worse. When his youngest brother was born, he attempted to get me in a headlock. Didn't do to bad for a 15 year old.” Dropping Julian's hand, he snorted in amusement, scratching his belly. “Still tossed him into the lake for that, though.” He heaved himself up.

“You deserved far more than that headlock, and you know it. Bursting into Ionith's chambers as you did. Uncultured swine.” Cordelia delivered a *smack* to the back of Germanius's head before continuing back down the hall. “Hurry up. We need to get fed and watered. Should probably bring something back for Rus as well.” He looked around the hall at their audience. “Oi, clear off! Fucking wankers...” A few more old-man grumbles were thrown in as he got glares for his rude words.

Rubbing the back of his head, Germanius made to follow. Passing by Julian, he scooped him up under an arm with a squawk.

Julian flailed, not liking being unable to touch ground. “Hey! Put me down, you great lummox! I can walk just fine.” His pleas went unanswered, as Germanius strode down the hall with long legs.

***

Making it to the tavern, Julian was dumped into a chair. Spitting like a cat, he only calmed when a large mug of piping hot coffee was placed in front of him. Moments later, a plate filled with still-warm pastries and a coffee tray was deposited, with Cordelia and Germanius sitting in the unoccupied chairs. Julian snorted, finding the sight of a massive Germanius trying to sit in a chair that was obviously not made to hold people of such a large stature beyond comical.

“Yes, yeah, pretty boy. Yuck it up why don't ya.”

After another smack and it's ensuing grumbles, the trio settled in for breakfast. Julian was dismayed to learn that Ty got his disgusting coffee habits from these two, with Cordelia adding an obscene amount of sugar to his aside from the whipped cream. Germanius was a downright savage, adding his coffee to his whipped treat. Julian's moue of disgust was met with twin ‘what's?’, before they looked at his pure black coffee and mirroring his expression.

“Deviants. Deviants the lot of you.”

“Trust me,” Cordelia began. “Dead Man's has some pretty good food, they just can’t make a fucking pot of coffee. ISN'T THAT RIGHT, DON!” The barman who must have been Don threw a

“Before we get too sidetracked, Rus woke up, yeah? Any idea for when he'll wake again?” Germanius shoved half of a cinnamon roll in his mouth.

“No idea. I've not had him as a patient before, so I have no baseline for how quickly he'll be up and about. Nor how morphine will affect him. For all I know, he'll be curled up in a paranoid ball under his bed when we get back.”

Cordelia flapped his hand. “Nah, you don't have to worry about that. He just gets really forgetful and stupid. Last time he was on morphine for an extended period of time, he forgot he had two brothers. Comedy. Gold. Especially with how he was going on about how adorable Belial was, getting all cuddly with him.”

Germanius guffawed. “That, was great. I think I still have a photograph at home.” Eating the other half of his roll, he missed the light look of shock Julian sported. To claim so flippantly to have a photograph of something as mundane as a that spoke of great wealth. Not even the Count had been able to get one, the prices being outrageous and the development technique was quite difficult.

Giving himself a shake, Julian picked up a blueberry galette, taking a bite. Going to wash it down with some coffee, he choked. The coffee was ghastly! How anyone could mess up something as simple as beans boiled in water he has no idea.

No wonder they mixed in whipped cream. Those filthy bastard's knew and didn't warn him. He is pointedly ignoring the fact that they did tell him, he just didn't want to believe them, but god's above!

“What in the world, Don!?! I've had coffee brewed by pirates, and this makes it taste divine by comparison! Just...I... How!?!”

He got another vulgar gesture for his critique. Rude.

***

After breakfast, the three split. Making a request for something easy to eat, Julian walked back to their room. On a tray he carried a covered dish of simple oatmeal with a dollop of jam and a small teapot in a cozy. He had to juggle everything briefly, trying to get a handle on the door. After nearly dropping everything twice, he slowly butted the door aside. Walking over to his side table, he set everything down with a quiet *clink*.

“Eyyyyyyyyeeeee…”

Eye going wide, Julian spun, nearly sending everything flying. Sitting up in a slouch against the wall was Ty, a pained drunken look on his face. He looks like he had been trying to get off the bed before giving up. Julian trotted over, helping the other to sit up better. It was a struggle, given the odd position and Ty's mass. After several long minutes, most of it filled with painful wheezes and gasps, Ty was in an upright reclining position. Once sure he wouldn't fall over, Julian brought over the tray. A slight shake popped out short legs, turning the tray into a squat table.

As Julian was getting everything in place, Ty was squinting at him. He looked like he was trying to think, but it was a painful process. He started to eat, with Julian bringing up his Doctor's bag. Pulling out a stethoscope, depressors, and a rolled leather case, he sat on the side of the bed. Securing the stethoscope around his neck, he opened the case, revealing several rows of pouches. Selecting one, he pulled out a convex crystal lens. Gently tipping Ty's face up, he passed it over one eye then the next, watching pupils expand and contract in reaction to the ambient light passing directed
through the lens. Doing this a few more times, he was satisfied with the reactions and condition of
each eye.

(He had had a real concern of retinal and brain damage. However, the results of his little test put
many of his fears to rest.)

Inserting the eartips, he leaned over while rubbing the the bell and diaphragm of the stethoscope
against his sleeve to warm it up. Starting at the upper back, he worked around slowly, asking Ty to
breath numerous times. While there was some strain, the tell-tale crackling of fluid buildup in lungs
was absent. Thankful for small mercies, he took a few moments to help pour a cup of mellow tea for
Ty, noticing the slight tremor in his hands. Finishing it, Ty was instructed to sit as straight as possible
for a heartbeat check. Despite the damage his abdominal cavity took, it was beating strong, if a few
beats slow.

After a few sips from a fresh cup, Julian did a quick oral exam. Somehow, despite the literal
beating Ty took, he lost no teeth or tongue. The only damage was a bitten cheek, and even that was
now mostly healed from the Kiss. Now all that was left was a physical to track the new muscle
growth.

Rubbing his hands together roughly to warm them, Julian splayed long fingers over tender ribs.
Wincing at the low, pain-filled hiss this wrought, he gently pressed down and back. Coming back to
the front, he repeated the motion before doing the same both up to the chest and down to the
stomach. Aside from some slight swelling in the stomach area (which is understandable, given the
hernia surgery), Ty had regained most if not all the lost muscle in his ribs.

Highly satisfied, Julian leaned back. Ty was even driftier than before, slouched once again against
the wall his bed was butted up to. This time, he had a stupid and blissed out smile on his face, eyes
closed. After Julian had stopped his motions for a few moments, he cracked an eye open. “Eyy, k'ep
goin’. ‘s nice.” His voice had a rumbly, purry quality to it, courtesy of his extended sleep.

Julian smirked. “Even though it hurt?”

“Mhmmmm, worth it.” He lazily lifted a hand, pointing. “Ezpecilly cuz ‘is yooou, babe.”

A guffaw was his response. “You are off your tits, huh? Do you even know who I am?” It was
sad how Ty got in this position, but his reaction to morphine was spot on from Cordelia’s description.

“Aaaaahhh. But yer gorgeous. Ya seein’ sumone?” He sipped his tea. “A nice sigh’ fer sore
eyes.”

Julian snickered. “Tiberius, honey-” “Hey, thas my name! How’d you know it?” “-Ty, we’re
dating. Have been for nearly a month.”

Eyes widening (as much as they could in a still-bruised face), Ty started chuckling before tossing
up his hands. “Awww hell yessss! I hit tha jackpot! Yeeaah!” Pumping his fists, he added a little
shake of his head. Julian covered his eyes, giggling as Ty started going on about how ‘beautiful an’
nice he was’ and if he ‘was sure we’re dating? Not that ’m complaining, but ya sure? We are!?
Yasss!”

Cordelia popped in, to check how Julian was holding up, just to receive a barrage of ‘look at my
boyfriend! He is soooo beautifuls’ and an embarrassed Julian. “I see he’s awake. How you feelin’,
Rus?” More word vomit from Ty was spewed, nigh incomprehensible aside from a few ‘he’s sooo
prettys!’.
Cordelia swears he heard something about dragons and cheese, and has no idea how Rus connected the two subjects even in his drugged-out state.}

Julian allowed the babbling for a few moments, before cutting him off. “That's all very nice, Ty, but we should let Cordelia go. Say goodbye.” At this point, he figured treating Ty like a slightly excitable child would work best. He certainly has the exuberance of one despite his current state.

“Bah-bai ‘delia!” Ty waved him out with a sloppy flap of his hand, slumping even more. As a chuckling Cordelia exited, Julian removed the tray. He smacked a hand, Ty gently scratching at his stitch tracks. He will not have Ty undo all his hard work!

Setting the tray outside the door to be taken care of, Julian went to the medical cabinet. Poking about, he found what he had been looking for; One stopper-top glass bottle, another a large squat tin. Heading into the bathroom (ignoring as best he could a whined ‘nooooo, don't leave me pretty!’), he filled a small cup with water and retrieved a flannel.

Wetting the flannel with the contents from the bottle, he brushed it over the scarred skin of chest and abs. Ignoring the hiss, he passed over each area several times, trying to clean still-healing skin. Once satisfied, he opened the tin to reveal a hard, compressed ivory disk. Dropping a few drops of water in, he worked his fingers in it, eventually churning a thin layer of a thick and greasy cream. Gathering up a bunch on two fingers, he started to smear it over the stitch tracks.

“Oh heeeeyyy, this is nice. What're we doin’, babe? Can I do it to you? Please?”

“I'm putting this cream on your scars, to help them heal.”

“Oh. Oh no! If I'm hurt, wha about you? Are you okay!? Do you need a doctor? I'll get Uncle Gemmy, he can help—” Julian had to gently press down on Ty's shoulders to keep him sitting.

“I'm fine, I'm fine. The only one hurt here is you. We don't need a doctor, I already am one. So, just, um, simmer down.” Julian was blushing a bit, not used to being fussed over. He's the one who's supposed to fuss, damn it!

Ty just looked at him like he was the moon. “You're a Doctor!? Your so smart! Oh my goddess, I hit the jackpot! Smart, pretty, and nice!” He slumped back down, grinning like the village idiot and humming happily. Julian took the opportunity to finish working the cream in before letting it sit. Wiping his hands on the flannel, he closed and replaced the bottle and tin. Helping Ty move, he eventually got him horizontal. Pulling long fingers that somehow tangled in his hair out, Julian gently wiped up the excess cream, leaving a thin layer still clinging to the new scars. Seeing Ty start to nod off, he made his way back to the bathroom.

Placing the flannel in a basket, he rolled up his sleeves and turned on the faucet. Soaping up his hands, he noticed a hot wetness on his face. Chest tight, his breath started hitching. Rinsing his hands, he leaned hard against the sink as the burning in his eyes increased, letting out as quietly as he could a few choked sobs.

***

Having cried out the pain, fear, and apprehension he had felt since this whole thing had started, Julian shut off the tap. He debated showering, but was too emotionally wrung out from the many high's and lows he had already been through. Stepping out, he checked the clock hanging by the door. It wasn't even gone eleven.

Deciding some sun was in order, he tidied his appearance. Changing, he walked out and down the
next hall. Seeing an open door, he peaked in. Sitting at a desk were both Cordelia and Germanius, accompanied by an Iriq woman. He knocked gently on the frame to get their attention.

“Ty's just nodded off. He's had some oatmeal and tea, and I cleaned his scars. He should be out for a few hours. I just need to step out for some sun.”

“I am happy to hear Rus'lan is feeling better. We shall check on him every now and then.” The Iriq woman had walked over, hand out. “I am Valora, the Right of Germanius. You are Dr. Devorak, yes? Nice to meet you.” Her Common was accented, and her sentences bounced between her native and adopted structures. Only a few inches shorter than him, her handshake was strong and calloused.

Germanius smirked. “So, what's this I hear about Rus gushing over how ‘nice’ and ‘pretty’ you were?” Cordelia started snickering. Valora grinned.

“Well, he is not wrong. He *is* pretty.”

All Julian could do was sputter and flush.

***

After leaving, Julian made his way to Mazelinka's. He owed her an explanation to his absence, along with an apology for his drunken behavior from before.

(He winces, remembering some of the things he said when she tried to dig him out of the hole he had dug himself in. How such a kind person came to care for him he has no idea.)

At some point, Malak had alighted on his shoulder. Nipping an ear, he grumbled as Julian continued on. Once reaching Maze's, he knocked on the door. It didn't take her long to reach it, grumbling the whole way. Opening it, she got quiet.

“Um, hey Maze- *hurk!*” He was yanked down by the collar, arms full of a crying retired pirate captain. Malak launched into the air with an angry caw, feathers flying from his abrupt de-perching. Awkwardly wrapping his arms around her shoulders, he released a breath before picking her up in a bear-hug. Both stood there for a few moments, tears being shed before he set her down. He squawked as he got a cuff upside the head and dragged into the house by the ear, her berating him the entire time.

Shoving her stupid, *stupid* boy into a chair, she turned to her stove. “You had **better** have a good explanation for just why you were a mess, and then just, just **disappeared** for a near week! Otherwise, you'll get more than just a spoon to your hide!”

***

It was late when Julian returned to his room, a large basket of baked goodies weighing heavily from an arm. He should have returned hours ago, but his conversation with Mazelinka took far longer than anticipated.

He had had many starts and stops, going from the day of the Date that Never Was (Maze stiffened when he mentioned the blonde woman's warning), to his drunken bender full of self-loathing.

(She had simultaneously spooned him and hugged him, leaving him thoroughly confused.)

When he got to the story of what happened to Ty, she choked. He did as well, more so when it came to his part in the surgery. He hadn't realized how much his hands had started shaking, or that he
was reduced to babbling a stream of consciousness until she grasped his fingers.

Her holding his hands, grounding him, helped him continue. Her relief at hearing Ty's awakening was palpable. When she was told just how off the wall Ty was after his painkillers, she called him a liar, and was prepared to come down and see for herself. Julian was only just able to mollify her, stating he didn't want to overwhelm Ty. Deciding that the Necromancers were not doing enough to feed and water both her boys (having claimed Ty), she set upon her kitchen like a lion on prey.

When he finally left, overfull from food and drink, she had shoved the largest basket she had at him, nearly staggering under its weight. It had been stuffed to bursting with sweet and savory rolls, pies, dumplings, and breads. There may have also been some clay carafe's of tea, but Julian had a hard time seeing around the food.

Walking down the hall, he switched hands, the basket handle digging into gloved palms. Looking up, he paused. A few doors down stood Asra. He had a soft glower, still dressed in traveling gear. Peeping up from his shoulder was Faust. She 'bleep'ed a few times before slithering down to the floor. Darting over to Julian, she started going in circles around his feet.

~Ty? Is Ty okay? Can I give him squeezies?~

“He was sleeping before I stepped out. We can check him, but if he's still sleeping we should let him be. It's also not safe to squeeze him.” He opened the door, eyes following Faust as she turned into a lavender blur. With some slight apprehension, he watched as she launched onto the bed before winding up to a sleeping Ty's chest. Tongue darting out as she looked at his face, she coiled on his chest.

He turned back to Asra. Anger and pain settled into a hard ball in his stomach, remembering how he had been used and cast aside so callously. The only reason he was even contemplating letting Asra near was because of his relationship with Ty.

Before he could even open his mouth, Asra beat him to it. “I don't know how Ty ended up with you, but if you hurt him…”

Julian gave a derisive snort. “The only one here who could get hurt is myself. Now, do you want to see him or no?”

***

Asra didn't stay long, not wanting to disturb Ty. He deposited a few glass bottles and vials on a desk, before extracting a large woolen blanket from his bag that was really way too small to hold something of that size. It was a cabled knit one, in a deep and intense red. Asra took his time laying it over Ty, making sure he was well covered.

(Faust was a bit miffed, getting smothered under it. She furiously wriggled out, giving a snakey glare to a smiling Asra.)

With a quiet request to keep the blanket safe (one of the last gifts Ty got from his mother), Asra scooped up a whiny Faust and left with one last pointed look at Julian. Upon the door closing, the Doctor let out a sigh. Changing into some pajamas, he brushed his teeth before going to bed.

***

Feeling soft *paps* against his face, Julian snuffled into his pillow. They stopped, just to start up again. Bringing up his hand, it got trapped midway up. With great reluctance, he cracked open his eye. After a few moments to focus, he could see the cause of his disturbance: Faust. The constrictor
was curled over Ty's shoulder, leaning over to hover her snout a few inches away from Julian's face. Her flickering tongue was softly hitting his face.

With a pointed index finger, he *booped* her blunt snout. "'m wake." Going to scrub his hand against his face, his elbow thumped into something warm and firm. Looking, it was a thick chest. Eye moving about, both shot open.

At some point in the night, Ty had gotten up and migrated over to Julian's bed, blanket and all. He laid on his side, facing Julian with an arm thrown around the other's waist. Luckily for the doctor, he was still asleep, or he would have gotten a face-full of the afflicted eye. Taking his time, Julian visually examined the face before him. The bruising was nearly gone, and the swelling had completely disappeared. The part of his scalp that had been damaged had lost its scabs, and there was a few inches of new hair. On the sections that had had stitches, the new hair was a dark grey.

(Julian felt a little sad. The rainbow highlights of Ty's obsidian hair were gorgeous. He hopes that the color will return after more fresh growth, but doubts it.)

Taking a deep breath, he nuzzled into the chest before him, eyes closing briefly. Curling his own arm around the dip in Ty's hip, he frowned. The salty, sweet smell of unwashed skin was pungent. He would need to get Ty bathed properly, sponge baths would no longer cut it.

~Ty okay? Can squeeze? Do I need to catch mouse?~

"Don' wan' mouse, Faus'. 'm good." Ty let out a jaw-cracking yawn, quickly covering his mouth so as not to treat Julian to the smell of morning breath. "But, can you do me a favor, sweetie? Squeeze Azzy hard. He was saying not nice things about Julian, and I don't like it."

~No! Slippery boy nice! Slippery boy friend! I go squeeze!~

Dipping over their entwined bodies and on to the floor, Faust darted to the door. Rising up and with surprising dexterity, she unlatched the handle, opening and then closing the door behind her. All was quiet for a few moments, Ty using the opportunity to bring Julian closer, wanting cuddles.

(His skin was so fucking...hungry. It needs to be fed.)

"What did Asra say...and when?" It would be a lie if Julian said he wasn't worried. He quite enjoyed the time he spent with Ty. But, he wouldn't be surprised to get dropped now.

"Woke up last night, starving. Waddled my way to the tavern. Ate an entire pot of stew. Azzy tried to warn me off you. Something about how you're 'enamored with your own misery' or some such rot." Ty ran a hand thru his hair, making a moue of disgust at the greasy feel. "I reminded him that no one is perfect, especially not he or I. Or the fact that some people take more time and investment than others for a worthy payoff.” He dropped a kiss to a flaming forehead.

Trying to shake off such a comment (an investment? That means time!), and step away from such...emotionally charged subjects, Julian started to sit up. “As riveting as this conversation is, I think we would both do much better after a nice, hot shower. So, let's get naked and rub soap all over each other?"

Knowing a diversionary tactic when he saw one, Ty let the conversation slide. From the way Julian was always willing to jump on the good foot and do the nasty, he had the feeling that the other had been shown little genuine affection outside of the bedroom. Lucky for the redhead, Ty would have no qualms smothering him in complements, hugs, cuddles and presents.

(It also helps that his sweetheart is an adorable little subby masochist. Hedonistic worship
demands enthusiastic sexual congress between spouses/partners, and Ty *refuses* to be shamed for leaving his partner unfulfilled in any way, shape or form!)

Relishing in Julian climbing over him to get out of bed, Ty let a hand glide over a long leg. Curling his fingers slightly, he hummed in satisfaction in the quiet laugh he wrought as they tickled a high arch. Still a little sore, he slowly lumbered out of bed. Julian had already gathered two baskets of shower supplies and robes, waiting by the door. Slipping on sandals, they slowly made their way to the showers.

***

Due to the amount of activity from the Worm, the showers were in near-constant use. 12 large cubicles in all, each had a long curtain to close off the entrance. There were six showers along each wall, with the back hosting 12 sets of sinks and fog-free mirrors. Everything was done in gleaming marble, with the center of the room full of low benches. Large balls of permanent Mage Light hung near the ceiling, giving off a bright glow. Making their way over to one of the benches, they set their baskets down. Ty sat heavily, still getting used to walking long distances after his bed rest. Both took their time divesting themselves of their clothes, Julian digging out a wide-toothed comb from their stash.

Sitting behind Tiberius, Julian pulled back all of his hair. Cursing the tangled curls, he eventually undid the messy loose braid they had been confined in. Starting from the bottom, he did his best to brush and undo the mess. Blood and Worm slime had congealed in the thick strands, making large sections matted. Not wanting Ty to lose more of his beautiful locks, Julian located and filled a small jug. Pouring it over the troublesome sections as he worked helped greatly.

Over an hour later, most of the hair was brushed. Sizeable sections were still matted, and there was a pile of broken hair next to him (the mucous had hardened so much, and the blood had *just enough* acid to weaken some strands), but it would now be possible to actually wash Ty's long mane. Arching his back, Julian moaned in satisfaction at the loud series of *pops* that emerged. “Gotta say, babe, that sound is giving me some ideas.”

The dark, promising look Ty shot over his shoulder was doing *things* to Julian. He flushed and sputtered, before schooling his face into a lusty grin. “Well now, I must insist, my good sir, that we get clean before getting dirty again. What say you?” He stood, holding out a hand. Hauling up a dirty ‘ol man, the two picked up their supplies and went into a corner shower.

They had excellent timing. This time of day the showers saw little use, so any shenanigans they got up to wouldn't be disturbed. Ty turned on and adjusted the water as Julian set down the basket on a built in bench near the entrance, shutting the curtain. Handing over a toothbrush and a tin of brushing powder, mouths were quickly cleaned. Ty stood under the boiling hot water, letting his hair soak in as much as possible. A thick stream of dirty red water ran down the drain.

Julian scrubbed his hands through Ty's thick hair, working his nails firmly into the scalp, breaking up matted areas prior to shampooing. He gasped in shock as Ty pulled him roughly against his front, the other moaning and throwing his head back. Julian could feel a half-hard shaft against his stomach, sliding along his own. He stood on his toes as thick arms wrapped around his waist, hands grasping and fingers digging into his hips and thighs. One hand left briefly, a motion traveling up the arm before returning. A flash of soft golden light appeared shortly before fading.

Ty slowly walked them back to the dry corner, rolling his hips into Julian's. His poor boy stumbled a few times, groin bucking from the slippery sensations. Kissing him hard and deep, Ty slowly sunk into a squat, making sure to drag his entire torso down Julian's hard erection. As he came to a stop, the doctors cock was trapped between his stomach and Ty's firm pectorals. Leaning
slightly forward, Ty flexed his chest as he reached into the basket, pulling out an obnoxiously large sponge and bottle of soap.

Julian was breathing hard, fingers buried in Ty's hair. He cried out before slapping his hands over his mouth in mortification as a hot mouth sunk down his dick. Looking down, he couldn't help but let out a muffled moan as he saw dark hair bob up and down. He did so again as he saw thick quads splayed out to the sides, flexing minutely as Ty leaned in and back.

Slowly pulling off the cock in his mouth with a hard suck and a wet *pop*, Ty had the audacity to grin up at him while licking his lips. “At any point, we could be joined. Interrupted.” Dragging himself back up, he slotted their hips back together. Adding a hard grind, he nuzzled into an ear and whispered, “Can you keep quiet, as I fuck you hard against this wall? Or will you scream for everyone to hear and let everyone know just how much of a slut you are?” He slipped fingers down a wet cleft, rubbing over a quivering hole. He did so again as he saw thick quads splayed out to the sides, flexing minutely as Ty leaned in and back.

Feeling long arms wrap around his chest and teeth fit into the meat of his neck, Ty poured a generous amount of soap into the sponge. Mushing it, a thick lather formed. He scrubbed it slowly up and down the back before him, his free hand following. As the sponge retreated, fingers replaced it, burying themselves between slippery cheeks. Splaying them, more suds could run down the crevasse. Thrusting his fingers into the soapy mass, more foamed into existence before he withdrew. Pulling back from the mess in front of him, he brought his sponge to Julian's front. Starting at broad shoulders, he made slow circles, making sure to brush over taught nipples. Adding more soap, more foam slipped down twitching abs, sliding around a hard shaft. The curls at its base caught a lot, making it look like a substance of a different sort was glistening. Not wanting to waste perfectly good soap, Ty turned himself into Julian's side, brushing the sponge over a hard groin, smiling in delight at the hard jerk and cry he pulled. He bit hard over a nipple, pulling another cry that was quickly muffled. “I don't know what you're going on about. I'm just cleaning you. Don't want a dirty boy now, do I?” The sponge started moving faster over Julian's cock and balls, thick streams of suds dancing down his quivering legs. There was another muffled shout as fingers were reintroduced to his cheeks, the tips of his middle three gliding over a puckered entrance to gently massage a tight perineum. He groaned as his erection was brought flush against Julian's quivering outer thigh. He did so again, lower, as arms threw themselves around his shoulders, fingers tangling and teeth biting lip as Julian hunched forward, hips thrusting between sponge and fingers.

Julian was so close, nearly at the end when Ty pulled away completely. Feeling lost, he turned, seeing the other rinse the sponge in the hot water. He whimpered in confusion, a hand coming down to finish the job Ty seemingly abandoned. He let out a startled “Ah!” as a large palm smacked his ass before shoving him under the shower head. Turning, he whined as he saw a soapy Tiberius, one taking his time to get cleaned. Using both hands, Ty slowly brought the sponge up and down his abs and chest, thick sheets of suds flowing over the mounds and dips of muscle. Bringing the sponge back up, catching as much foam as possible, he arched his back, pushing out his chest as he squeezed a thick stream of foamy goodness over it.

Disregarding his own soapy state, he walked back over. Coming in close, he turned his head up, begging for a kiss as he wrapped his hands around a thick dick, one over the other. With help from the soap, they slowly moved up and down, the top hand adding a little twist to a sensitive head at the end of each stroke.

Tongues entwined, Julian upped the pace and grip. Fingers alternating in squeezes as his hands
pumped, a feeling of satisfaction settled deep in his belly at the rolling, rumbling growls he rent from Tiberius. He himself moaned back as large hands gripped his buttocks, long fingers squeezing and massaging before dipping between them. Ripping away from the delightful lips below him, Ty threw his head back, letting out a loud groan. Releasing another, louder one, he came between both their stomachs and all over Julian's hands. His hands became bruising, fingers digging into cheeks as he pulled the two of them closer.

Julian nearly choked as Ty abruptly swooped down, shoving his tongue into a panting mouth. It thrust deeply, Ty trying to suck the soul from him through his mouth. A hand came up, gripping the side of his face as his arms continued to pump a still hard shaft. Ribbons of cum covered both man's stomach and chest, thick and hot. Julian's mouth watered, the sensation of another's thick, hot jizz clinging to him making him weak in the knees. He let out a quiet groan as Ty's hips started thrusting up, shivering as the head was rubbed.

The thrusting soon become longer, deeper, and more fluid. The muscles of Ty's lower back, hips and thighs worked hard, gliding and moving with all the grace of a dancer. Ty threw both arms around Julian's chest and shoulders, catching his arms. Julian's hands were still gripping a hard, slick shaft. Moving his thumbs, he pulled his cock in to rub against Ty's. Both groaned, Ty's motions gaining speed. He slid both arms down, catching around lean legs. Hooking and picking up, he spun as Julian gasped in surprise. Walking back thru the shower, he stopped for a few moments to allow water to wash away some of the mess. Soon after, he pressed the other into the wall, burying his teeth into a delicious neck. His hips started pumping again, pulling sweet sighs and gasps from his sweetheart. Worrying into the neck below him, he could feel Julian's legs raise and spread, the hands around both cocks abruptly speeding up. Julian hiccuped in a few gasps before crying out, letting out sobs as he finally came. He was soon joined as Tiberius also reached the edge.

Soon, both men were covered in cum as they kissed lazily. Julian pumped them both a few more times before releasing them with a shiver. He moaned into the mouth over his as a set of fingers scooped up a thick gob of cum. Sliding down, the moment his feet touched marble, he was spun. Leaning into cool stone, he gasped as two fingers slid inside him. Eyes rolling, he tossed wet hair from his face and arched his back as the thrusting digits went deeper and deeper on each breaching.

“H-, how? How can you still be so hard?” He whimpered as more cum was swept from his belly, pushed into him with a loud *squelch* as he got prepared. He widened his stance, trying to get more stable from the fast fingerfucking he was getting.

“Result of Kiss. Had more energy than needed. Have to pay back the Horned One. Mmmhhmmmm, fuck yeah sweetheart.” Ty slapped a quivering cheek, relishing in the loud *crack* and cry that resulted. “I'm going to ride you like a fucking carnival ride, the best damned one, until He's satisfied with payment.”

Both froze. The doors for the showers had opened, a group of people entering. Among laughter and chatter, they could hear the others disrobing before picking stalls.

“Ey, one's already being used. Looks like someone will need to double up or wait.” A male voice, young sounding. “The one over there still needs to be repaired, so two need to partner up.” They could hear bare feet slapping marble. “Ya know, Teeva, you could use my stall. Wouldn't be right to make you sit out here, with nothing but cold marble to keep you company.”

Julian startled, looking behind him. Ty had stopped fingering him. Instead he had scooped up more jizz, slathered it over his large cock, and positioned the head against a loose hole. Julian shook his head, face hotter than lava. Ty grinned, nodding fast. He leaned in, lips against a hot ear.

“We'll just need to be quiet.” Julian bit his lip, stifling a whimper. He would be lying if he said
that this wasn't *doing it* for him. Getting dicked hard, having to keep silent as others scrub themselves down, unknowing of the dirty, *disgusting* things happening next to them, separated as they were by a few short inches of marble...

Mind made up, he pushed back, covering his mouth as a flared head pushed in. It burned so good, and didn't stop until the full thick nine-inches were in. Leaning against the wall, he panted as he wiggled his hips. After a bit more flexing (biting his lip hard as his sweet spot was rubbed so fucking right), he started thrusting back.

They heard a feminine snort. “Oh please, Gaul. We both know what you're trying to do. And everyone here knows that your a two-pump chump that can't even be bothered to do oral.” A lighter set of feet walked away. “No wonder you never sleep with the same person twice: they don't want to sleep with you.”

Burying his mouth in defined shoulders, Ty snorted. Julian had to cover his mouth with both hands to keep his snicker from being heard. He gasped as a large hand palmed his half-hard erection. Another snicker was heard before Ty started thrusting slowly, arms curling over Julian's legs just to grip hard the inner thighs.

A series of “ooh's!” followed that remark. During the resulting stuttering, more walking was heard. “Now, Bailey, on the other hand...she can get it. Great tits, nice hair, oh and that ass. I want her to sit on me and make me call her 'Mommy’. Speaking of, want to share stalls?”

Hoots and hollers covered up the loud moan Julian let escape as Ty started to speed up. The sounds of skin slapping skin were quiet, easily covered up by the sound of running water. More shower heads started up, adding to the cacophony.

“Can we get Pel in on the shower action?” A different voice, also female. “I'll be honest, I just want to ride his face until I squirt.” Louder calls rang out, a quiet male sputtering. The one called Gaul was making all sorts of offended sounds. Soon after, the stall next to theirs was occupied by the threesome. The water turned on, steam rising as the sounds of washing started up. Other stalls started shortly after. A disgusted sound rang out (to the amusement of everyone else) as the curtain for the last unoccupied shower was wrenched about.

The wet slapping of skin from Ty and Julian got louder, with Ty grinding at random. Julian had both hands firmly planted on the wall, legs shoulder width apart. His head hung, mouth open as he panted. Each thrust bounced him, pushing a whimper from deep in his chest. His face was scrunched in pained pleasure, doing his best to not *make a sound*. Sounds of pleasure soon joined them, the threesome in the stall next to them kicking off.

“Mmmhhhhmmmmm, bet we could outlast those kids. Their enthusiasm is admirable, but we got experience.” Ty planted his lips along a tense neck, sucking a love mark into existence.

Julian's head shot up, eyes wide as hands gripped his hips and started pulling him. He scrambled to cover his mouth, just stopping the shout in his chest from escaping as Ty started to hammer. The hands on his hip pulled him into position, forcing him to stay there as Ty gave him everything he got.

“OH YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME!” The other bathers laughed at Gaul as his chosen partner started to moan loudly, encouraging Pel to ‘keep going’ and ‘don't fucking stop!’ A shocked ‘Bailey!’ was squealed, followed by a fleshy slap. Soon, a high sigh was released, shortly followed by the wet slurps that can only be from a wet pussy being eaten. Cheering and encouragement was shouted from others, suggestions on what to do next and tips for technique. Over it all, a growled shriek of frustration was heard.
Ty hadn't stopped thrusting, in fact going harder. Each meeting of hips to ass caused cheeks to lightly jiggle and forced a grunt from Julian. A quiet ‘ahhh…’ started to trail from Julian's mouth, getting progressively louder. It was muffled as a pair of fingers were shoved in his mouth, giving him something to suck on. The cock inside him started thrusting more shallowly, but harder. The change forced him to get on his toes, back arched out as the hand on his jaw kept him in place.

“Oh fuck sweetheart. Look at you. Such a slut.” Julian jerked and cried out as a large hand slapped his ass hard. “You take my dick so fucking well. You were just made for this weren't you?” He whimpered loudly as his prostate was nailed, eyes crossing. “Such a good boy. Just makes me want to tie you up and make you cry. You'd look so fucking pretty.”

Julian let out a surprised shout as one of his legs was grabbed and lifted, forcing him to one set of toes. It was pulled back to Ty's hip, the change in position allowing the other to go deeper. His prostate was constantly getting nailed, forcing his eyes to roll and a never-ending groan to be emitted.

At some point, Julian had spat out the fingers in his mouth. Collapsing forward onto his forearms, he leaned onto the wall, spittle trailing from the corner of his mouth. “I, I can't. Please, ah! Please let me cum…” his voice broke on the last word. “I need it. I need it.” A few fat tears of frustration rolled down his cheeks, dropping to mix with the water swirling into the drain below. Distantly, he could hear cheers and shouts of completion from the next stall.

“Just a little longer. You can do it sweetheart. C'mon honey. Just a little...a little moRE! FUCK!” Ty was so fucking CLOSE. Inside, he was throwing curses at Hedonism, just knowing the Great Horned Fuck was deriving amusement from their frustration. Growling loudly, he fist his erection, working it hard and fast, knowing if he could get his boy off they'll both be finished.

It was the work of a few pumps before Julian came, screaming and gushing. Each pulse of his orgasm rent a new shout, leaving him breathless. He barely registered Ty coming, vaguely hearing growled compliments of his ‘perfect fucking ass’ and to ‘take it all, sweetheart’. He did feel the thick, heavy warmth of a good nut, feeling both relief and satisfaction at the sensation. He moaned brokenly as Ty collapsed over his back, shaking. He turned his head, laying a soft kiss to the forehead before him. Soon, lips met and lazily kissed, tongues swirling.

Pulling back, hands on the hips before him, Ty withdrew with a wince. One that turned into a satisfied rumble as he watched a thick stream of cum gush from a well-fucked hole. He rubbed his hands over abused cheeks. Leaning over, he picked up the sponge. Wetting and wringing it out, he squeezed clean water from it along the dip of Julian's ass, gently washing away their play. He repeated the motions, gently wiping away cum with his free hand. After a few minutes, he re-soaped the sponge, quickly washing up a blissed-out redhead. Once finished, he guided the other to the bench.

Julian sat, panting. It was only as Tiberius was rifling through the bath basket that he started, going fuchsia. “Um, Ty? My dear? Did we, uh, you know, get a little...loud?” There was no way the others in the room hadn't heard them. Julian has always been vocal, and Ty himself is nothing to scoff at, sound wise.

Ty only looked up once he located the shampoo. He had a bit of a shy, awkward grin, one that wouldn't be out of place on the face of a boy trying to hide something. “Uhhhhh…” he scratched a cheek. “I ah, may or may not have, and this is neither an admission or denial, have or had not put up something that could or cannot be considered a sound cancellation ward.” He ducked his face, looking away with a blush. “Not that I'm saying that's what happened. Just that it's, ya know, possible.”
Taking a few moments to wade through the verbal bullshit, Julian frowned. With one eye closed, brows furrowed, it would be considered intimidating if not for his red face and bite-mark covered neck. “So, no. They didn't hear us. Because of magic.”

(Internally he sighed, somewhat relieved.)

“Correct!” Ty dumped out a palmful if shampoo, lathering it before scrubbing into Julian's hair. Around them, the chatter from the other bathers was still going strong. Julian hummed in contentment, the feel of long, strong fingers on his scalp relaxing. A gentle kiss to his jaw alerted him to his need to rinse. Making his way under the flow of water, he watched Ty smooth a hand along the side of his head, frowning at the wedge of shorn hair.

Finishing rinsing, Julian plucked the bottle of conditioner, wobbling on still-weak legs as he sat. Quickly applying the thick cream, he motioned for Ty to sit in front of him. Pulling over the shampoo, he grabbed the ends of Ty's hair as he sat cross legged on the floor. Both were prepared for a long wash, knowing that they may very well use the whole bottle.

Starting from the bottom, Julian worked up a rich lather. One that quickly became a rusty brown color. Working a few inches at a time, obsidian slowly emerged from dirt. They quickly ran out of shampoo despite the large bottle, with over half of the hair still filthy. The entire time, the other stalls were still occupied.

Taking a chance, Julian ducked his head out. “Hey um, pardon me? This will sound, ah, weird, but does anybody have some shampoo we can borrow? My partner's hair was soaked in blood and slime-” before he could finish, other heads poked out, all in various states of wash.

“Yeah, man! You can borrow mine! Just don't use all of it!” A bottle was tossed from across the room. It wasn't large, and half empty.

“Oh uh, that's nice of you. It truly is! But, Ty has a lot of hair. Like, a lot. What's left in this bottle wouldn't cover it. We already used a whole one, and still have over half left to wash.”

“Wait, did you say ‘Ty?’ Like ‘Tiberius?’ Innit he the guy who took out the worm?” A different voice, female. Actually from the stall next to them. “Oh and uh, sorry for the sexcapades. Didn't mean to disturb you.”

“You could start a fucking orgy in our stall, and I wouldn't give a fuck so long as I'm given enough shampoo to wash all this worm shit out,” Ty shouted, startling everyone with the marbled acoustics. Julian flushed, turning to him with a glare.

Before Julian could say anything, several bottles of shampoo were shoved in their direction. Fumbling slightly, he gathered them in his arms. “Oh! Thank you all so much! We'll replace them as soon as possible!” He smiled shyly, sending a few hearts fluttering. He didn't catch the snickering a few let out at the sight of his ruined neck and the hand-and-finger shaped bruises littering his hips and thighs, too happy to get Ty cleaned to notice.

Sitting back down, Julian picked up where they left off. Working through a few of the smaller bottles, he finally got the mass of hair scrubbed. Poking a dozing Ty, they scooted under the still-hot stream of water. A second and third wash were deemed necessary, so much nastiness still clinging to thick curls and scalp. Lucky for Ty, not much more hair was lost to breakage.

Deciding a full conditioning treatment would be needed, a mix of conditioner and Ty's oil was whipped up and applied. Coiling and clipping the mass to the top of his head, Ty stood and re-soaped himself. Julian took the opportunity to do a final rinse of his hair, stepping out after laying a
kiss to a wet cheek.

One towel around his hips as he dried his hair with another, he looked around the room. Most benches were occupied, either by the first set of bathers or new entrants. Mist hung heavy in the air, courtesy of the showers. Sidestepping, he relocated their basket of robes. Pulling his on, he laid his towel around his neck. In short order, he was joined by Ty.

Julian was happy to see that the grey strands now growing in weren't grey, but white! And they still had that iridescent quality from before! Ty now looked like his hair was spun from obsidian intertwined with opal! He dropped kisses all over Ty's face and head, humming in joy the whole time. He couldn't stop running his hands through the short strands, swearing that they must have grown another full inch since they entered the shower.

“Not that-” *kiss* “I'm complaining.” *kiss* “-but-” *kisskisskiss* “-what's gotten into-” *KISS* “-you?” Tiberius was smiling the whole time, loving the attention. In the background, he could hear others snickering at their antics. Just barely able to make out a happy ‘your hair!’ and ‘so pretty!’ , he walked over to a mirror. Looking into it, he grinned.

“Now this is nice!” He whistled, ruffling the tufts with his fingers. He could feel the faint ridges of scar tissue, twisting jaggedly along his head. Lucky for him, there were only a few, each a couple inches long. He took the time needed to properly admire the new color, anxious to see what everything would look like when fully grown in. He laid a loud kiss to the lips below him, Julian hanging from his shoulders.

After a few more minutes of preening, Julian eventually shuffled them out. A few bathers who know Ty shouted well wishes and happy greetings, glad to see him up and about. Walking back to their room, Julian wrapped an arm around Ty's waist and rest his head on a shoulder. Entering their room, they discovered the beds had been replaced by one large single one. Steering a drowsy Ty to it, Julian got him settled. Putting their baskets away, he went to pass Ty again just to be caught by grasping fingers. Turning, he saw a tired but stubborn Ty fighting sleep, trying to pull him in.

Deciding to indulge, he put his robe to the side. Picking up his book from the side table, he got in. After shuffling the pillows, he dove back in to his novel, wanting to know how the love-triangle between Pavel, Mariella, and the sultry Gina would go down as Ty curled around him and sunk into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

This thing was a bitch to write. I'm going back to bed.
Chapter Summary

Ty does Magic!, Julian gets caught up in Scary Feels, and Faust...well, she's a good noodle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Julian woke with a snort and a wiggle, nuzzling into bare skin. He mumbled, the waist he had wrapped his arms around flexing in a low chuckle. Long fingers carded through his hair briefly before withdrawing. Grunting in displeasure, he opened his eye. He lay on his side, arms wrapped around a sitting Tiberius's waist. Ty was semi-reclined, a set of wire-framed glasses perched on his nose as he returned to his...knitting?

Sitting up, Julian could feel the slide of the trashy romance novel he had been reading as he shifted. He rested his chin on a shoulder. Yep, Ty was indeed knitting. Knitting what looked to be a sock?

(It's either a sock, or an angry porcupine got trapped in yarn. Either way, that is a lot of pointed sticks that someone could get hurt on.)

He watched as Ty did a few stitches, coming to the end of a needle. His brow raised as Ty moved to the next, wrapping yarn around several fingers. It disappeared into his hairline as his fingers moved in a blur, stitches magically disappearing from one needle to appear on another.

He was quiet for a few moments. “What witchcraft is this!?” There was no way Ty wasn't doing magic. He was going way too fast. He watched his grandparents knit as a child, being a good yarn holder, and they didn't even come close to the speed Ty was going.

“No magic, sweetheart. Just skill.” Ty thinks it's adorable, watching Julian shift and watch from different angles in pure disbelief.

“That, my good sir, is a bald-faced lie! What trickery did you cast upon me, foul tempter!” During this bit of banter, Ty had completed a full round and then some, which Julian thinks is quite incredible considering each needle was holding a fair amount of stitches.

“Fear not, citizen! There is no trickery here! Merely the skill of someone who has worked with yarn and needle since they were a wee one!” The next round saw the start of decreases for the toe. He should be done soon, he can't wait to get these socks on.

Turning to the side table, Ty picked up and handed to Julian an already completed sock. It was a warm chestnut brown, knee-high with a thin band of cables running down the cuff to just after the calf. It had a slight halo, and was very squishy. “Here, the one that I had finished last week.”

Julian was fascinated. It felt soft and warm, and gentle tugging showed it had a bit of stretch. Running his hand over it, he felt not even a bit of catching, and the stitches looked snug and uniform. “This is nice. Wonderful, even! Why can't I find anything this well-made in the shops?” Well, the
average shop. High Street boutiques and custom tailors would have something this nice, but it would cost an arm and a leg. “What's it made of? Must be something fine. Kashmir?”

“Nah. Just wool. And second-cut, too.”

“Liar! Wool feels foul and itchy, unless you spring for merino! Or a silk-blend!” When he had worked at the Palace at the height of the Plague, he very quickly went out and bought better socks. He was already on his feet for 12+ hours at a time, and itchy socks on top of that…

No. Just no.

“Well. Most clothiers sell pre-made socks that were made on a machine. I'll admit, the invention of the sock machine is wonderful, allowing the poorer citizens access to a basic clothing staple at a steep labor discount. But, the yarn has to be made a certain way to work with the machine, and what is best for the machine is not what is best for the person.

House Principia is eyeing the textile industry pretty hard. It's how we became a powerhouse in the first place. However, over in Alba, word has gotten out of a machine that weaves for you. And, over in Norman, a spinning machine is in development.”

Ty removed his glasses, bringing his work closer to his face, twisting it about. “When we acquired a sock machine, which had to be done in secret, mind you, and saw how it works, most of the clan was pretty excited. Everyone in House Principia knows some sort of fiber art and has a quota. Even those who don't go into the trade have a certain amount of things they have to turn in.

A few of our elders who can't work needle or hook anymore were feeling a bit bereft, but had hope with this machine. But, running our spun yarn through it posed some problems.”

Julian ran his fingers over the finished sock again, thinking. “Let me guess? Too fuzzy and squishy?” He shudders, remembering the thin, almost string-like things that were passed off as socks when he got his research uniforms.

Ugh!

Ty snapped his fingers. “Bingo. You need to have shit yarn for those machines to work right. Some of our leading Master Spinsters came up with a few variations that would go through the machine and bloom into something softer when washed, but handmade is still best.

As it currently stands, if House Principia hadn't grown and expanded trade-wise as we have over the last 300 years, we'd be fucked. Already a few lesser Houses are scrambling to shore themselves up. Don't be surprised if during the next decade or so several families and companies go bankrupt or get acquired by a bigger fish.”

Ty leaned back over to the side table, returning with a large tapestry needle and a small pair of scissors. Julian watched as as stitches were slipped from one needle to another, leaving just two needles with stitches. Threading the tapestry needle with a length of the sock yarn, Ty turned to Julian. “If you thought watching me knit was cool, wait till you see this. It'll blow your damn mind!” He started weaving the tapestry needle through different stitches in a zig-zag pattern. After a few passes, he started to slide a stitch off the fore needle.

“Oh no stop! No! What are you doing!?” Julian remembers very well what happens when a stitch falls off the needle. His Grandmother was legendary for her fits of anger when it happened.

(He remembers, quite distinctly, having to dodge a thrown needle as she cursed the air blue. It
embedded itself into the plaster wall behind him, and she threw the hat she had been making into a corner before stomping to the kitchen.)

Julian had smushed his face in his hands, a long drawn-out ‘Noooooooo!’ trailing from his mouth. It cut off abruptly when he saw the loop stay open, yarn going through it. More loops followed at a steady pace. He knelled, bringing his face close. He sputtered when Tiberius gently palmed his face and pushed it away, Julian going into an exaggerated sprawl.

Ty glanced at Julian out of the corner of his eye. He'll be the first to admit that Julian made for a tempting sight, limbs flung about and naked as the day he was born. His heart did a little *pitter-pat* at the grin the other currently wore. He gave a little shake of his head, returning to his work.

Julian rolled over onto his stomach, crawling up and resting at Ty's still-blanketed knees. His eye was wide, darting all over the place. As Ty pushed off the last stitch, Julian looked from him to the sock toe and back. The toe looked largely finished, in that it looks like a toe with a mouth. Woven between the final stitches were several loose loops, similar to a laced but open corset.

“Watch this, babe,” and Ty started pulling the yarn used to weave the stitches taught. Slowly, the toe zippered shut, looking like it had never been open at all. Julian's brain looked like it had stopped working. After a few moments, Ty started to get worried; did he break him?

Julian exploded into sudden movement. Pillows flew as he flailed, snatching both socks and inspecting them. After twisting them about and looking at them for a few moments, he slowly turned to look at a snickering Ty. “It's true...you're a WITCH!” He flung an accusing finger in a hysterical Ty's direction.

(But not before being extra careful to set the socks down.)

Sliding out of bed, Julian minced to the wardrobe. Flinging it open in an exaggerated manner, he grabbed some clothing before slamming the door shut. “Witch.” He walked to the dressing table, picking up some basic grooming items. “Witch.” He strut to the water closet, standing dramatically in the doorway, hand on the knob. “Witch.” And with a mock sneer, he closed the door.

Ty sunk down the bed, wheezing. He clutched his sides, a tear escaping from one eye. If Julian acts like this over a sock, he will lose his goddamn sanity if he sees Ty make a sweater!

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In no time at all, both men were clothed and groomed. Going down one hall and then another, they made it to Cordelia's and Germanius's room. Peeking in revealed the latter, lacing up his boots. “Hey Uncle Gemmy,” Ty knocked on the frame. “We're just on our way for some food, then I was thinking of looking into the ‘Worm’ room. Want to join us?” Ty was interested in possibly harvesting the Worm he had killed. By Hunter's Rights, it was his. But, with how long it's been down there, there may not be much left to salvage. Fell Worms are very gelatinous, and as a result decay quickly. “I'm also interested in getting my knives back if possible, and seeing if there are any clues on who Answered.”

“Tubor and the others already broke down the Worm. A few trusted Potioneers paid good money for parts. Tubor set it aside, minus a fee, of course. The paperwork checks out, and key parts were set aside for you. The mandibles would make a fine trophy.” Germanius sat up, hands on knees as he looked about the room. “As for a knives, not a one has been found, but the room is still mucked up—” he paused, slowly turning to look at Ty. His eye squinted. “What do you mean, ‘Answer’?”
“Had to send out a Call. I just didn't have the firepower to take the Worm down. Hell, I didn't even have anything that could be considered a kit! Just a few knives, a bit of magic, and my wits.”

Both Julian and Germanius sucked in a breath. It put a lot into perspective, painting a better picture of how Tiberius was put into the state he was. Julian's chest grew tight, both with the remembered fear of the injuries Ty had, but also pride that he took on and WON against a juvenile Fell Worm. Entire teams have been wiped out by these creatures, naught but sludge and bone left in their wake.

Germanius slapped a hand to his forehead, dragging it down with a groan. “Uuhhhhh…no wonder we couldn't find anything! We were looking for a Summons, not a Call! FUCK! This changes everything!” He shot out of his chair, bending over his writing desk. Grabbing a pen and ink, his hand flew over parchment. “Head over to Deadman's. Cordelia, Valora, and Tubor should be sitting down for lunch. I need to send this out to Martel. He'll get the ball rolling on doing a Reversal.” Folding up the parchment, Germanius sealed it with wax, pressing his ring into it.

“Ah, well. Will you be joining us?” Julian admits that Ty's family has started to grow on him.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Don't worry about me, I won't whither away from missing a meal. Now, you two…” Germanius turned, poking both in the chest. “You two could use a few more. Go on now, get!” He spun the two, shoving them out the door with a cuff to Julian's head and a smack with the letter to Ty's rear. They grumbled as they walked off.

“Fuckin’ cranky old geezer…”

“I HEARD THAT!”

***

Julian was treated to the spectacle of two Principia Warlords in a feeding frenzy. Front row seat and all. He stared incredulously as plate after plate and pot after pot was cleaned. Several baskets of bread had been demolished, with poor Don looking frantic, trying to keep up.

He traded looks with Valora and Tubor. The other's had had their own fair share. Julian and Valora were quite tall and fit. Muscle needs fuel. Tubor was a high-level magic user, and just like muscle, magic needs fuel.

Ty and Cordelia were just fucking ridiculous. Where is it all going? How!?

“Okay, seriously. For real this time. Fuck OFF , Ty!” Tubor was slumped over on an elbow, a lit cigarillo slotted between long fingers. He had an indigent look on his face. “You are a beast that CANNOT be fed. And you!” He pointed an accusing finger at Cordelia, who was in the middle of shoving a mouthful of pot roast and potato into his mouth. “I'll do you one better! You're a fucking famine! You roll into town and poof!, the food disappears!”

Julian smothered a snort at the twin raised brows of Cordelia and Tiberius. It was obvious that they were family, especially with the identical unimpressed looks they shared. Family reunion's must make for quite a scene.

(His heart gave a jerk. He hasn't been home for so long. He wonder's how everyone is doing…)

“Whatever, you twinkie corpse fucker. You're just jealous you can't get a body like mine. EY!” Ty rubbed his head, glaring at Cordelia for the smack.
“And spend all that time and energy for years trying to turn myself into a meathead? No thanks. Besides, I can get your body quite easily. A bit of poison here, some magic there and voila! I've got your body!”

A loud ‘boo!’ could be heard from the other side of the tavern. The other's in the room groaned at the terrible joke.

Amidst all of the tomfoolery, Ty snuck a few apple tart's onto a plate, slipping it before Julian. Julian waved it off, pushing it back to Ty. With a stony stare, Ty pushed it back.

Valora sat back and watched, the bickering of Tubor and Cordelia fading into the background. Julian was starting to frown, and Ty's lip had started to curl up in amusement. Seeing the other two start debating and gesticulating, she leaned back, settling in to watch the latest drama unfold.

One that didn't last long, due to a third party strutting up to the table. Pulling over a chair, a disheveled Lucille plopped down, grabbing the plate of tarts and devouring one in two bites, ignoring the aggravated huffs coming from Julian and Ty.

Tubor started hissing like an angry cat. The feud between himself and Lucille was well known throughout Vesuvia. It wasn't uncommon for angry words to turn to sling magic.

Nudging Julian with an elbow, Ty picked up the pastry basket and walked away. Other's at nearby tables started edging away as well, doing so with a wary eye. Taking the hint, Julian followed.

(He thought to warn Cordelia and Valora, but didn't want to drag the attention of the other two on him. One magic-less person against TWO renowned casters? Perish the thought!)

Walking backwards through the swinging doorway, Ty and Julian walked a few steps, before breaking into a run at a loud shriek. A shriek that was shortly followed by the sharp smell of ozone, and a thunderous clap. Thankfully, they had turned a corner before the enraged bellowing of Cordelia echoed down the hallway.

Now would be the best time to investigate the ‘Worm Room’.

***

“Wow.”

“Um, yes. I agree. Wow.” Julian's voice shook. They were standing in the spot the Worm fell. A greasy smear denoted where the corpse had fallen. Next to it, almost comically small, was a dried bloody crescent. Fanning out from it were bloody splatters, with a larger ‘splat’ off to the side.

Julian felt hot and cold at the same time. This was the spot where Ty nearly died. The large random splat had been a piece of his lung. It was this very spot that he had vomited blood and tissue, dying, probably wondering if he would ever see his family again.

He started to hyperventilate, just the thought of the intense pain and crushing loneliness of dying alone a leaden weight in his chest. He hadn't realized he had frozen until a few gentle taps to his cheek. Sucking in a hot breath, he turned to a worried Ty, blinking rapidly.

“Sweetheart? Are you okay? Do you need to sit? Want me to take you back to our room?”

Julian shook his head, shuddering. “N-no. I'm fine! Fine! Just need to ah, catch my breath.” His voice broke on the last word, a tear escaping a watery eye. He turned away, clearing his throat as he
used a gloved hand to wipe his face. “Ju-just give me a moment.”

Ty scooted up, wrapping an arm around Julian. He rubbed soothing circles over the other's back and shoulders. One of the researchers began to walk over, worried. Turning aside, Ty shooed her away, mouthing a ‘we're fine’ over Julian's head. With a nod, she walked away, gathering the other's who had come over to the side.

It took only a few short minutes for Julian to settle down. After a few deep breaths, he straightened his shoulders. “Ha. So. Okay. What uh, exactly are we looking for?”

Dropping a kiss to a moist cheek, Ty released his hold on the other. “Pretty much anything out of place. Blood with no trail, rubble in an odd pattern. Something that looks deliberate. It may not even be here. It could be on the wall, the ceiling, or on the far side of this chamber.”

Julian hummed, arms crossed. Fingers drumming on an arm, he thought. Occasionally he shifted, muttering. A murmured ‘Maybe a,...no no no’ was heard before he huffed. His head twisted and turned like an owl's, trying to see the whole chamber all at once.

Ty watched the spectacle, amused. He outright smiled when the other started to pace, gesturing to himself. Leaving the other to his thoughts, Ty looked about.

On the floor, the greasy outline of where the Worm had rested snaked about. Long greasy smudges could be seen on various parts of the walls and ceiling, large globes of Magelight illuminating a majority of the chamber. On one part of the ceiling, soot and ash clung. There was some pitting of the stone as well, showing just how strong whomever Answered his Call was.

Whoever came to his aide was powerful. The stone used to build these cisterns was quarried from deep within the earth, and fired before placed. It was the same stone that the Outer Wall of Vesuvia was built with. It had protected the city from countless sieges over the years. For this rock to be as damaged by fire as it was…

Shaking his head, Ty started walking about. Doing a few loops of where he was found, he started looking at various piles of rubble. He stood, squatted, and twisted about, hoping a change in view would cause a clue to leap into sight.

Julian had stopped his pacing, standing before the dried blood puddle Ty left. He circled it a few times, looking between it and the Worm print. Spying a section of fallen column, he walked over. It was quite thick, being built to support the high cistern ceiling. Arms up, he jumped a few times, hands scrabbling for purchase. Needing more leverage, he walked back a few steps before launching into a running leap.

“A-ha!”

Grasping an edge, he gripped it hard. His feet slipped a few times before his boots caught tread. He could hear Ty snickering at him as he tried to walk up the side, butt sticking out and legs splaying. Squawking as they slipped, he pulled himself up as he swung a leg. Foot catching the edge, he pulled himself up and over, rolling over as he reached the top. Cheers and applause could be heard. Sitting up, he threw his hands up in victory.

“Ya know, we could have gotten you a ladder,” Ty thumbed behind him. In a corner were a few tables of tools, ladders among them.

“And deprive me of showing off my physical prowess? Pah!” Waving the other off, Julian opened his jacket and shirt, wiping away sweat as he did so. Leaning back on his hands, he crossed
his long legs in front of himself, head swiveling from side to side.

Happy that the other seemed to be better than earlier, Ty returned to his looking. He noticed a few researchers pause, taking in the sight of a mussed Julian. One looked toward him, questioning. Ty threw back a smug look and a nod. He got a thumbs up and a wink in return.

(He smirked, seeing one of the others slam a fist in the air, spinning and kicking a rock just to start howling and hopping. Take that! The Doctor is his!)

Seeing a sharp movement from the corner of his eye, Ty turned. Julian had shot straight up, staring fixedly at the far side of the room. After a few moments, he hopped to his feet, trotting to the edge.

“What do you see, Jules?”

Lifting his eye-patch, Julian scrubbed both his eyes before replacing it. “Either I'm seeing things, or something literally just flashed into existence. Over there!” He pointed a long finger to the far side of the room, one of the few spots not completely illuminated by the Magelight.

Ty and a bunch of the other's dashed over. Julian messily slid down his perch before joining. Elbowing his way through the crowd, he stood beside a crouching Ty. At his feet, a pile of shining feathers in different lengths laid. Picking up one, Ty stood. Holding it up to the light showed the feathers to be similar to that of a raptors, long and coming to a point. They were far larger, with the smallest being the length of a man's forearm. There were a few long, curled ones, looking more like the tail feathers of the mythical Phoenix.

Ty whistled. “Well, that answers that. Now we just need to figure out just which one this is…”

A Necromancer Apprentice raised her hand. “Um, sorry sir, but what do these feathers have to do with anything?” A few murmurs rang out. Julian admits, he too is wondering what feathers have in common with a dead worm.

“An Incubus Answered my Call. Thing is, I don't recognize the feather pattern or texture.”

A snort was heard. “Yeah, right. An Incubus showed up and fought a Worm. That's funny!”

Tiberius sighed, rolling his eyes. “Uh, you do know that Incubi and House Principia are descendants of Hedonism, right? And that Hedonism is a Force of Nature, right?” He turned, quickly picking out a guffawing youngster. His lip curled as the other continued snickering.

Julian cleared his throat. “For those of us not in the ‘know’”, he made air quotes, “please, enlighten the uneducated masses to what, exactly it means to be uh, a Force of Nature?”

Tiberius swung a feather out, pointing it at Julian. “I'll do you one better. Here! Pull my feather!” He smiled at the deadpan look he got from the other, giggles emerging from the crowd. “Okay, fine!” He glided the pointed tip up, starting from the center of Julian's chest, and ending with a flick under his ear. As it moved up, skin tightened and hair raised. A bright flush floated up onto high cheeks, and a gasp was shuddered out. A few raucous ‘ooohs!’ rang out, a shining lavender eye locking on laughing dark ones in response.

Julian opened his pinked lips, getting ready to lay into Ty. “Before you start in, just tell me; what did you feel?”

Blinking a few times, Julian's eye went wide. “Like, I just ran a marathon, had the most restful sleep, and like I have a full belly. I mean, yeah, we had breakfast before coming here, but this...this feels more satisfying.” He started to talk with his hands, wide gestures to emphasize each feeling. He
blushed. “My muscles feel both languid, relaxed, and like I had just spent a whole day doing hard labor and um...well...” his face went scarlet, and he looked down while biting his lip.

“Like you just had the best, soul-shaking, screaming sex of your life?” A quiet ‘yes’ was Julian's response. “The one thing these all have in common is life. While yes, an Incubus will go for sex over nearly anything else, it is more to do with the fact that it is easier to feed on a willing sexual partner than it is to hunt down, let's say, a wild boar and devour its heart.”

Everyone quieted instantly. “What most people forget, is that an Incubus is a predator. Its prey is the energy of life. Whether they get that from bedding a willing partner, to ripping apart an animal with their bare teeth and hands matters not. As a result, anything that tries to throw down with one is likely to lose.”

Tiberius grinned, a look that wouldn’t be too out of place on a jackal. His lips were curled up high, prominent canines on display as his eyes took on a golden gleam. A few onlookers shifted, uneasy. “Just remember that Incubi, while human shaped, are decidedly not. If you’re not careful, you can be their next meal. And not in a good way.”

***

They had returned back to Cordelia and Germanius's room. After hiding from an enraged and soot covered Cordelia behind Germanius, they sat around one of the desks. The feathers had been separated into different piles according to length and textured. All told, there were three piles of seven each of tail, wing, and decorative feathers. Most were a solid black, but roughly half of the non-decorative ones had alternating stripes of black and browns.

None of the Principia present could identify which Incubus they came from. This was either a powerful youngster, or a really, really old one.

“This here,” Ty pointed to the long, curled ones, “reminds me of Abraxas. But I know for a fact he doesn’t have any young, just having reached adulthood himself.”

Cordelia hummed, picking up one. “Maybe an ancestor of his? Not necessarily his Sire, maybe a Grandsire? Or another Elder?”

“The patterns here remind me of the Lammergeier. Not many sport such a pattern, so that really narrows down the selection.” Germanius had Summoned a thick tome, paging through it rapidly. Finding his selection, he set it down. On one page was a detailed color drawing of a feather very similar to a flight feather from the pile.

“Yeah, but a few look closer to a Steppe Eagle. The feel of the magic that was shared with me was hot, like the pumping of blood during a chase after prey. Maybe a mix?”

“Mmmmm, I don't know. For there to be a cross between the two types is just…”

“Gemmy, we ALL know it's possible. Hell, remember Claxion? He was a Crow and friggin’ PEACOCK mix.”

“Oh yeaaaah, I forgot about him. FUCK that guy. A name never seemed more appropriate until he showed up. Whatever happened to him?”

“Pissed off the wrong guy. He made moves on Severus's daughters.”

“Oh. Well then.”
Unable to decipher just who had come to Ty's aid, the mystery was placed on the back-burner. Instead, the topic of Ty visiting the Palace was brought up.

“Oh HELL'S NO! Uh-uh! Nope! Not happening.”

“While I, too, share your sentiments, my reasons are fairly obvious,” Julian showed off the back of a bare hand, the Murderer's Mark in stark contrast to his pale skin. “What are your reasons?”

“The ghost of Count Lucio felt me up.”

The room went dead silent. “What.”

“Also, he didn't look like himself. Instead, he was in the form of a goat.”

Valora leaned forward. “Rus-lan, are you okay?” She turned to an incredulous Julian. “Is he okay? Is it normal for someone to have gone through hard surgery to act this way afterwards?”

“A goat that stood on two legs. Oh! And he was missing part of his arm!”

Julian stood up. “Okay, Ty! Let's get back to our room! It's been a busy day, and a nap seems in order!” He walked over, tugging Ty by the shoulder. “We'll go, take a nap, and talk more again tomorrow! With a discussion decidedly absent of ghosts!”

Ty continued to sit, despite Julian's best attempts. He thought it was adorable, trying to wrestle up someone who was nearly twice the other's weight. The snickering from the other's showed their agreement.

“What? You're not afraid of ghosts, are you?”

“Me? Afraid? Of ghosts? Ha! It is hard to fear something that doesn't exist!”

Valora scuffed her foot, slamming her booted toes against a table leg. With a squawk, Julian jumped, sprawling into Ty's lap. The other stood, cradling a huffing Julian.

“Ghosts aside.”

“-not afraid.”

“- I do agree. I'm tired, so...nap time!” Ty spun, walking out the door with a still-protesting Julian in a bridal carry. Their snarking was cut off as the door closed.

The remaining three sat, processing the silence. Valora shuffled, scooting her chair closer to the desk. “It is nice, seeing Rus-lan so energetic. We should keep Julian.”

“I agree. It's about time he found someone to settle down with.”

They turned to Cordelia. “What are you looking at me for? I've already drawn up the paperwork. Ty's going to be in for a surprise when he does his taxes.”

“...will you be the one to tell him?”

“I won't even be in the country.”
Returning to their room, Ty tossed a babbling Doctor onto the bed. The other bounced with a “oof!” before settling. Stripping off his boots, Ty started doing the same to Julian.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking off your boots.”

“I can see that. Just...why?”

“Because we're taking a nap, and while you may have been raised in a barn, I wasn't. So, no boots in bed.”

Julian leaned back on his elbows, brow high as he threw the other a salacious smirk. “Oh, I don’t know about that. I’ve had quite a few other's mention how much they like me in my boots. And nothing else!” He wiggled the still-booted foot Ty hadn't gotten to yet. He laughed as a strong hand grasped his ankle, pulling him down the bed. Coming to a stop, his legs dangled over the edge, feet kicking.

Ty walked between long and spread legs, smoothing his hands over the tops of thighs, up a lightly-muscled torso and broad shoulders, to plant palms on either side of a smirking redhead's face. The other had a slight flush to his face, the pupil of his cool lavender eye blown wide.

Curling a hand along a defined jaw and cheek, Julian pulled the other's face down. “Mmmmm, it's been some time since our last meal. I could go for a little snack,” he murmured, adding an eyebrow waggle. He kissed a snickering Ty, adding some tongue and getting a pleased rumble for his trouble.

Ty knelled on one knee, lips and tongue seeking more sweetness. “I think...we can...do that,” sweeps of heat were delivered between words. He growled when the other moaned quietly at bitten lips, butting his knee against the underside of the other's groin. His hands ghosted down heaving sides, one ducking between layers of jacket and shirt to palm feverish skin. The other rested on a slim hip, fingers digging in as long arms locked around his back. He started kissing down a long neck, delivering nips at random. “However, we should be careful. Don't want to spoil our dinner now, do we?” He sunk his teeth into the junction of shoulder and neck, cock twitching hard at the shuddered groan he got.

~Ty! Ty is better! Must squeeze!~

With a slam, their door opened. Quick as a shot, Faust slithered in. Launching through the air, she landed in a heap of purple coils on Ty's back. She withered happily, tongue *bleaping* a mile a minute.

Ty sat up with a sigh, sitting back on Julian's thighs. The other echoed him, one arm flung out as the other covered his eyes. Faust crawled up Ty's shoulders, winding around them best she could before nuzzling under his chin.

~Missed Ty. Was scared!~

“I know honey. I missed you, too,” he dropped a kiss to her scaly head. He chucked under her chin, adding scritches.

~Smells here. Like mating. Are you doing Mating Dance?~

Ty choked, and Julian squawked in mortification. If either man had still been aroused, they no longer were.
“Um, Faust? Sweetie? How do you, uh, know what mating smells like?” Julian was redder than a tomato. This was nearly as bad as the time he had to explain to a 24-year old woman that yes, sex is what makes babies.

(The other Doctor's didn't let him live that whole debacle down for months…)

~Asra likes mating! He does it LOTS!~

Julian DID NOT need to know that...never mind that he has first-hand experience to just how MUCH Asra likes 'mating'. Or he himself.

Ty swung to the side, sitting on the bed's edge. Faust had coiled around his neck, raising her head up to bump her snoot against his nose. Julian wiggled and slid about, finally settling with his head in Ty's lap. Ty started carding his fingers through unruly locks, satisfaction burning in his belly at the happy hum the other gave.


She pillowed her head along her coils on Ty's neck. He rubbed them, trying to soothe her of her guilt.

“Yes you did, honey. But it's okay, Julian and I can mate later,” he smirked at the embarrassed sound the other made. It got wider at the blushing glare he got.

~Yay! Love a Doctor. Love Ty. Will be hatchlings? I teach!~

Both men choked on air, Julian devolving into hacking coughs. It went on long enough that Ty flipped him over, smacking his back while whispering for him to 'breath, luv!'.

“We, uh, *wheeze* can't um, have hatchlings, Faust. We're both male.” Julian was scarlet. This was The Talk all over again!

~Magic! Can fix? I ask Asra!~

Scrambling over each other to catch a slippery snake, Ty and Julian tumbled to the floor. Caught up in a pile of tangled limbs and cursing, she was long gone by the time they disengaged. With a groan, Ty collapsed onto a panting Julian's chest.

“...I need a drink.”

Ty grunted in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

It's official, Ty's a Witch. Now to see if he floats like a duck.

And Julian? You're doing great, sweetie.

(P.S. The opening scene is pretty much verbatim what happened when my s/o saw me knitting a sock for the first time. He wants a sweater. I demand a flock of sheep and 10 acres for my hand in return.)
Of Adventures and Amour

Chapter Summary

Drinks are shared, there is cuddling to be had, and love is in the air.

Oh, and they're going to find some Worms.

Chapter Notes

Adventure Time! Yay!

...oh, and Portia get’s some love.

Ty was decidedly not happy that evening. Over dinner, it was determined that a visit to the Palace was to be done. Preferably the next morning. Cordelia hoped that they could coordinate with Nadia about investigating the cause of the Worms. What he didn't tell the others was that he was going to try to steer the investigation on Dr. Devorak into the purview of House Principia.

(He cares little about the murder of Lucio. He and Germanius are in agreement: Julian is a valuable resource. Why other provinces of the Stellaris Empire aren't fighting over him despite his actions is blowing their minds.)

It took quite some time for Tiberius to settle down. Throughout dinner he huffed quite a bit. Near everybody involved was sick of his grouchiness by the time dessert rolled around. Only Julian and surprisingly Tubor agreed with Ty not going.

Overruled, Ty stomped off to their bedroom. An anxious Julian would have followed, just to be taken aside by Cordelia. Walking to the room that Cordelia and Germanius shared, the door was shut and barred.

Sitting at the desk, Julian started absently playing with his fingers, eye bouncing between the other two men. Cordelia sat across from him on his bed, while Germanius rummaged around in a trunk. Pulling out a dark amber bottle, he gathered a few shot glasses. Julian's leg started bouncing, his nervousness growing by the minute.

It was only as each man had a shot before them that the silence was broken. “Calm down, Julian. We just wanted to have a word with you,” Cordelia sipped his drink, making a pleased hum at the deep, smoky flavor of the alcohol. “What happens in this room, stays in this room. We have some very important questions to ask you, and we need your most honest answers. How our meeting with Nadia goes depends entirely on your truthfulness.”

Taking a deep breath Julian nodded. He skullered his drink, rolling the now-empty glass in his palm. “Well, gentlemen, fire away! However, I suspect that I'll need more drink to get through this.”
“What are your Intentions towards Tiberius?”

Cordelia smacked Germanius as Julian choked on his refill. “We agreed to leave that be! Ty is a grown-ass man! He can watch after himself!”

“If you think I’m not going to do everything in my power to ensure that MY NEPHEW is safe and happy, then go fuck yourself! Ionith was my sister! She nursed my children at her breast next to her own when Pallas died! She cared for my children same as her own, despite the demanding duties of being The Priestess of Hedonism and all that entails! Seeing Rus-”, he choked. “Seeing Rus after the Worm showed that I FAILED. That should have never happened! I should have fought harder, to bring him home after his accident. But I didn’t…” he sucked in a breath, eyes watering. “Instead, I let him be Ostracized. Left out in the Cold, with no Warmth or support. I couldn't look Ionith in the eye then, and couldn't look Rus in the eye either when I told him he couldn't go to her Remembrance.”

The room was quiet as the others allowed Germanius time to gather himself. Cordelia looked like had aged an additional ten years, shoulders slumping. Julian's chest felt tight. Trying to imagine wanting to go home, just to have that home turn away from you...that hurts.

(He made his choice years ago. He could have returned at any time. Ty didn't, and can't.)

“...Death looked at this wretch, and turned her gaze aside. If you fear foul intentions towards Ty, worry not,” Julian removed his gloves, the Mark stark. “I take what I can get, knowing I have little to offer in return.” His hand flexed, curling into a fist. “I can honestly say though, that despite what happens between us, I do treasure our time together. Whoever Ty ends up with will be very lucky.”

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Talk quickly resumed where the other two had originally wanted to start: Did he kill Lucio, and if so, why? What should have been a somewhat straightforward conversation was soon turned on its head with a simple phrase.

“I don't know.”

“What do you mean, ‘you don't know’? It's a simple question! Did you, or did you not, kill Count Lucio?” Cordelia wanted to bang his head against the table. He thought Rus had picked a good one.

Now he's wondering if the other was on drugs when he made his choice…

“I have little to no memory of that night! Hell's below, I have little memory of my time researching the Plague at the Palace!”

Germanius slumped back in his chair with a groan, Cordelia pinching the bridge of his nose. Julian rubbed his eyes, patch going askew. As he went to replace it, a meaty hand caught his wrist.

“You still have both eyes.”

Julian nodded. “It's still physically present, it just doesn't work,” he looked up, meeting Cordelia's gaze firmly. “I keep it covered, mostly because I got sick of people asking what happened to it.” He gave a roguish grin. “That, and the ladies love the hint of danger it gives me. The mystery! The drama!” He gestured widely with his free hand, not a drop of drink spilling. “What dark and tortured past did I live through, to mare my visage thusly so? Alas,” he draped his hand over his heart, affecting a swoon, “if only I would let a comely maiden close to my heart, perchance I can live a life worth living, in the sunlight, and away from the darkness that taints my past!”
“Oh NO... not another one,” Cordelia moaned, slumping back onto his bed. He snuffed. “Why couldn't Rus just settle down with...oh, I don't know, anyone other than a thespian!? This is Relmyna all over again…”

“And Ondor.”

“And Stella.”

“Don't forget that couple. What were their names again?”

Julian, while successful in his misdirection, was now completely blindsided at the amount of names being thrown about. The woman from a few weeks ago was right, Ty has had many, many conquests.

Now he's just wondering, what exactly does Ty see in him?

***

After an hour of bullshitting and quite a few drinks later, a rosy-cheeked Doctor stumbled out. Swaying just out of the doorway, he spun in a circle before listing down the hallway.

“'rong way, chile,” Cordelia slurred, shifting a snoring Germanius into bed. “'e's down deh ‘all, back down de way”.

Spinning in a disjointed yet oddly graceful movement, Julian gave a sloppy salute before going the opposite way. Coming to the end of the hallway, he leaned against the corner for a moment. Grinning like a sot, he twisted to the right on the balls of his foot, dragging his shoulder against brick as he did an approximation of a walk, if it was explained to a horse that was also drunk.

After knocking on some poor, unfortunate souls door, he eventually arrived at his desired destination. Trying his best to focus, he pawed at the doorknob, losing grip repeatedly. Finding this funny, he started giggling before shushing himself. Trying to keep himself quiet, he covered his mouth.

He missed it by a mile.

Instead, he ended up covering his cheek and part of his ear. He paused, eye widening when he came to an absolutely brilliant conclusion: if he can't hear his fumbling, then neither could Ty. Genius!

He resumed his fumbling, giggling greatly 'smothered’ due to the hand now covering his ear. He mentally patted himself on the back, proud of his solution to not wake Ty. He's so considerate! In the morning, Ty will be sooo impressed that he didn't wake the other despite his drunken state, he may get a kiss!

A kiss sounds wonderful right about now. And a hug. And other...things.

Ty has some really nice, big hands. Strong, too. But gentle. They can do a lot, like run through his hair, and cook delicious food. They can do so much that Julian likes. He really likes it when they manhandle him. Pick him up and hurt him. Those long fingers leave such beautiful bruises…

The heat of lust joined that of alcohol in his bloodstream. Biting a lip, he renewed his efforts. Before he could unlatch the knob, the door swung open.

A shirtless Ty stood in the doorway, sleep pants riding low on thick hips. The glasses from earlier
were perched on his nose, the backlight of their room bouncing off the thin wire frames. His freehand scratched his stomach as he cocked his head to the side in curiosity.

“Babe, what are you-”, he cut himself off, sniffing. He chuffed. “You're drunk off yer ass, ain't ya?” He let out a grunt as Julian tipped forward into his chest, nuzzling between his pectorals as long arms snaked around a cinched waist to fondle firm cheeks. A loud chuckle bubbled up. “I see someone missed me.”

“Mished you lots,” Julian kissed the chest he buried his face in loudly, native Nevinesse accent thick in his voice. “Wanna show you how musth.” He started leaning forward before stumbling into a crouched, half-walk as Ty moved back into the room, shutting the door. He let out a grumpy squeak as he was tipped onto the bed, room spinning in his vision. He curled up, devolving into giggles as he felt Ty start to take off his shoes.

“Seems like someone had a nice evening. Delia and Gemmy, along with some Artoie?” He tickled a high arch after the boot slid off, smiling at the loud snort and jerk he got.

Julian sat up on his elbows, a goofy look on his face. One that quickly turned into a leer as Ty undid his trousers after removing his boots. “Hmmmm, an’ my nigh's gonna get bett'r, now I got you. ‘Specially if you help get the res’ off. An yeh pants!” He made grabby motions at Ty, wanting to feel hot skin under his hands. He moaned as canvas pants were pulled off, catching on his half-hard erection. He ran unsteady hands up and down Ty's sides as the other knelled on the bed, undoing and removing jacket and shirt.

Ty batted the others hands to the sides, ignoring Julian's horrid groping with a hidden smile. He flicked a ear when a hot mouth attached itself to his sternum. “Settle down, sweetheart. I need to get you ready for bed.”

“But Tyyyyyyyy...I want you. I wanna feel you’re hands all over meeeeee.”

“I know you do, but we’re going to bed. I'll fuck you when you're sober.”

Julian sat with a pout. “Everyone else has no probl'm fuckin’ me when I'm drunk,” he tugged a muscled arm. “C'monnnn- erp!” He lost his grip, flinging himself back into a soft mattress as a result.

“That's because those others have no self-respect and standards.” His heart hurt, hearing Julian talk about his use by others. He wanted to punch someone.

He'll cuddle a drunk Doctor instead.

Finished undressing the other, Ty rolled the other over and under the covers. Going back to the desk he had been sat at, he moved what he had been working on away from any edges before grabbing a pencil, notebook, and a thick tome. Rejoining the other, he settled in. In an instant, arms wormed back around his waist. In short order, he had to move a wandering hand.

“Sleep.”

With a huff, Julian turned away, pulling the covers up around his shoulders. Minutes later, he turned back, cuddling back up to Ty. He huffed again. For his sass, he got a pillow to the face.

“Sleep.”

“Don’ wanna…” And between two blinks, Julian was out like a light.

***
He has been betrayed. The one who should have been on his side at all times, to offer comfort and succor, to give him support and help, is a vicious, conniving, backstabber.

“Sweetheart, I only turned on a lamp. I certainly have no plans for your demise. It’s kind of hard to plow you into the bed when your six feet under.”

A foul他的 shorty, something cool and damp was placed at his lips. Sipping showed it was a glass of water. Moments later, two tablets pressed in, followed by more water. He was rolled to his side, covers tucked around his shoulders.

“Why do I feel like dying?” He gave a death moan as the movement jostled his head. Pounding along his temple and behind his eyes hit him like a runaway carriage.

“Because Delia and Gemmy should have known better. Artoie is not meant to be consumed without supervision, and those two chucklefucks let you drink nearly a dozen shots of it. Fuckers.”

Julian moaned in agreement. A pox on them both. He hopes the next time they go to take a shit, their dicks fall off. Assholes.

He felt marginally soothed when long fingers worked back through his hair. “I need to leave for a few minutes—” a pathetic whimper cut Ty off. “Just long enough to get something to eat. A water glass is on your table, and a bin on the floor. Do you want me to bring you back anything? Porridge?” Julian death moaned a negative. A soft kiss fell upon his sweaty brow. The bed shifted, the foul light of the lamp turned off, and footsteps walked out of the room.

Bussing his head further into the pillows, a hung-over Julian dropped back into a restless sleep.

***

“Well now, look who's up. GOOD MORNING, UNCLE GERMANIUS! GOOD MORNING, GREAT-UNCLE CORDELIA! HOW ARE YOU FEELING THIS BRIGHT, SUNNY DAY?” Ty greeted the two sat sloppily at the table, setting down his breakfast tray rather more forcefully than needed. He grinned nastily at the other two, greatly relishing the whimpers and twitches of pain they made.

(Serves them right. Assholes.)

Making sure to make as much noise as possible, Ty sat and dug into his breakfast. He made sure to order a thick ham steak, several eggs sunny-side up, multiple slices of thick-cut toast smothered in rich butter, and extra crispy hashbrowns. He dug in with gusto, grinning in great glee as Germanius went slightly green at the smell and Cordelia covered his wince as cutlery dragged over stoneware.

“What's wrong, Uncle Gemmy? Usually you like such a hearty meal? And great uncle Cordelia, are you okay? You usually don't suffer from headaches!” The entire time, he ate and slurped. People at the other tables at first looked at him like he had lost his mind, until they saw the other two.

Taking a page from Ty's book, Tubor joined the table. He was pissed. They had spent a couple hours last night convincing both Ty and him that a Palace visit was warranted. Now, they can't do it, because some idiots decided to get drunk.

He's going to make them pay.

***
Julian woke a few hours later, feeling much better. He sat up, rubbing his head as he smacked his lips with a grimace. It tasted like something had died in his mouth. He fears finding out what it smells like.

Hearing scratching, he looked to the side. Ty sat at the desk, writing into a journal. He looked like he had been sat there for some time, a teapot in a cozy sat off in a corner. The feathered end of his pen danced at the pace he was going.

Blinking a few times, Julian croaked. He cleared his throat, “Whu time isit?” He flinched, the sound of his raspy voice causing an arrow of pain to fly through his head. While much better than earlier, it seems his headache hadn't completely left.

“It's after two. You might want to grab a shower. I've already packed our bags.” In the corner by the door, two large rucksacks sat. A few duffel's and two rolled camping blankets were present as well.

“Where we goin’?” He doesn't remember anything about a trip. Unless something happened while he slept?

Ty sighed, leaning back in his chair as he rubbed his chin. “Spoke with Tubor over breakfast. One of the other magical's who came to help investigate the Worm may have found something. Martel tried to do a Reversal, both to figure out how the Worm got here, and to see who Answered my Call. Both attempts failed.”

Julian blinked again, puzzled. It took longer than normal for his mind to catch on. The *click* of several pieces falling in place was nearly audible. “So, the Worm must have been physically brought here, or a very, very obscure mode of magic was done.”

“Yes. While it sucks that a Reversal didn't work, it also clears off a whole list of things that fall in the same category. Bad thing is, as we narrow down the list, it increases the possibility of an unknown or extremely obscure method was used,” Ty sighed, tossing the pen on his desk as he started to massage his temples. “And considering how the Main Library of the Citadel hasn't turned up anything...”

Julian flopped back with a groan, “Noooooo, don't say it; you'll jinx us.”

“Hence the bags. I need to have a mandatory meeting with the Countess and other magicals before leaving. One mentioned something about a Worm-myth, but the text is severely worn from age,” Ty looked away. Tilting his head, Julian could just make out the heat of blushing cheeks. “I was wondering if you, um, wanted to come with me? You don't have to! But...I like spending time with you.”

When asked so sweetly, how could Julian say no?

***

A large group of people sat in the parlor, tea and cakes at hand. Only the Countess, Tiberius and his family, Martel and a few others were allowed to be present. The look on Consul Valerius's face when he was dismissed was priceless.

The Countess was taking no chances; only the bare minimum of people who needed to know was allowed. She suspects that there may be a mole in her Court.

Well, no one extra except for two very whiny, clingy sighthounds.
Ty and the other's came in via a discrete side gate. Expecting to be met by Portia, Mercedes and Melchior were also present. When they caught sight of Ty, they went bug-fucking-nuts. Dancing in place, tails and ears wagging and twitching. They hopped and barked at the gate, one nearly knocking poor Portia over. Upon opening, the two dogs took off, running straight at Ty. With a leap they landed in his arms, tongues slobbering doggy kisses all over his face and neck. Ty was giving back as much love as he received. Arms under fuzzy butts and shoulders covered in paws, he bussed his face against theirs, doggy-voice spitting out compliments and praise between sweeps of wet tongues.

He carried on this way until the Main Dining Room, stopping in his tracks upon catching sight of the Menagerie portrait again. Whining dogs slid down his body, ears back. Asra stood at Nadia's side, waiting to meet them. He approached in worry.

"Ty? Are you okay?"

Ty just made a sound like a dying animal, face frozen in a mask of astonishment. He slapped at Asra's shoulder, before turning the other's face to look at the portrait. "Umf, Ty? I don't get it."

Hands started racing about his body, clever fingers digging into places that they really shouldn't be!

Several times Ty started to say something, just to stumble over his words. "Ty, just...stop!" Asra grabbed his hands, looking into his face squarely. Whatever had Ty rattled must have been big.

"I, um, I just..Fuck! Cards!"

"What?" Asra is so confused.

"Cards! Deck! Tarot! Need to have, gotta see, hope wrong!" Ty's fingers started shaking and twitching.

"Why do you ne- ACK!" Asra was soon dangling in the air, ankles in a death grip as Ty shook him about.


"They *urk* are *erk* in my *urk* trou-ser *hurk* pocket *ARK*!" Each shake bounced him, with Ty dropping him on the last word. As he sprawled, Ty kneeled, searching his person again, this time with purpose. The others in the party were looking at Ty like he was a madman. Did he actually come out of the battle mentally intact?

Giving a loud ‘A-ha!’ upon finding them, Ty fanned them out along the floor. He scrabbled through them, the sound of a laughing Hedonism ringing throughout his mind. Finding what he was looking for, he spun on his knees, card held up. After a few moments, he started laughing like a deranged seal.

Lucio, you dumb motherfucker!

Now in the parlor, dogs squeezed under Ty's chair, the time for talk has come. Ty was still letting out the odd hysterical snort/giggle combo. It was getting on everyone's nerves.

He can't *wait* to drop this bomb!
“Alright, you little shit. What’s gotten you laughing like some two-bit smutty romance villain?” Cordelia was still pissed over Ty's breakfast shenanigans.

“Lucio tried to Mantle the Devil, *snirk*.”

He sipped his tea with a smarmy smirk at the utter silence this statement wrought. He added a long *sluuuurp* for sheer schadenfreude.

“I like this tea. This is some gooooood tea. Where oh where can I get some of this tea?” Ty was vibrating in his seat. Any longer and he would launch himself into the stratosphere.

Shame Julian isn’t here. Oh well, he could give him a detailed blow-by-blow when they meet at the gates.

“Lucio, you dumb motherfucker…” Asra covered his face, letting out a loud, angry growl into the quiet room.

As the room exploded into sound, Ty just refilled his nibbly plate and sipped his tea.

***

After everyone calmed again, with Martel offering Nadia a very brief, dumbed down explanation of what Mantling is, the original cause of the meeting could commence. Ty passed over the journal he had filled, both his testimony of what happened and his theories patterning the pages. Martel added in copies of the medical file of everything that was done (Julian's notes rewritten in a different hand, to disguise his presence), and Asra Warped in several crates of books and notes from the initial Investigators and the Necromancers.

Nadia sat dumbfounded, lost on where to start. The small table that had hosted the tea and snacks now groaned under the weight of the sheer amount of information it now held. She knew that this was a very serious thing, but had no clue until now just how much was being poured into finding out just why it had happened. Without the resources of House Principia and the local Citadel Chapter, she feels nauseous at the thought of how far behind they would be.

“Each of us has organized our findings, but unfortunately we have had little time to properly compile it,” Martel murmured around the rim of his cup. During the course of the Investigation, the relationship between himself and Nadia has improved. While not on par to what it was, progress was made. Talks with Germanius had certainly helped ease the way.

“Ehhhh, wry not ge’ The’does’a an’ Goffikus?”

Everyone turned to Ty, a few with frowns. He was half-way done stuffing a slice of cake into his mouth, and had spoken around it.

“Um, I'm sorry, I only speak to people who don't have their mouth's full,” Asra was glaring. He hates it when Ty acts like he doesn't have any manners.

Heathen. Now he knows where Faust gets it from.

With a roll of his eyes, Ty finished chewing before swallowing. Washing his ‘bite’ down with more tea, he over-daintily dabbed his mouth with a linen napkin. With a sniff, he repeated himself, “I said, ‘Why not get Theodosia and Gothicus?’ She’s good at sniffing out patterns and things left hidden, and Gothicus is, well...Gothicus.”
Slamming a thick and frankly decrepit book onto the table, the Crone sat. Up until now, she had sat off to the side, quiet as a mouse. She was bent with age, her hair so white is was nearly translucent. Liver Spots dotted her wrinkled face and hands, and she walked with aide of a cane. She was very small, and very old.

She reminded Ty of Gilda. He liked her immediately.

“Alright, you damn kids! Here's what I got,” her voice rode over the current conversation, sounding not unlike a harpy's shriek. “Went through my old books, I did, and found something interesting. Turns out, a people far out to the North and East may have faced something like this before.” Opening the cover of a book that had to be bigger and heavier than she was, dust billowed up. Flipping a few thin vellum pages, she ended on what looked to be a map. Old and faded in places, the other's leaned in closer.

Ty whistled lowly. “Damn, girl. How old is this book?” At some point, it would have been a complete map. The Central Continent took up most of the right page, with the Westerlands and the dividing Marl Sea on the left. Most of the Seldd Archipelago was missing, and Easternia?

Not to be found. Where the Skal Peninsula should have started, nothing but the Pelinal Ocean. On top of that, various borders within the Central Continent were either missing or very wrong. Entire cities were either listed under a different name or just not there. The map definitely predated Vesuvia, not even a smudge denoting a hamlet was in the spot where the city currently stands.

“Mhhhh, I'd say it was made last Era. Probably around the time Emperor Arrus the Third ascended, but before the War of the Black Stone. And before anyone says, I know for a fact that this map is legit!” She waved her walking stick in emphasis, shooting a glare at Martel who had been in the process of opening his mouth.

Another low whistle from Ty. “So this puts the book at what, 1500-years old?” The Central Library of Harmonia, the seat of High Queen Elyssia had scrolls and manuscripts dating back that far and a bit further, but the Fire of 3E 879 destroyed much of the older artifacts. If he can get this book, he may be able to Present it.

He could go Home.

(He would have to find a way to bring Julian with him. If any Outsider deserves to sample the delights the Umbra Nation has to offer, it's he.)

“Don't even think of it. I'll curse your dick off,” the Crone growled. This wasn't her first rodeo, and this whippersnapper isn't the first nor the last Principia Warlord she'll deal with before she decides it's not worth getting out of bed and just die.

“Oh, you're no fun anymore,” Ty leaned back, arms and legs crossing. He returned the Crones glare, mentally upgrading her to ‘Hag’. “Besides, nice map aside, but what else is contained in the book?”

Nadia sipped her tea. “I must admit, I also cannot see what this map means to our current situation.”

“Thought you kids had eyes,” the Hag grumbled. “Nerrrrr, do I have to do everything myself? Look here!” Using her cane to point, an area of coast by the Pelinal Sea was tapped. In long-faded ink, a stylized serpent-like creature was scrawled. It was just different enough from a standard snake or dragon sigil that it stood out. “Now, this is referencing a Fell Creature attack along the coast of what is now the ruins of Far’iela. Surviving witness accounts had the same story, but conflicted on
one thing; just what the Creature was. Some accounts say Serpent. Others Drake. A few, however, say Wyrm.

I know for a fact that that is a word used by the Painted People. One that is etymologically different from other languages that use the same spelling. Cross-reference that with the legends they have, and their descriptions line up with what the boyo fought; large, segmented, a ‘crown of eyes, all-seeing’ and ‘rivers of flame-less fire, falling from a gaping maw’. One story mentioned ‘pale flesh, soft and pliable, not unlike the fat from a boar’.

“Next,” she pulled up a smaller book, one in better condition. “Here, we have a history of contact between the Central Continent and Easternia. About a century after this book was published, a group of traders landed. They spoke a language no one knew, and dressed strangely. We later learned that these were refugee’s, sailing to find a new home. They fled a Wyrm, one that followed them halfway across the Ocean. They spoke of the Eldritch One, a Wyrm Father. When he appears, Wyrm's follow.

This predates Gates and the Summoning rituals that one would use to bring such a Fell Thing forth. After trade was established with the newly-discovered Easternia, these Wyrm Signs seem to go in cycles.” She ran her fingers through the book, sliding bookmarks into key sections. Turning, she passed it off to Martel. “Have someone go, talk with the Tribes. After dealing with these Abominations for who knows how long, they may have the answers we seek.”

***

Portia puttered about Nadia's Study, cleaning. Normally she wouldn't do such a thing, Nadia liking her desk undisturbed, but with the meeting the other was currently in, the poor woman was a mess of nerves.

Placing bookmarks and piling tomes, organizing papers, straightening the pens...if Portia didn't keep moving, she would shake herself to bits. She knew how important this meeting was. Not just about the Worms, but about Ilya. Ty was supposed to ‘investigate’ her brother. While he made it clear that he desires the opposite of death as an outcome, if he gets moved to dealing with the Worm instead…

(She prays that it doesn't get shifted to Valerius. When he actually puts forth effort, he's very good at his job. Now that Nadia's awake, he'd be on it.)

As she was fluffing some pillows on the lounge, a knock at the door startled her. Another servant's head poked in, questioning. “Ah, Miss Portia! I have a guest for you! Where would you like them?”

Opening the door further revealed Valora, in casual dress. “I can take it from here, Des. Thank you!” Closing the door behind Valora, Des left. The two women took a moment to study the other.

Portia's blush came back fierce. Outside of the armor and quilted padding, Valora cut a striking figure. She had quite the bit of muscle on her dark frame, biceps large and defined. The dress she was wearing was a bright saffron, face paint matching. It had a deep, plunging v-neck and was sleeveless. At her natural waist, a thick white cloth belt was tied, gold and saffron geometric patterns embroidered in it. The dress separated into two panels on either side of her hips, falling straight down to her ankles. Strappy sandals and a few gold chain necklaces completed the outfit, her kinky locs parted down the middle and pulled up into two high buns.

Portia took in a deep breath, nearly squeaking as long legs carried the other closer, getting deep into Portia's personal space. “Uh-, ummm, can I help you!” Gods above, she was sounding like Ilya.
did with his first crush. She was so lucky that she didn't have to worry about her voice cracking, Ilya had hid from Olva for a solid week when that happened.

Valora's smile showed off devastating cheeks. Portia's heart was thumping hard. “Hmmm, no. Not really. It's more like, 'what can I do for you?’, or to be more specific, 'to you?’” A long-fingered hand traced over a pale collarbone, nails grazing a sensitive neck. Valora zeroed in on blown pupils, parted lips, and a heaving chest. She would be lying to herself if she said the thought of burying her face between those breasts as she rode the other hasn't crossed her mind.

“You can do whatever you want to me!” Gods, it has been so long since Portia had ‘company’. Between assisting Nadia, cleaning up after the courtiers, starting and then discarding plans for the Masquerade and now the whole Worm business, she hasn't even had time to ‘take care’ of herself. Having someone ready, willing, and nailing some of her types just standing in front of her?

She hit the jackpot!

The other blinked, not expecting such enthusiasm. From word about the Palace, she expected to expend far more effort; Portia is well known and highly regarded for her kind but no-nonsense demeanor. Warm but firm. “Oh. Well then. So, what do yo- *hink* MMMPH!”

Portia pulled the other down, locking with plush lips. She walked backwards until hitting Nadia's desk. With a hop and help from Valora's fucking amazing arms, she sat her ample backside square on the blotter. Hands and lips clawed and sucked, gasps and moans falling from panting mouths. Valora sucked down a hot neck to nip at a collar bone, fingers ghosting under Portia's loose shirt to smooth up wide hips. As they crept closer to Portia's chest, the shirt rode up.

With a moan, Valora buried her face into boosted breasts. She sucked and licked like a starving, thirsty woman. The brasserie Portia wore was made for work, with a thick band and wide straps to keep everything up and in place. A scooped hemline to prevent overheating, and it was a perfect serving platter for Valora's feast. She was briefly interrupted as nimble fingers curled around cups, pulling them down and revealing tight pink nipples. Hot tongue swirling, one disappeared into her mouth, the other being rolled and tugged by her freehand.

Smothering her moan at the sharp beats of pleasure throbbing between her legs, Portia bit the hem of her shirt. Wiggling her hips, she spread her legs wide. Thankful for choosing today as one of the rare days she decided to wear a skirt, the arm she wasn't leaning on moved down between their bodies. Pushing aside the crotch of her panties, she gave a breathy cry as her fingers rubbed over her wet clit. After a few moments, her hand was batted away. Growling, she went to go back when a fresh set of fingers curled up and in with a wet slide. She jerked, letting out a loud ‘Oh!’, shirthem dropping down. A hard suck to the other nipple accompanied the thumb pressed against her clitoris, rubbing hard and fast. Slick, wet sounds from pussy and mouth traveled around the room, moans joining the music of lust.

Abruptly, the mouth on Portia's breast detached with a wet *pop*, teeth scraping against the hard nub. Opening eyes she hadn't realized closed, she watched as Valora pulled back. “Just WHAT do you think you're doing?” she hissed. The fingers that had been buried up to the knuckle in her mound were pulled out with a thick *slorp*, trails of juice running behind them. “Get back to what you're doing or so help me I'll oh FUCK YES!”

Valora chuckled, the sound muffled from her mouthful of pussy. As Portia was bitching, Valora had pushed back the others skirt before jerking her forward, pulling off her panties. Spreading back and wide soft thighs, she dove in tongue first. Sucking loud and thickly, her tongue slid up and down between wet lips and wirey curls. At each pass of a swollen clit, it curled, pushing it between her lips
for a hard slurp. At odd times, she dipped the slick muscle inside, making sure to do so with a lot of spit.

Portia’s hips jerked and twitched constantly, legs held in place by strong arms. Her head draped over the back of the desk, hanging. Between pants she groaned, trying to pop her pussy up into the mouth sucking the soul out of her. Trying to reach the end, her hands cupped her breast, fingers massaging and twisting her nipples and areola. She gasped loudly and started cursing as Valora slipped three fingers inside, working her tongue in tandem. She could feel her slick run down her crack to drip onto the desk, mentally making a note to clean that up, oh what would Nadia think?

With that final though, Portia froze. Hand flying up to her mouth, she moaned brokenly as her hips and thighs jerked. She could feel the fingers fluttering inside her as her cunt clenched, swearing she could hear a wet *squelch* as she did so.

Valora pulled back with a final lash of her tongue, making sure to lap up as much ‘cream’ as possible as she did so. Smacking her lips, she pulled out drenched fingers from a sopping pussy, humming in satisfaction at just how wet she had made Portia. Waiting for the wreck before her to calm down, she licked her fingers clean. Eyes traveling around the room as she finished her dessert, they alighted on a few cotton napkins at a tea station. Going over, she picked up a few. Making sure to fold them nicely, she cleaned up the junction of Portia’s legs as best she could.

“So,” Portia panted, pushing herself up onto her elbows. “How’s next Tuesday sound for you?”

As Valora snickered, Portia winked at her with a toss of her hair.

***

Ty's head was spinning as he walked down one of the Palace's halls. They had finished talk about the Worms (or Wyrms) and moved on how to get to Easternia. After much debate, it was decided that they (Tiberius and Julian) would leave through the North gate, heading towards the Frostback mountains. A few days out was a trading post, where they would join a Principian merchant train going east. They would then split off, continuing east until they hit Saturnalia, the Sister City of Vesuvia. They would catch a series of trains until they hit the coast, moving onto a steamship that would take them to Jarlwood.

At least, that's the plan. Who knows what could go wrong.

Germanius and Cordelia had drawn up various letters; Writs of Passage, Notaries of Business and Words of Authority. Each would give them safety and power to do things that a normal Warlord couldn't do. Germanius handed over a copy of his Signet Ring to further legitimize their presence and purchases during this ‘expedition’. Throw in a booklet of Officiated Cheques and an obscenely large bag of gold and jewels and most if not all possible expenses were cared for.

(Ty was going to make monetary arrangements of his own. You never know when you'll need to bribe someone.)

The head-spinning was a result of something else completely. Obviously, Ty would be one of the best to send, considering he actually fought the Worm. Julian is coming because of A). His healing talent, B). He actually has a good reputation outside of Vesuvia, offering his talents for little to no money, and C). It would be very, very awkward if it got out that Ty was boinking the Murderer of the Count during his Investigation, an Investigation turned over to his House. At least if it comes out while they are both gone, it could be spun as House Principia being in the dark about it.

What makes him ideal to send is his parentage. Turns out, his Father is the brother of the current Jarl of Wintervale. For his conception, his Ma had gone over for the purpose of laying with Jarl
Hroldof Redmane to produce a child to cement a trade deal. One of her Courting gifts had been a finely crafted battleaxe. Wanting to thank the smith herself, she was introduced to Tovar Redmane.

...And fucked him in the Jarl's bed. Oops.

***

After splitting from Ty at the Necromancers, Julian made his way back to his flat. Tubor offered to store any personal things not going with him in their Guild, and he also wanted to let the Landlord know he was leaving.

He was being reckless again, and he knew it. He had no idea where they were going, or for how long. The moment Ty asked him, he jumped.

(Ever since he met Ty, the weight pulling him back to Vesuvia had lightened. What had started as an impossible compulsion has petered off into a absent thought, like a half-remembered dream.)

Business with the Landlord done, he entered his flat. At some point, someone had disposed of his foodstuffs, most likely an Apprentice of the Necromancers. Making a note to thank them for looking after his place while caring for Ty, he started packing. Being a fugitive meant he carried little, so there wasn't much to worry about. It literally took him 15 minutes to store his life in a rucksack. Looking about, he took the tea's Gilda gave him. It would be nice to have something pleasant as they traveled. Worse comes to worst, they could trade it for additional funds.

Finding the bolt of cloth he got from the market, he made sure to bring it. 20 gold a yard was an obscene amount of money, and this was a full batt. Hefting it in his hands, he upped his previous estimate of its worth; it was not several hundred, but a couple thousand gold in value.

He would be stupid to not bring it with them.

Digging back through his rucksack, he pulled out an oilskin. Making sure to be careful, he wrapped it around the batt several times before securing it. With a bit of ingenuity, he had everything resettled in his bag. Going down the stairs, he dropped off his flat key before exiting with a bit of pep in his step and a song in his heart.

He was going on an adventure!

Chapter End Notes

Why do I do this to myself? This is like the Fellowship of the Ring all over again, except with two idiots and a bunch of Worms instead of cute hobbits and orcs.
Chapter Summary

Julian gets reassured that he's a nice person (he don't believe it), not one but TWO furry reunions (not that type), love is in the air (feelings abound), and sharing is caring.

Many would think that the Northern Gate was the same as the Main Gate of Vesuvia. After all, the city itself is situated right on the water, with protective walls encapsulating it. Three main roads converge on Vesuvia, each having its own entry gate. The Main Gate was the busiest, and at the northern end of the city. Ergo, the confusion.

What many current inhabitants forget is that the city is almost 500-years old, and has been attacked and rebuilt numerous times. Count Ferrous spearheaded the Rebuilding of Vesuvia, including it's walls. Instead of dismantling or bricking-up the old gates, a few were left as is. Mostly used for trade overflow, anyone can come or go through them like a regular gate.

It's just the waiting. On certain days and times, these 'sub-gates' became utterly packed. Verifying the papers of those coming and going can create delays lasting hours, along with huge crowds. How is Julian going to slip past all of this?

Ducking into the stables, Julian went to confer with the Stable Master. Lucky for him, Cordelia was already present, finalizing some paperwork. Off to the side was a large pile of travel bags. Being sure he had his hood up, Julian greeted the other. "Cordelia! Nice to see you again! Is Ty with you?" He tried to keep his enthusiasm toned down, not wanting to put the other into an awkward position of explaining just why he was so friendly with a wanted man.

"Don't worry, no one here will rat you out." A quiet sigh of relief escaped Julian before he could catch himself. "You'd be surprised at how many are willing to go to bat for you. You have a very good reputation."

"Him, a good reputation? Ha! Banish the thought! It is only by sheer dumb luck and skilled fingers that he has a reputation, and a good one is entirely undeserved.

A clap on his shoulder shook him out of the melancholic haze he had sunk into. "Don't sell yourself short. You're a good person."

Try as he might, Julian couldn't help but feel warmth. He knows it's not true, but it's nice to hear.

Shortly thereafter, three horses were secured. The stable has a joint location at the trading post they'll be stopping at before continuing east, so return of the horses isn't a worry. Cordelia mentioned that the outright purchase of steeds may be required, but House Principia will provide funds if necessary.

Once transport was finalized, Cordelia pushed a large bag into Julian's arms. Inside were traveling clothes and boots, all done in browns and greens. Getting spun into a spare room, he was told to

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Quite a bit was shoved into the bag. Sturdy, thick-soled boots ending under the knee and loose canvas trousers. A long-sleeved tunic would hit at his thighs, over which was some light quilted padding and a leather chest plate. A light, open coat and a serape were his outerwear. Completing the outfit were some convertible gloves and a thick leather belt.

He felt wistful, folding up his Plague Doctor's get-up and replacing it. He had worn it for so long, and to so many places. Wearing something that wasn’t it felt strange, weird. He took extra care, making sure the soft leather of his tall boots wouldn’t crease too badly in storage. Handing off what had literally been his life to Cordelia left him feeling hollow, like a part of himself had been scooped out. At the same time…

...at the same time, it was liberating. In the uniform, he was Dr. Julian Devorak, Plague Doctor and Murderer of Count Lucio. Outside of it, he was simply Ilya, son of Ivan and Siobhan, native of Nevivon and who has some talent with healing.

Walking out, he saw Cordelia loading up the horses. One was a small pack mule who kept turning back and lipping Cordelia's hands looking for treats. The other two were larger horses for them to ride. One a Frisian mix, a mare from the looks of it. The other he couldn't pinpoint, only knowing that it was big and a painted stallion. Off to the side, two Principia Standing Hounds lay, languidly watching.

Upon seeing him, the dogs stood up. Thick dual-colored coats rippled as they stretched and shook before they approached, noses wiggling as they sniffed. Heads coming up to his waist, they circled him as they investigated, tails starting to ‘tick-tock’ as they sniffed away. Soon, they were burnishing their heads against his legs, looking up with big eyes and whining for scritches.

“They must smell Rus. Girls probably miss him.” Turning, Julian caught a sad, far away look on Cordelia's face. ‘They were his, before he had his accident. He was so bad off, he couldn't care for them. First time he relapsed, they almost tore out Asra's throat.”

Julian winced, petting the dogs. “What happened? To him, I mean.” He may have no love for Asra, but even he admits that that is horrifying.

“I don't know all the details, but Rus was badly hurt. Fell into a coma, and when he came out had to relearn a lot of things. One day, Asra ducked out to do some much-needed shopping. Returning, he found Rus collapsed on the floor, Mazel and Tov guarding. Trying to help the other up, the girls went for him, not knowing him well enough. It was decided that it would be best to take them back.

They’re good girls, just doing what they were trained to do: Protect Rus. What Asra, and many others forget, is that our Hounds are more than working dogs. Our warbands and Warlords prize these animals, treat them as partners. It's not uncommon for them to continue protecting their human partner long after they fell in battle. Numerous times I have gone to do a retrieval, just to see them standing guard long after their person has expired. You'll never find a more loyal breed.”

Before Julian could ask more, a high and happy ‘MY BABIES!’ was heard. With a yip and a dash, both dogs bolted into a kneeling Ty's arms. Loud whines and whimpers could be heard as he was knocked onto his back, dogs going mad as they did their best to merge into one man-dog hybrid. Eventually, Ty was settled onto his back, a dog under each arm as tails and tongues went mad. Through it all, praise and pets were planted on furry backs. Julian is certain he saw a few tears.

Turning away to give Ty some privacy, Julian fiddled with the mule. It was a sturdy one, perfect for hauling heavy loads long distances. Getting lipped, he rubbed between its ears for a few
moments. Feeling a nudge at his side, he was presented with a few large succulent apples. “Here, butter up the animals. Rus should be done with his reunion shortly.”

Not having to be told twice, Julian snatched one, presenting it. The mule fell on it with great gusto, a few quiet *haw's* escaping, drawing the other two mounts attention. Sidling over, a few snorts and chuffs of interest were heard. The larger one nudged Julian’s chest, ears flicking. With a laugh, Julian presented the other apples. Soon, all three were crunching away, ropes of slobber trailing from long muzzles.

While Julian was getting acquainted with the horses, Ty stood up. With a few final pets, he joined him. Goosing the other, he came up behind and slid muscled arms around a svelte waist as he dropped a kiss to a reddened cheek. “Hey, sweetheart. You ever ridden before?”

“Oh boy, have I,” Julian leered. “I've ridden quite a bit...oh! You mean a horse. Yes, yes I have.” He laughed as Ty groaned, burying his face in the junction of Julian's neck and shoulder. Nudging aside a tunic collar, Ty delivered a chastising nip, pulling more laughter and a half-hearted swat from the redhead. Releasing a snickering doctor, he slid on bridles and checked saddle straps.

Cordelia felt a bit of hope. Even before his accident, Rus hadn't had much non-family attachments. After, that had whittled down even more, the family reluctant to bring him Home due to the unknown nature of his accident. He would be forever thankful to Asra being there, but Rus needs more than what Asra could offer. Julian seems to be filling in the holes wonderfully.

Catching the wide smile that painted Rus's face, one that was so uncharacteristic before his accident, Cordelia made a promise to himself; anyone who tries to separate the two will feel his full, unfettered wrath.

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It took about an hour to make it through the gate, papers taking a long time to be processed. Vesuvia, until recently, was one of the safest cities in the Empire due to the steps taken at the gates, keeping out criminals and preventing their escape in one fell swoop.

It leaves Ty wondering just how Julian escaped after his accusations.

Thick in the middle of the throng, Ty took the lead with his mount Gaston. He was a bit of a mutt, but definitely had some Percheron or draught ancestry. It was the largest one the stable had, and the only one that could carry both Ty and a full load. As a result, he was able to bulldoze a path out, making room for Julian and Maggie the Mule.

Poor Julian. As Ty moved out, nudging aside those on foot with loud shouts and brushes of Gaston's thick sides, Julian followed on his mare, Mirth, apologies falling from his lips. He kept the lead for Maggie somewhat short, not wanting her to get separated. Mazel and Tov wound about the crowd ahead from them, the occasional bark lifting above the rabble. After 15 minutes, the road widened enough that Julian could pull up aside Ty. He was rosy cheeked, the high sun tickling his skin. Just ahead of Gaston the dogs trotted, heads swiveling about as they panted.

“So, what's the plan?” The road continued to widen, allowing the crowd to disperse. A few smaller tracts led off, one going towards what Julian remembers to be a large farm.

“Well, the outpost is called Shepherd's Stop. It will take about three days to get to, possibly four. The trade caravan won't be there for another two days after our projected arrival, giving us time to rest and trade. We'll be going with them eastward for about a week before splitting off.” As they spoke, cobbles gave way for packed dirt, the clicking of paws and clomping of hooves muffling.
“How will we be joining them? And what do you mean, trade?” Julian came prepared with a few knives, a short sword at his hip. Despite how safe the region surrounding Vesuvia is, only a fool would travel unguarded. He has little need for any further trade as far as personal protection goes.

Ty slouched back, rolling with the rocking of Gaston. “Can’t be certain until we get there, but seeing as it’s a Principian caravan, we can trade services for food and board. Depending on what needs to be done, we’ll either be doing guard work or futzing about, doing what needs to be done. As for trade,” he opened his coat. Dressed similar to Julian, under his outerwear a few pockets were sewn. Pulling out a folded paper, he tossed it to Julian, “this is an Order of Purchase. I need to make arrangements for a shipment of iron to be sent to Serenissima. The post also has a good weapon smith, so we’ll need to stop there and check out what’s in stock.

That, and I like to shop. I plan on making a few personal purchases and having them be sent back. If you want anything, send it with mine. Tubor has enough room to store our goodies, especially if we gift him a few things.”

Julian’s heart sank a bit. Being on the run meant he had little in funds. The treasures he got at Gilda’s a few weeks back will not last for long. He needs to stretch it out as far as possible before dipping into his tradeables.

(He truly misses shopping for pleasure. Since coming back, he did his best to stay away from the bazaars. So many things to see, and no money to buy them.)

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

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A few hours out, and they were the only ones on the road. It had since narrowed down again, empty fields on either side. The sky will soon start turning into evening.

A loud rumble echoed out. Ty turned back, eyebrow quirked as a blushing Julian ducked his face into his serape. With a snort, Ty dug into one of his saddle bags, pulling out a parchment-paper bundle. Pulling back, he handed the other a still warm stuffed bun. Rewrapping the buns, Ty replaced them, holding one back. From the same bag he withdrew a few stoppered jugs.

“H-how!? How are they still warm?” It’s been hours since they left. These should be stone cold.

“Runes. Every bag has a rune array. Different ones will activate depending on what’s in the bag. Took quite a bit of fiddling to do, trying to get opposite runes to work simultaneously on different things,” Ty bit into a steaming bun with a moan. “Fuck Bern, I know you're married but damn! Anyway, I blew up quite a few bags trying to keep hot things hot and cold things cold at the same time in the same bag. May have singed my eyebrows doing that.”

Chipmunking his own bun, Julian could only nod. He agrees with Ty, the buns are great. Accepting a jug with a very muffled ‘thanks’, he washed his food down with a sweet, fruity tea. Appetite awakened, he devoured the rest of his bun before asking for another. This, too, disappeared. He only felt satiated after a third one. He sipped his tea as Ty continued eating, killing off the rest of the buns.

“So, you mentioned at some point you had brothers? What are they like?”

From the way Ty lit up, Julian struck gold. “Well, I'm the oldest of three! We all have the same Ma, Ionith. Next is Tybalt. He's going to be 22 this year. Then, there's Belial. He's 13. Don't know who Bel's dad is, Ma was very secretive about that, but Tibbles's Da is Samont Ghupta. If I
remember right, he is the 8th son of the Sultan of Muhara.”

Julian choked. He sputtered, tea trailing down his chin as he coughed. “Wh-what!?” Samont is a legend, being responsible for the complete overhaul and modernization of the water and sewer systems of Muhara’s capital, Hirj. If he remembers right, he’s also a distant cousin of Nadia’s.

“Yes. And I just found out that my uncle is the Jarl of Wintervale. Hopefully, he still doesn’t hold a grudge. It’s already going to be awkward as it is. We don’t need to be tossed into the Underkeep because Ma gets turned on by weapons of war.”

“But, wasn’t she the High Priestess of Hedonism?”

“Yes, but before that she was a Warlady and had her own band. I was born and raised in it. It was only after Tibbles was born that she ascended.”

“Ah.” A few beats of silence. “Why would the Jarl throw us in jail?”

“Ma fucked the wrong guy. Dad is the Jarl’s brother.”

“Oh.” That would put a damper on any friendly relations, indeed. “So, why the different fathers?”

“I was to cement a trade deal. Nordic steel is well known for its strength, and the Jarls of the Painted People have made forging it into an art. For Tybalt, it was a desire to gain some of the intelligence Samont has. To do what he did for a city that had such an outdated system is nothing short of divine. Considering how far down the ladder he is from inheriting, the Sultan has no worry about a few bastards running about. Belial, on the other hand, I have no friggin’ idea. I tried digging, to turn up nothing. Only thing I can think of is she wanted another child, and his dad was the lucky guy to get nailed. Cute little fucker, though.”


Julian’s stomach clenched, a tidal wave of homesickness cresting over him. “It’s...peaceful. Right on the sea, and warm year round with short but frigid winters. The waters are an emerald green, and the sand a warm gold. Trees are everywhere, and plants will take root in the most impossible places. There’s always a breeze, bringing in the smell of salt.” He let out a sigh, voice turning wistful, “Papa and his family are from there, him meeting Mama when her ship docked. It left without her at the end of the season. They married fast, despite his family disapproving his foreign wife. I came shortly after, Pasha about eight years later. Heh,” he chuckled. “She always trailed behind me. We spent many days down at the docks, digging for crabs. Mama would always yell at us for tracking in mud.”

They lapsed into silence. Hooves hitting dirt and the soft padding of paws filled the silence.

“Do you want to go visit them? You're parents, I mean.”

“It's been years since I left. Pasha could only just see over the kitchen table, and I hadn't been back since. Would they even be happy to see me? No warning, no letters. For all they know, I'm dead.”

“Doesn’t mean they stopped missing you.”

“Hmm, I'll think about it.”

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They continued on for a while longer, going until sunset. Leaving the road, they went deep into an
empty field. Spotting a small clearing they unloaded the horses. Leaving them to graze, they rolled out their bedrolls before making a small fire pit. The dogs settled, ripping into rabbits that they had chased down. Pulling out a spit tie and a kettle, Ty filled it with some water from a skin before hanging it to boil. Julian had fetched more apples from their bags, biting into one.

Which was a bad idea, when he stopped to think about it. As the crunch rang out, galloping hooves raced toward him. Coming to a hard stop, three muzzles mauled him, lips pulling and tugging at the apple in his hand. One that quickly disappeared, Gaston bullying the other two to snag it. Feeling bad for Mirth and Maggie, he gave them one each as well.

The animals mollified, Julian went to drop onto his roll, wincing. Stretching out his legs, he let out a pained moan, hissing as muscles spasmed. As the dogs got up to guard, they nuzzled his face with a sympathetic whimper.

“Cramps?”

He nodded hard, hands trying to massage sore thighs. It’s been ages since he rode horseback for so long. His hips, thighs, and entire back were on fire. Only a warm salt bath would be able to give him some relief.

“Here, let me.” Large hands stripped him of his shirts and plate, rolling him onto his front. He could hear Ty go over to their bags and the jingle of metal before he came back. Moments later, Julian moaned as hot hands started massaging, covered in something that was cool and tingled. A whiff of cloves whispered past his nose as Ty sat on the backs of his thighs.

“Feels nice, huh?” Ty smiled as he got another moan. Pressing down hard with his thumbs, he worked up and down either side of Julian's spine, cracks of resetting disks and sounds of relief meeting his ears. After, he worked on broad shoulders, paying extra attention to the lower end on the blades. As he went further down he dropped a few soft, heated kisses, the writhing and sounds of the man below him heating his blood. He scooted up, grinding into Julian's ass under the pretense of getting a better grip on slick shoulders.

Pillowing his face in folded arms, Julian canted his hips, grinding back. He gave a pleased hum as hands grabbed them, rubbing a thick erection into his still-clothed cleft. He flashed a coy look over his shoulders, “Think I can get a massage on my thighs? They hurt so bad. It's like an inferno…”

“Just a massage? I can do much more than that. And what about here?” His fingers squeezed, a shuddered breath escaping Julian as his backside was manhandled. “Don't want to leave this unattended. I'll be sure to whet your ‘flames’.”

Julian laughed, unable to keep up the cheesy dialogue. “Oh my, we sound so bad! Like two characters in a torrid romance.”

A chuckling Ty leaned forward, forehead resting between flexing shoulders. “Oh gods, we do! Almost like that one by Bardelius, the one with the maid?”

“Oh no, not that one! Wait, there was two! Is it the one where she needs to ‘knead his loaf, to make it rise’? Or where she is asked to ‘polish his spear’?”

“Wait, there was TWO!” A giggled ‘yes’ was Julian's response. “Noooo…” Ty collapsed onto his side, pulling a squawking Julian with him. Legs tangling, he slotted their faces together, breathless laughter fluttering between them. It only stopped when Julian gasped, pain twisting his face. He curled, hands grasping a spasming thigh. Leaning back, Ty quickly pulled off boots and pants, hands getting to work. Soon, he had long legs spread, the other panting as pain slowly turned
Ty was getting so much satisfaction out of this. A moonlit Julian, nigh naked, and spread below him as his hands had their fill. He hadn't noticed that his massaging had turned into a heavy caress, too wrapped up in the visual. It's times like this that his heritage really shows. This was a literal feast for his senses. The feel of warm skin and firm muscle, the sight of a panting partner, the smell of arousal...

Gods above, Ty just wanted to sink his teeth into that neck and hold on as he rode a bucking Julian. His mouth literally watered and his canines itched, and he could almost hear the sweet sounds of begging lips. He swallowed hard, eyes locking with a lidded lavender one. A long-fingered hand beckoned him closer, and he went, lips meeting lips as his tongue slid into what was soon becoming it's second home.

Julian moaned, arching up as a still-clothed cock molded to his groin. He tangled his hand around the long braid of hair on Ty's back, yanking it in retaliation to a hard grind he received. The deep, primal moan pressed into his neck in response made something buried deep sit up and take notice. Twisting his legs around the others, he buried his fingers into captured locks as he kissed hard the mouth above him.

Wrapping large hands around a slim waist, Ty strained to hold the other in place as he ground. "Oh, sweetheart, let me...let me love you," he sealed his mouth over the pulse point fluttering in Julian's neck, pressing his teeth in but not biting fully. His chest heaved at the sound of pure, unadulterated lust that emerged from a gasping mouth. His hands smoothed up and down thighs that had raised to wrap around his waist, nails pulling furrows of heat on each pass. Hissing in frustration, he reared up onto his knees, ripping off his tops. Trembling fingers fumbled with his belt as he finished stripping his torso. Both worked to pull down his pants and unders, a gasped groan escaping him as long fingers wrapped around his shaft.

Julian rested on an elbow, free hand pumping the thick cock between Ty's legs. It's been a while (to him, at least) since Ty dicked him nice and good, and he's been jonesing for it for a few days. Hearing the other man beg to ‘love him’ gave him no choice but to give in.

(There is no possible way Ty meant ‘love’ as love. It has to mean the act, has to!)

He wiggled, helping Ty pull down his own underwear. Soon, both were nude, skin prickling in the cool night air. His hand twisted up and down a hard dick, working hard to make Ty feel as good as he makes him. He bit his lip, trying to gather his thoughts long enough to tell the other what he wanted done to him.

Ty must have read his mind. Leaning over towards his bedroll, long fingers reached for his pack. Grasping, he soon caught the strap, yanking it over. Ripping a pocket open, he dug, making a sound of victory as he withdrew a small bottle. Pouring a few drops onto his index and middle fingers, he set it to the side as his hand traveled down. His now-free hand held an ankle high and wide as he slid both fingers in knuckle deep.

Julian threw his head back with a moan, eye rolling. Ty knows how to hurt him right. Others had either been too careful, or too hard too fast. His legs spread wider as he moaned out an ‘oh, yes!’ Feeling the digits pump a few times, he decided he couldn't wait any longer.

"Please, just, just I need.. .” Ty looked up to see a pained Julian, eye cast down as he bit his lip. He looked so wanton, so needy that Ty was ready to pop-off right then and there. The only thing keeping him from doing so was that Julian would be left aching and unfulfilled.
(How could he leave such a sweet, pleading man bereft? It is a treat, a **pleasure**, to render the other shaking and speechless. Hell, it's his **duty** to make the other scream for more.)

Slicking himself, he lined up before pressing in. Fuck, Julian felt **so** **good**! He swears Hedonism made this man for him, there was no other way to explain how well they fit together both literally and figuratively. He moaned, a series of shallow thrust bringing him deeper between shaking legs. With a final thrust he was balls deep, torso lying limp against a shivering Julian as he fought to catch his breath. He swears he could feel the other's heartbeat around his dick, everything was so tight.

Digging fingers into the hard back over him, Julian had to fight to breathe. His legs shook as he dug his heels into the grass below them, a hard line of heat throbbing inside him. He rocked his hips, hissing in pleasure as a thick head rubbed him **just right**. He grunted as Ty bucked into him, fingers clawing into thick muscle. A hot mouth slotted against his as the other rocked in and out, each outward pull going longer and longer. Soon, only the head remained buried before Ty thrust back in hard. Each hard, deep thrust fucked out a sound from deep within his chest.

Ty couldn't help but curl around the other, wrapping his arms around the back and shoulders of his lover. Each sound Julian made encouraged him, making him thrust faster and longer. He mouthed the neck below him when hard nails dug into his back. His hips shuddered when blunt digits were drug down, a cry escaping him as his sweet boy hurt him back.

“**Oh** **fuck**, sweetheart. **Yeah**, hurt me. Just fucking tear me up,” he bit the neck he was nuzzling, moaning as his cock was clenched and Julian twisted, crying out for more. A hand moved down, cupping a hot cheek as he thrust, trying to get deeper. “That's right, moan like a bitch in heat. I fucking love it. You're such a good little cockslut, aren't you?”

“Ye-sss-sss-sss…” Julian bounced on each thrust, gasping for more as his mouth ran rampant. Ty was right, he was a cockslut. Nothing but a dirty, filthy whore. He would have no problem bending over and bobbing on this cock for the rest of his life, it felt so fucking good.

Ty moaned loudly, Julian's babbling sending a spear of heat to his gut. Come hell or high water, but he was **not** letting this man go for anything. Intelligent, kind, funny, and a **great** piece of tail. He was the whole deal, and he would be **stupid** to not hold him tight, and Ma didn't raise no fool.

Julian grunted in frustration. He needed to cum. He was shaking and panting, like an addict needing their next fix. The sweet burn of insertion has left, leaving only the heat of pure pleasure in its wake. A heat that now needs to be put out, lest he burns to ash. Thrusting a hand between their bodies, he grasped his dick hard, fist moving fast to bring him to completion. He **can't** wait for the other to bring him to the edge with prostate stimulation alone.

“**Ah**!” The feeling of Julian clenching around Ty as he fisted himself was phenomenal. He went slower but deeper, knowing he was close to bursting and wanting to make **sure** the other would be filled. He had a want, a **need** to bury his shot as deeply as possible.

(Perhaps some other time, he may spread it like icing over the others cheeks. Julian's ass was certainly sweet enough to be eaten like a cake, may as well decorate it like one.)

Memories of a loose, leaky hole dripping with his cum flashing through his mind, Ty came with a low shout. He held the hips below him still as he hammered, trying both to bring the other to orgasm and to draw out his own as much as possible. Shortly after, he felt Julian stiffen, legs going taught as he cried out. Ty moaned as he felt the others cum splash up his stomach and hit his pectorals.

With a final thrust, Ty collapsed on a shaking Julian. Head pillows on the others chest, he spotted
a cum-covered hand. Tongue flicking out, he captured and sucked clean a few digits, moaning in
delight.

(Fuck, Julian taste so good. How is this man so perfect? How!?)

Ty would have been content to stay there forever, but a low whistle rang out. Turning his head,
the kettle on the fire was letting out a jet of steam. With a snap of his fingers, a glow covered his
hand. One fluid motion later, and he turned the spit arm away from the fire.

Knowing the moment was over, he leaned back on his haunches. Slowly pulling out of Julian he
kept the others legs spread, eyes fastened to their joining, looking to ensure the other hadn't been
injured from the lack of preparation. Seeing nothing but milky fluid and a pink entrance, he relaxed.

(Hedonism be praised, but he wants to put more there. The man was made to be loved, and have
his ass be constantly filled to dripping with spunk.)

Resting the others backside flat, with legs buttressed and spread, Ty stood. Kicking to the side his
pile of clothes, he walked back over to his pack. Digging in another side pocket, he found a kerchief.
Detaching a waterskin he made his way back over. Wetting the cloth, he wiped himself down before
attending to the other. Happy to see that none of his release had seeped into Julian's bedroll, he sat.
Rolling and pulling the other, he coaxed an exhausted Doctor to kneel, legs spread as he clung to
Ty's shoulders. Taking care, he cleaned the other up, treasuring the soft sounds the other made.

Once finished, he tucked the other into his bedroll. Tossing the dirty rag into the fire, sparks flared
as it slowly caught. Wrinkling his nose at the unpleasant scent of burning wet cum, Ty stirred the
flames. Satisfied at the new cinders, he filled a tin mug, dropping a tea ball into it. Waiting for it to
cool, he looked up at the night sky.

A hard twist of wistfulness unfurled inside him, accompanied by longing. He has no memory of
traveling so far from Vesuvia, of seeing the stars in all their splendor. At times, strong feelings such
as this would appear, with no rhyme or reason. He lost so much, his life gone as a result of his
accident. Travel and the wonders of the world must have greatly shaped who he was. He must have
been so happy, if just seeing this sight for what is now the first time could pull such feelings from
him.

Not for the first time, he mourned the loss of something he doesn't ever remember having.

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Something wet was nuzzling his chin and a warm, heavy body lay across his stomach. A few
prods and a swipe of what could only be a tongue was joined with a low whine. Another boop of a
doggy nose and Julian reluctantly woke. Looking down his body, one of the dogs was sprawled over
him. Her tail started thumping the ground and she gave a quiet ‘ruff’ when she noticed him noticing
her. Her ears laid back and her tail started going fast as he sat up. Scrambling off him as he rose, she
gave another ‘ruff’.

Yawning wide enough to crack his jaw, Julian looked about as he scratched his scalp. To the side,
Ty could be seen sleeping on his stomach, head cradled in his folded arms. Laying across the small
of his back was the other dog, ears alert as she kept watch. She chuffed at him as he stood,
unconcerned with his nudity.

No one would be able to see them anyway, the entire field blanketed in a thick fog. Visibility was
very low, only a handful of feet. Just on the edge of sight, the horses could be seen laying in the
grass. With a shiver, Julian gathered and redressed, feeling clammy from the moist air. Deciding to
let Ty sleep for a bit longer, he fought to rekindle the banked fire. Resetting the kettle, he walked away to relieve himself, ‘his’ dog following. Once finished, he followed her back. Heading to the pack that Ty had pulled food from previously, he dug about. Pulling out some thick rolls, he set a number of them on the stones lining the fire to warm.

By this time, Ty was stirring. Pushing himself up, he looked about. Eyes bleary, he pet the two pooches before stumbling off. Returning a few minutes later he also redressed before accepting a hot mug of tea from Julian. Plonking himself down, he stared off into the ether before snorting. He gave a pleased hum as he was handed some rolls, and a louder one at the soft kiss he got.

Biting into the roll, he reminded himself to marry Bern. He doesn’t normally bottom, but for food this good he will. The combination of rye, rosemary, dill, onion, garlic, olives and bits of sausage rolled together into a nice, crusty package was perfect. Quickly killing it off, he ate another three. Going back to his pack, he reached into one of the non-tempered pockets to pull out two large cherry turnovers. Placing them by the fire, they were perfect to eat in short order. Taking his time to savor the sweetness, he eventually finished his meal. Helping Julian get everything repacked, he properly snuffed out the fire and roused the horses. Tempting Gaston to stay still with an apple, he was quickly saddled. Mirth and Maggie were packed as well before all three were lead back to the road.

Tossing up a ball of Magelight, the men mounted before continuing. The road itself was raised, cutting a swath through the fog. Everything was muffled, mist thick. The weak morning sunlight illuminated little but cast everything in a gentle golden glow. Times like this, Julian wishes he had more artistic talent, the scene would make for a wonderful painting.

After an hour or so, the fog started to break along with the Magelight. By this time the haze of the Frostback Mountains could be seen far in the distance. From Julian’s memories, they should be hitting the New Woods by midday. They’ll need to be careful going through it, Vesuvian patrols in the area being very unreliable and sporadic.

(Just more evidence of how much of a failure the Consul is. Love him or hate him, but Lucio was on top of road safety. The moment anyone reported anything, it was taken care of; sometimes by the man himself.)

Setting aside the dry medical text he was reading, Julian sighed. He had forgotten just how dull traveling by horseback could be. If he had more books…

“You okay, sweetheart?”

“Yes, just bored. The only books I have are medical and unfortunately for me, drier than a desert.”

“Ooh! Ooh ooh oh! I have something! Just...let me…” he started scrambling about the saddle, making Gaston grunt in displeasure. “Where are you, you little fuck! I swear to fucking Rhio- DER YOU ‘ER!” Brandishing a slim book like a hunting trophy, Ty steered Gaston closer to Mirth. He had a bit of a nervous smile, long fingers fluttering over the cover and spine. “Um, here? It’s, um, one of my favorite books? I brought it because it's about an adventure and we're on an adventure although I hope ours goesbetterand—”

With a gentle tug, Julian took the book. The cover was a deep green, gold lettering long since faded. Opening to the title page, a stylized ‘The Hobbit’ met his eyes. Looking back to a very nervous Ty, he asked what it's about.

He was met with a wall of word vomit and grand gestures. Creatures living in holes, but they're not dirty! And a great wizard helping dwarves! A journey! And goblins, spiders, elves…
“Sounds like a good story. I can see why you like it so much.”

“Yeah! It's great! Easy to read but fun!”

‘Easy to read’ is not a common phrase. Most often used by mothers teaching their children to read, or the uneducated, hearing it made Julian take notice. Considering his mother's position, Ty should be more than proficient.

“Can, you can read, right?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah I can. It's just…”, Ty rubbed the back of his neck, looking away in embarrassment. “I had an accident a few years back. And, um, I forgot. A lot. Asra had to help me learn how to do pretty much everything all over again.”

Oh. OH! It explains quite a bit, like how protective Asra and Germanius are over him. Being an Apprentice to Asra was probably more of a legality, done to protect Ty than to be a teaching relationship. It also explains why Ty has no kids. He has to be getting close to 30, and most Umbra have a few kids by this point. Combine that with what Cordelia told him, and so many little things just clicked.

“...are you good at reading? I can help you.” It takes literal years to learn to read and comprehend. To have to relearn all of it…

“Pretty good, actually. Asra, and Ma when she could, helped me out loads. Just, certain books or subjects give me splitting headaches. Ma thought that whatever happened to me didn't make me lose so much as forget things. Most of my difficulty came from things related to my previous job with the Citadel.

I just...miss who I was. Everything from before my accident is just blank. I know a few things, but I don't know them. I felt horrid when Belial visited and I didn't know that it was him. He cried for hours.”

Julian could not imagine what it must be like. He has some issues as well, but he still recalls his childhood in Nevivon, like the trick step at the back door, and how Baking Day would fill the house with the sweet scent of bread. Losing all of that…

“We'll just make some new memories together.”

***

Stopping for a simple lunch, the New Woods were entered shortly after noon. Julian had been sucked into the book completely, and can see why Ty loves it. It isn't so much that the words are easy to read as the book itself. It has a well crafted flow, each chapter coming to a natural break. And the descriptions…

It would be nice, to have a place like Bilbo's. A nice, snug home surrounded by greenery. Julian loves the hustle and bustle of a thriving city and all it has to offer, but having somewhere quiet and warm to go at the end of a busy day sounds wonderful.

Being a voracious reader, he had gotten to the Battle of Five Armies when they entered the wood. Dappled sunlight crawled over the pages as he read, thumb being nibbled as he waited in anticipation for the outcome. Ty had left him to his own devices, only interrupting for food or rest breaks.

Rustling grass pulled him out of his reverie. Ty pulled the train to a stop, Mazel and Tov staring at attention a point to the right, ruffs high. Ty watched them like a hawk, hand on a dagger. One of the
dogs let out a loud, trailing growl, stepping forward.

Marking his spot and putting the book away, Julian also prepared himself. His heartbeat jumped, a few beads of sweat gathering at his temple. If they were going to get attacked, this would be the perfect spot; they were alone, in a remote area, and it was just them and two dogs. With the amount of supplies they carried, it would be quite the haul.

More rustling, followed by swaying grass. A bark, different from their dogs rang out. Wolves?

With a chuff, sneeze, and wag of a tail Mazel stood down. Tov ambled forward on point, giving a bounce on her forelegs. Trotting out of the tall grass, two white sighthounds emerged. Coats dirty and tongues lolling, they gave happy barks upon seeing Ty.

What were Lucio's dogs doing here?

“Mercedes! Melchior! Just what are you doing here? Bad dogs!” Ty shook his finger at them, causing long ears to lay back and whines to come out. “Portia must be worried sick about you two!” More whines. “No, I'm not going to give you treats! You two are being bad, naughty dog’s!” The two sat, one turning its head away as the other covered its muzzle. “Don't you look away from me! Just because you can't see me doesn't mean I can't see you! And you! Acting cute won't get you out of trouble!”

Julian face-palmed. “Do we have to turn back?” They would lose so much progress if they did.

“No. Once we get to Shepherd's, we'll send a message along with where the dogs will be kept. There's bound to be a kennel of some sort.” With a click of his tongue, Ty set Gaston to moving again. Following him, the new additions to their party danced about. One went to dash after a squirrel crossing the path, just to get grabbed by the scruff by Tov. With a shake and squeeze, she only released the interloper after a quiet whine. Meanwhile, Mazel kept on having to herd the other back onto the road.

It going to be a looooong couple of days.

***

Luckily for the two men, things settled down. Julian returned to his book, unintentionally powering through to the end. Upon completion he sighed. It was a nice read, he hopes there's a sequel. Turning to give the book back, he saw Ty fiddling with some sticks and string. Recognizing the start of a sock, he sidled Mirth closer. Ducking about, he could see the start of a ribbed cuff, the yarn a deep and intense scarlet. He didn't want to interrupt but…

“Already finished, babe? Gimmie a moment, I've got other books you'll like,” a few more flicks of his fingers and he put the naked needle in his mouth, shifting the yarn bag hanging from his wrist as he took back the book. Rummaging about, he pulled out a thicker tome. Pressed into the cover was the title.

“'The Lord of the Rings'? What's this one?”

“The first sequel to the one you finished. It's full title is 'The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring'. It's part of a trilogy, and was supposed to be published in one big book, but rationing at the time forced the author to split it into three parts. Much more substantial than the previous one.

Should take you a while longer to read. I also have 'The Silmarillion', which is what kicks off everything. But I recommend reading that one last, it kind of sad.”
They had to come to a stop soon after leaving the New Forest, Maggie throwing a shoe. Scuttering about in the late afternoon light revealed a split going straight down the shoe's middle. Lucky for them, the stable is known for including a farriers kit.

Unlucky for them, neither man knows how to replace a horseshoe.

Examining the fresh one and comparing it to the others still on Maggie, Ty's pretty sure he can get it on. Having Julian hold her still, he sandwiched the naked hoof between his thighs. Using the file, he smoothed a few rough edges before fitting the shoe. Pulling a nail from between his lips, he threaded it before tapping it in with the small hammer, taking care to not catch her quick. He ended up stopping and redoing it a few times before he was satisfied. He asked Julian to lead the now-disgruntled mule in a few circles to make sure she could step right before he was satisfied. Giving her silky ears a few rubs and an apple for good behavior and they were off, less than an hour behind.

Another delay came from Lucio's dogs. The one Ty thinks is Mercedes started falling behind, head and tail drooping. Giving a whine, she just laid down in the path, refusing to get up when called. In solidarity, Melchior joined in.

"I now know why they say dogs and their owners start to resemble each other. You and Lucio both are nothing but trouble. C'mere!" Picking up one dog who decided to go boneless at the last minute, he slung it over the back of Julian's saddle. Doing the same with the other, they continued on.

On this side of the Woods, the fields became more proper plains. Judging from the position of the sun, they have a few more hours before stopping. Ty would try to push on past dark, but from how tenderly Julian was sitting and the amount of bullshit that went on, it would be best to make camp and start fresh tomorrow. Provided they can make good time, they should hit Shepherd's Stop early tomorrow evening.

Pulling out a map, Ty raked his eyes over it. Up ahead was a small river, one that comes down directly from the mountains. It would be nice to drink some cold, fresh water, and the horses would definitely appreciate being able to splash about. Plus, Mercedes and Melchior could do with a rinse.

"Hey, sweetheart? How you doing?" A pained whimper. "If we can pick up the pace, there's a river up ahead. I'm betting a dunk would feel nice right about now, yeah?" Another pained, but interested whimper. "I'll throw in another ma~ssage!" A change in hoofbeats and Mirth cantered past, a pained glare being shot Ty's way. With a snicker, he nudged Gaston into motion.

Going off the road, this time to the left, they had to go in about a mile before reaching the river. Dotted along the banks were shoals of tree's, giving some measure of privacy. The other bank butted up against a thick and proper forest. Making camp at a bend, Ty had to help down a stiff Julian. Stripping the other down, he settled him in the shallows before unloading some impatient horses.

Julian leaned back against Mazel, using her like a furry chair-back. The feel of the cool water running over hot muscles was a divine gift. He dozed as Ty puttered about, feeling guilty at being unable to help. Feeling something flutter against his calf, he spotted the iridescent scales of a river trout. Taking care to slowly sink his upturned hand under the water, he sat it against the sandy bottom. Being extremely patient, he waited for the fat fish to swim into his curled fingers. Quicker than a cat pouncing, he closed his hand while flinging his arm up and to the side.
“WHAT THE FUCK!” Ty had been lining their fire pit when he got smacked across the back of his head with something heavy and wet. Rubbing his injury, he looked down to see a flopping fish. Knowing that fish just don't drop from the sky, he looked at Julian. The glare he gave a snorting Doctor was harsh enough to strip paint from wood. He barely ducked in time to avoid getting hit with another fish, this time to the face. With Julian already howling in mirth, Ty decidedly did not appreciate Mazel joining in. With a disdainful sniff, he gathered the fish to clean, dodging around a curious set of sighthounds as he did so.

Batting away a pack of hungry dogs, he soon had cleaned and butterflied fish roasting over the fire. Sitting on the fallen tree next to the fire, he was soon joined by a staggering Julian. Adding a dash of salt to the fish, both men chowed down. As they ate, the dogs returned, Mercedes and Melchior presenting their fresh kills of the foul creatures known as squirrels for praise. Knowing it won't be enough, Ty sent Tov to get a few more rabbits. Soon, all four dogs were ripping into their meals with great enthusiasm.

Finished eating, Ty wrestled feed bags onto the horses. Busy doing that, Julian set the kettle, deciding to break into some of the tea’s he got from Gilda. Waiting for the water to boil, he had front-row entertainment of Ty trying to chase down and soak two resisting hounds. Eventually stripping himself completely, he soon had two furry noodles under his arms as he waded into the lazy river. Stopping when the water lapped his hips, he heaved the little monsters into a toss. Watching them swim about for a few moments, he then scooped up some sand, scrubbing the thin layer of sweat that clung to his skin. Once finished, he let loose his hair, finger brushing the large curls. Dunking his head, he scrubbed his scalp. The area of his cranial stitches had settled somewhat, not nearly a raised as they used to be. His new growth was now passed his shoulders, the discolored strands showing no signs of going back to their original color.

Finished with his ‘bath’, he sat on the sandy river bottom, stretching out his long legs. Hearing shifting water, he turned to see Julian wading over. Kneeling, the other scrubbed his back, getting the hard-to-reach spots that Ty missed earlier. Returning the favor, they then sat together, taking in the sights of nature.

***

“Babe. Hey, babe. Sweetheart. Wake up!”

Julian woke with a snort and a jerk, fist flying before him before catching himself. Disoriented, his head twisted, looking for the threat that must surely exist because Ty isn't stupid enough to wake him from his hard earned sleep.

Seeing nothing, he twisted in his cozy bedroll, rounding on the other before he was cut off. “Look up!” Disgruntled, he did so, making a mental note to remind Ty that he could earn his Mark at any moment...

...and lost his breath.

The night sky was lit up in a riot of colors. Reds, greens, and blues twisted and broke in a long, undulating series of whorls. It was like paint was dripped into a saucer of water before being tilted. The stark, black outline of the trees surrounding them put it all into harsh relief. The sheer, all-encompassing awe he felt reminded him of just how small he was compared to the world, and that despite everything he's done and seen, Nature had much more to offer.

“Worth it?”

Scooting closer, Julian curled his hand around the others, giving it a squeeze. “Yes.”
Of Goats, Ghosts, and Gore

Chapter Summary

Grubs, ghostly goats, and more adventures!

Oh, and there's a bear.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, work and writers block is a bitch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Asra ducked down, never taking his eyes off of the door across the canal from him. He had a dull brown scarf wrapped around his hair to disguise its unique color, and a bit of dirt smeared over his face.

He had checked in with Lucille shortly after Ty left, just to find her tending to Marchessa. The head of the Spellswords had turned up mere hours before, body littered with bloody injuries. He joined in healing her, asking her questions to keep her lucid. Some things she just could not answer, delirious with blood loss, however, one word stood out:

Worms. More specifically, Grubs.

Once cleaned and full of food, Marchessa was coherent enough to give some bare bones details. She had taken some of the youngsters out on their first job, rabid boars. Located just to the northeast, a small farming hamlet had reported torn-up fields, injured or killed livestock, and scrapes along the stone walls and buildings. Fairly typical signs of a rabid boar. Given that Vesuvian Bristleback boars are group animals and it is a routine job, Marchessa took this as an opportunity to check out the whelps.

***

Upon arrival, Marchessa sent her prospective students off to investigate and question the townsfolk as she met with the hamlet's Matron. After a pint in the local watering hole, the squeakers had returned and pooled information. Heading a bit further north, tracks were found leading to an old abandoned tavern and stable. Thinking they had found the nest, one of her more brash students had kicked down the door, axe high.

His head melted off in a stream of acid.

His body fell with a meaty thunk. Buried in the building was a literal nightmare. Some... thing shambled forward, made of entirely too many pulsing limbs and gasping heads. The sounds it made as it moved were hair raising. And the smell! Pulling the rest of her students away, Marchessa readied her spear, a globe of fire igniting in her free hand. Behind her, she could here one of her students retch. Her stomach rolled in sympathy. She backed away further as the thing schlepped into
daylight, a wet gushing sound signaling each step.

It was a fucking abomination. A tangle of flesh, slime, and the pale, fatty bulges of Grubs. The boars, a sow and her piglets, had been melted together, fused with some poor hapless traveler. At the top of the mass sat the poor man’s head, eyes bulging in death. Instead of a swollen tongue a wriggling Grub body flopped out from a severed jaw. His neck was a boars head, grasping the human head between animal jaws. Grub eggs were pulsing in the bright sunlight as they fed from rotting animal flesh. The body was a tangle of squirming, thrashing Grub segments and animal parts, the very tips of human toes peeking from the bottom of the pillar.

One of her students had dropped their sword, backing away in horror. Before she could chastise him, the ‘mouth’ Grub curled up and swelled, a few drops of acid falling before spewing its payload.

The group scattered, spreading out in an arc around the creature. It turned slowly with a moan, one eye bursting in a hail of festering maggots. It swayed in place, moaning again before turning more, stopping when it had Marchessa in sight. On arm rose, half rotted. Turning its hand up, she choked at the sight of a human mouth surrounding the mouth parts of a Grub. Lips flexing, the ‘mouth’ started murmuring.

“Ah-ma. Ma. Mwa. Ah-ma-ma…”

The sharp woosh of an arrow being loosed pulled her back to reality. With a sharp ‘Go!’, spells, daggers, and arrows started flying. With a horrendous shriek, the creature lunged with surprising speed. As it darted about, thick trails of smoking slime were left in its wake. Diving at her, Marchessa sidestepped, the high ‘ah-ma-ma-mamamamama’ of the mouth an eerie breeze. With a spin and push, her spear was buried deeply into a soft back, rotting fluid flowing out. Slamming her flaming hand along the fluted metal grip midway down the spear shaft, she forced fire down the handles core. Sweat gathered at her brow when the metal tip buried in unclean flesh resisted releasing its load. It was almost like there was a barrier keeping her magic from going any further.

Clenching her teeth, she pressed forward. Almost hearing the *pop!* of her destroying the metaphysical barrier, heat left her in a rush. Skin swelling and bulging with an orange light, the thing burst in a ball of magma. A high, piteous ‘AH-MAAAAAAAAAAAAA!’ resounded before abruptly being cut off. As the molten material expanded in a circle, some of her students cast water spells, trying to prevent a fire.

After nearly an hour, it was cool enough to approach. The twisted, skeletal remains of the traveler was intertwined with charred boar flesh and the thin, popped skin of Grub. They wove in and out of quick-set volcanic glass, steam still rising in thick tendrils. One of her students used the tip of her sword to poke about loose material. Pushing aside a few scraps of cloth, a brooch of some kind was found. Juggling the hot metal between her hands, Marchessa dropped it in the dirt. A gush of cold water later and it was safe to touch. Wiping off mud, she danced back with a hiss. Under the grime, the stylized oval of the broach bore the unmistakable resemblance of a Grub.

The Cult of the Worm.

They need to get out of here.

“MOVE OUT! HEAD BA-”, before she could finish her sentence, the derelict tavern exploded. The soft, many segmented bodies of adolescent Grubs burst through rotten wood in a hail of splinters. Each as long as a trader’s carriage, half-a-dozen of the Fell things surged. Maw gaping, one swallowed down a student, his scream cut off as he went down head first. Another was torn in half, her legs crunching as sharp mandibles chewing as she watched herself be devoured. Trying to cast a Summon, Marchessa was knocked onto her front, the heavy body of a slick Grub pinning her
in place. She could only watch as each of her students was devoured, torn apart in the sudden feeding frenzy. Eyes wide, the last thing she saw was the grinning mouth of a cloaked Cultist, their Mark of the Worm dangling from their neck.

***

According to Marchessa, her next memory is waking under the docks of Vesuvia. She doesn't know how she got there or what happened. Before the hoard of Worms, she had no injuries, so how she got into the state she was in is a mystery.

The Spellswords had cleared out of Vesuvia after the third day Marchessa was missing. Across the bay was their main lodge, complete with their own personal port. Until the whereabouts of Marchessa and her missing students could be determined, her superior Recalled all Spellswords operating in Vesuvia.

Lucky for them, Marchessa had somehow grabbed the broach before her capture. Getting a sketch made, Lucille passed it around, looking for information. Dealing with any sort of Cult is dangerous, but a Cult of Worms is even more so. So far, it hadn't been active for several decades (at least, in this part of the Stellaris Empire).

Not expecting much, everyone was surprised when Martel sent word of a possible lead. A beggar living in the Flooded Quarter had come for a meal at a nearby Poorhouse. Seeing two Citadel members passing the sketch back and forth, he mentioned seeing something similar a few blocks down from his usual beddown spot. Showing them a seemingly abandoned property, he mentioned that a wide variety of people come and go at random times. He thought it may have been some sort of brothel.

Being short on people, Asra volunteered to watch. As the beggar said, a stone carving closely resembling the brooch was at the apex of the door. It was a simple wooden door, with a thin grille on eye level. Starting from just after sunup, Asra had concealed himself on the roof across and one down from the building. Adding a Spell of Ignorance, he watched.

So far, nothing stood out. A few random people knocked, just to have someone tell them to scram. By the fifth hour of his watch, no one has been granted entry. Leg muscles screaming from being in the same position for so long, he got ready to leave and report when something finally happened.

A slight figure, covered head to toe in a thick cloak, knocked. Same as before, the grille pulled back. Words were exchanged before the door opened. As quick as it started, the door closed.

Waiting a few moments, Asra slowly backed away from the edge. On hands and knees, he slithered to the opposite edge. On hands and knees, he slithered to the opposite edge. Hands clenching brick, he swung himself over the side before lowering himself. Letting go, he dropped a few feet before catching a window ledge. A few more drops, and soon he was padding down water-covered cobblestones. Heading to the Main road, he joined the swell of people heading towards the Palace.

 ***

“Um? Ty?” *gulp*

“Mmh?”

“There's uh, a bear. Next to you.”

“Mmhm.” *sip*
“It's sitting. Right there. On the log. Next to you.”

“Yep,” Ty continued to sip his tea. He had been up for about an hour, leaving Julian to sleep. Rustling up the dogs, he had packed up a few things before making a fresh cup of tea and having a sit down on the fallen tree trunk that bordered the little inlet. He had heard the snuffling of something big, but ignored it. It's morning; everything is looking for breakfast.

“Ey! Shove off,” he pushed (gently) to the side a large fuzzy muzzle. His companion got curious about what was in his cup, lipping it's rim. Getting a snort of wet air from a wriggling black nose, Ty shoved a furry shoulder. Letting out a growl of disgruntlement the large, shaggy brown bear swaggered off of the trunk. Meandering to the water's edge it started sniffing about before walking out further. Within moments it started fishing.

Julian was whiter than a sheet, trembling. He had just woken and sat up, looking for Ty when he saw the bear. His throat was dry and his heart was going a mile a minute. Is this what Pasha feels when he does something reckless?

(When they return, he's going to get on his knees and apologize for everything he's put her through. Then do the same with Mazelinka and his parents.)

Jumping when a hand settled on his shoulder, Julian looked up. Ty's was holding a fresh mug, steam wafting from it. Taking it with a murmured ‘Thanks’, he sipped, eyes glued to the fishing bear. Hearing sizzling, he turned to see Ty tossing chunks of rabbit meat into a skillet suspended over the campfire. Ambling over, he could see wild carrot and mushroom being pushed around with the meat. Tossing in some herbs, Ty left it to cook as he pulled out some flatbread. Soon, both men were chowing down on a filling breakfast.

Julian felt some mild panic when Mercedes and Melchior got a bit too close to the bear. However, a sharp whistle from Ty soon had them sprinting over. Batting curious doggy noses to the side, both men finished eating before getting rucked up. Within an hour of waking Julian was fed, watered, dressed and mounted. Before making their way back to the road, Ty wrapped some fish in paper, a Stasis rune etched into it. Lunch will be quick and easy.

Much like the previous day, fog blanketed the road. Not nearly as thick as the previous day, everything looked to glow in the morning sun. It was almost like someone painted everything in hyper-pigmented paint, the water droplets hanging in the air taking in the light and refracting it doubly.

Trusting the dogs, Julian got comfortable. Digging out Ty's book, he picked up right where he left off. With a shiver, he unlatched his rolled up blanket before wrapping it around himself. As he read, he could hear the quiet *click, clack* of Ty's sock knitting.

Stopping for lunch, Ty butterflied the fish before setting them to cook. Two others he seasoned and re-wrapped, hanging them to smoke. A small Time rune hung in the air above them, a localized time distortion spell speeding up the process. The dogs chased down a wild pig, dragging it back to camp with wagging tails. The smell of blood spooked the horses, and only extra feed in their bags calmed them.

Soon they were on the move again. Passing another rider, some chit chat was exchanged. Learning of nothing new, the party continued on. By late afternoon, the haze in the air characteristic of a large settlement could be seen. Consulting the map and judging the position of the sun, Ty determined that they should reach Shepherds Stop around sunset.

Returning to his sock, Ty started knitting the heel flap. Periodically he turned back, checking in on
Julian. The other was absorbed, lost in the world the words of the book painted. He sat slightly slouched, the tip of his unoccupied thumb resting on his lips. Ty could see his eye racing across the page, brow occasionally furrowing. From the amount of pages Julian has gone through and lack of reaction, he must be getting close-

“Wh-what? What?”

-and there it is.

“You got to that part, eh? Gets me every time, and I've reread these books dozens of times.” It's true. Getting to Khazad-dûm and the escape is heart wrenching in many different ways.

“But, no. No. Not Gandalf!” Julian looked up, glaring. “How dare you make me feel these...these feelings! After going so far, just to have him fall!”

“Ey! I did no such thing! Besides, if you think this is bad, you should read the rest!” Bait set. Now the question is, will Julian bite?

Julian stared at Ty, mouth agape. “It gets worse!? HOW? Please tell me it has a happy ending!”

“It does.” One that is bitter sweet, but happy.

Not that he's going to tell Julian that. He has to learn it the hard way.

***

Germanius sipped his tea, enjoying the sun. He was having a light afternoon snack on the Western Porch with Nadia, idly chitchatting. A sweet berry tea and chocolate mousse pie was on offer. With the warm breeze from the port and the high sun, it would be easy to fall asleep for a few hours.

(It's what happened to Cordelia. Old man drifted off in one of the Salon's. Valora's keeping an eye on him.)

After the meeting from a few days earlier, Germanius is hoping to steer Dr. Devorak's investigation under House Principia. It's already clear that most of the Court is incompetent at best, and lazy at worst. Considering how Vesuvia and House Principia were building ties before the Counts Murder and Countess Nadia's encloisterment, it would be easy to attempt control of the situation under the guise of rebuilding relationships.

Question is, how to do so? Yes, he could offer assistance to an overworked Nadia and Portia, but he cannot allude to anything specific. Doing so can raise the wrong eyebrows. However, if spun as being the House taking over due to the original Investigator taking on a different role, and the Investigator being a member of said House…

Hearing a slight snort of discomfort, Germanius watched Nadia lean back, pinching the bridge of her nose. Soon, both hands were on her temples, working in circular motions.

“Are you well, m'lady?” This may be his chance.

“Just a headache. Stress from pulling the Court back together. I'm certain that you've had to do similar things at times.”

Germanius hummed, “I have. However, I am lucky enough that I've never had the...issues that you seem to be currently wrangling with.” He sipped his tea before taking a bite of pie. “Can House Principia render assistance?”
Nadia stared hard at him from between her hands. “Perhaps. On what grounds?”

He'll have to be very careful. Nadia has a reputation for sniffing out bullshit. “Rekindling ties. As you recall, our states had been in talks of trade before the Count's untimely Murder. I think this would be an ample opportunity to start rebuilding. I must confess, I am feeling a bit of guilt,” he turned the handle of his teacup. His other hand ran up and down his resting fork.

“How so?”

Hook, line, and sinker. “I know Rus was to be your Investigator into the manner of Count Lucio's Murder. From my understanding, it wasn't so much to prove Dr. Devorak did the deed as to why and how. Now, the matter of the Worms does indeed take precedence, essentially turning such a flashpoint matter into nothing more than something to be done another day. Alas, it would be nice to have some answers.” Pausing to sip more of his tea, he also indulged in a few more bites of pie.

The pie is quite good. He'll need to get the recipe for his chef.

“I highly doubt your doing this out of the goodness of your heart. What do you want?”

He leaned back. “To be frank, nothing adds up. Up until Lucio's murder, Devorak had a reputation as someone to watch in the medical field. Gifted in surgery, he set fire to Battlefield medicine with the amount of jerryrigging and off-the-wall solutions to dealing with things like trench foot, amputation-caused gangrene, and viral outbreaks of typhoid. By the time he was 20, he was full-on running field hospitals.

And don't get me STARTED on what happened at Thunder Gorge. But aside from... that situation, he is also known for his bedside manner and ethics. Before coming to Vesuvia to study the Plague, many other medical practitioners had nothing but good things to say. His murder of Lucio is extremely out of character for him. Cordelia had been actively making moves to recruit the youngster into his labs, he was so impressed with Devorak's talent.”

Hearing her gasp, Germanius guessed Nadia hadn't been in the know about that. “Cordelia has astronomical standards. He won't go after just anybody. It's one of the reasons many in House Principia were shocked at Devorak's actions. We too, want to know why.”

Twisting the truth has always been a talent of Germanius. Give enough to make it believable, with a dash of high-grade horse shit. Most of what he said was true, just not the last bit. Cordelia cares not about some two-bit faux noble getting whacked. Hell, Cordelia's hands are nowhere near clean.

What he does value is a quick mind and quicker fingers. Things Julian proved he had in spades. House Principa, and furthermore the Umbra Nation, would be stupid to pass up such a brilliant mind just because someone got a little trigger happy.

Nadia poured herself another cup of tea. Slowly mixing in a spoonful of honey, she hummed in thought. Setting her utensils aside, she took a small sip.

“I will think on your proposal.”

***

“Ya gotta be fucking kidding me.” A deep breath, “EY YO GOTHICUS! GET OVAH HERE! POP'S SENT A LETTER!” A muffled shout sounded down the hall. “BITCH I CAN'T HEAR YOU. SPIT THE DICK OUTTA YA MOUTH AN COME 'ERE!” The slamming of a door heralded the heavy stomping of the one named Gothicus.
A disgruntled Gothicus swanned into the salon, hands working to redo his pants. He was shirtless, bite marks going up his neck, and Theodosia could just make out nail marks on his shoulders. She always thought he and Tiberius looked more like brothers than she and he. Damn near twins. Mama's got some questions she'll need to answer when Theo meets her in the afterlife, the resemblance is too uncanny.

She wrinkled her nose at the smell of sex just wafting from her brother. “Bitch, ya nasty. Clean up before presenting yourself to a lady.”

“Pffft. Show me a lady, and I'll clean up.” Gothicus ducked a thrown shoe. “Hey! Watch the goods! How am I supposed to make money with a fucked up face?” With a mou of concern he started patting his face.

“Whatever, princess. Pops wants us to head to Vesuvia. Something about a bullshit storm of epic proportions brewing at the Palace.”

“Innit Rus already there? Make him deal with it.” A loud *squawk!* rang out as Theo tossed her other flat, making her mark. “WHAT THE FUCK THEO!? That hurts.”

Theo sneered, “Pop's wants us to go because Rus is taking care of some other fuckery. Therefore, why we need to go.”

“But I don't wanna!”

Balling up the letter, Theo chucked it at her over-dramatic brother. “No choice, hoe-bag. Now, kick out your flavor of the day and get packing!” Turning on the ball of her foot, the brunette strut out of the room. Before the door could finish closing, she nanced back in, picking up her shoes before twisting out again.

Rubbing his face, Gothicus smoothed out the letter. Skimming over it, he paused before re-reading it fully. By the time he got to his father's signature, he was full on grinning.

“Damn, Rus. How you always in the thick of things?”

***

Julian entered their room with a moan of pain. Staggering in, he flopped face-first onto the bed. He could feel a large hand cup his calf, thumb rubbing soothing circles.

“Want me to call up a bath?” A disgruntled grunt. “Need help getting undressed?” A slightly more interested grunt. “I'll place an order for some food, too. Anything in particular?” A loud *mrph*. With a few last pats, Ty walked back out of the room.

Julian continued to sprawl on the bed. After a clicking of claws and a low whine, one of Ty's dogs leapt onto the bed. This seemed to signal the other three. Soon, Julian was sputtering as several sets of paws danced over himself and the covers. After a particularly large paw used his backside as a stepping stone, he turned onto his back with a glare.

This would be his undoing.

Coming back to their room, Ty was greeted to the sight of a literal dogpile. Using Melchior as a pillow, Julian had three dogs sprawled across his front, muzzles under his chin. All had their tails wagging as he rubbed and scratched their heads and backs, voice high as he laved praises. Mazel and Tov were looking at him like he was the moon.
Its official. Now Ty has to keep him. He'd do anything for his girls, and from how Julian was mashing his face against theirs, Julian would do the same.

A loud whine from Mercedes cut through the praisefest. “Awww, sorry girl. Are you feeling left out? I'm so sorry!” Julian rubbed her ears, animal voice going full tilt. “You know, despite being one of Lucio's beasties, you're not too bad.”

“Grubs on!” Ty set down four large bowls of meat scraps before twisting to slide their food tray on a table. Before the last bowl hit the floor, four furry missiles flew from the bed. Julian’s *oof!* as his pillow left him was nearly muffled by the sounds of lapping tongues and chewing jaws.

Chuckling, Ty stripped himself of most of his clothes. Turning, he quickly did the same to Julian, leaving the other looking poleaxed at the sudden flurry of movement. Snickering at the absurd angles Julian's hair was sticking out at, Ty sat at the little table. Pulling over his pot of stew and a crusty roll, he dug in.

Shaking his head, Julian joined in. Being much more sensible, he had a large plate filled to overflowing with sliced roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, a large bowl of roasted vegetables, and a thick slice of cake. Digging in with gusto, he sighed in contentment; while certainly not going hungry, travel food is never as satisfying as a good, hearty platter.

Halfway done with his plate, Julian could feel a weight on his knee. Ignoring it, he kept eating. Soon, another joined it. Within a matter of minutes, four furry heads were resting on his knees and thighs, puppy eyes going full blast. One dog, either Mazel or Tov whined. Mercedes wiggled her head higher, nosing the edge of the table.

Julian felt like a monster.

“Ey! Clear off, the lot of ya!” A flick of thick fingers to the back of a furry head, and all four dogs slunk off. Julian turned, looking at Ty. “Sorry. Looked like you were about to give in. My girls know better, but with you being a new face and all…”

Julian smiled. “Thanks. I was about to. I've always been a sucker for a pair of big brown eyes.”

Ty leaned back with a smirk, “oh, really?” He ran sock-clad toes up Julian's calf.

“Mhm. Especially if they're attached to a furry body with four legs.” Julian's smile got larger as Ty snorted, pouring the both of them a generous glass of wine. Accepting with a tilt of his lips, Julian settled in for a long flirt. “Now, while you don't have four legs, you certainly have enough hair to count for the ‘furry’ part.”

“Ooooh, I dunno sweetheart,” a full black eyebrow rose, “from how some people go on, I seem to have three legs.”

Julian laughed loud at that. “Oh, no! That was bad!” He leaned on an elbow, covering his eyes as he devolved into giggles. “Next thing I know, you'll say you're quite the dab hand at doggy style!”

“Well, you know what they say, pets and owners start to resemble each other.”

“Pfft! Really? Are we really going to go there? You're horrible!” Leaning across the table Julian smacked a muscled arm, Ty leaning away in an exaggerated flinch before guffawing.

The moment was interrupted when Tov placed her front paws on the table, standing high as she growled a stare down with Julian.
“Easy girl! We're just playing. See! All okay,” Ty rolled up his sleeve, presenting his ‘injury’ to the protective pooch for inspection. Nosing the area for a few moments, she let out a chuff before licking the spot. With a heavy thump, she trotted over to a corner before flopping onto her side with a groan.

Julian snorted, sipping his wine. “Quite the set of girls you got there.”

“Mhmm. Best girls. I've missed them.”

“How long have you had them?”

Ty scratched his scalp, “uuuh, I wanna say their about, oh, five years old. Got them as pups.” He refilled both their glasses. “Nothing is quite as nice as exploring the great wilds with nothing more than your wits, weapons, and a good pair of dogs. Of course,” he threw the other a cheeky grin, “having the right travel companion makes everything better!”

Julian flushed, bashful. “Oh stop! Flattery will get you nowhere!” He paused, thinking for a moment. “On second hand, that was a lie; flattery gets you everywhere!” He leaned back, lounging as best he could in a wooden table chair, “please, continue to shower me in praise!”

“*pffft!* Now you're just fishing! Your an amazing catch, and you know it! Smart, funny, great personality, I can go on.”

Slumping onto the table, a brick-red Julian buried his face in folded arms. “Sttoooooopp!”

“No.”

Peaking, Julian saw Ty had a serious look on his face. One that matched his tone. “I don't know what happened to you to make you doubt yourself, but you ARE a genuinely good person.” Pausing to sip his wine, Ty continued, “I've...noticed a couple of times that you seem puzzled and confused when I'm paying you a real, sincere compliment. I'm not just blowing smoke up your ass, I wouldn't do that just to snag some tail. I honestly like you as a person.” Seeing the other look down at the wooden table, Ty reached across, twining his fingers around the others. “If you ever want to talk about this ‘issue', I'll listen.”

Sitting up, Julian thought. He stayed quiet for a few minutes. Ty just continued to sip his wine, squeezing the hand in his grasp occasionally.

“...if you're going to...compliment me, don't start off with my intelligence.” Any time someone tries to butter him up, regardless of their reasons or motives, they always start off with how smart, how brilliant he is.

At times, he feels like nothing more than a brain with a name.

“Done. Now, how about we get ready for bed?”

***

The servants were going mad. Nothing else could explain it.

Nadia's headache was back in force. The throbbing pain in her forehead and temples pulsed in counterpoint to the maids blubbering. Sitting in her parlor, she only had a robe on and her hair was down, having been roused at ass'o'clock at night by a furious pounding on her door. Beyond it was a horde of Palace workers, all with the same story:
Lucio's wing was melting, and something was screaming. *Melting.*

She'll need to have Portia check the food cellars. Ergot must've gotten into the rye, there was no other explanation. Everyone is tripping balls, and she's the one that has to put up with it.

Nadia took a deep breath, letting it out in a long sigh as she pushed herself out of her seat, “Now, while I do NOT deny that Lucio's old wing is horrid in it's design, it is nowhere near tacky enough to look as though it is *melting.* So, I will ask this once, and only once: one person step forward, and clearly and concisely tell me what is going on.” After a few brief moments of shuffling, a member of the mob stepped forward.

Nadia was surprised, her Head of Maintenance is known for having a cool and level head. For him to be a part of this noisome rabble, something must be going on.

But *really? A melting Wing?*

“About an hour ago, one of the maids went to check on the dogs. They usually kip outside of the late Counts door, in a pile of bedding. No one has seen them all day. Before reaching the top of the steps, she said the most unsettling and horrifying roar echoed down the hall.”

Nadia sniffed. “And how do we know that his dogs hadn't just dragged in some poor animal? They are used to hunting, and it wouldn't be the first time that they did so.” Really, she expects more from her servants.

“Well, m'lady, how does one explain seeing the newly installed gas lamps wrenching themselves from the walls? Or the deep gashes in the marble floor? Even the portraits have been defaced!”

“That is all well and good, but where does 'wrenched lamps' and 'gouged stone' equal *melting*?”

“That came after *something* screamed into Bell's face. Going upstairs meself, something shoved me from behind as the walls wavered like churning milk. The entire time, a loud burning rung through my ears.”

“...let me investigate.”

***

Nadia and a disheveled Germanius stood at the bottom of the stairs. The man had already been up and about as she walked passed his rooms. Despite her protests, he joined her.

Looking up, full darkness obscured the steps. She shivered, feeling like she was being watched.

“Get back to bed. I'll take care of this.”

She turned. Germainus looked exhausted. His salt and pepper mohawk was limp and the eyepatch he wore was gone, leaving the fleshy pit where an eye should rest visible. Dressed in wrinkled nightclothes, he looked more like a disgruntled parent woken by naughty children than the fearsome warrior and respected statesman he was.

“It would be beyond rude to leave this in the hands of a guest.”

He grunted, scrubbing a hand over his face with a snort. Snapping the fingers of his free hand, an ethereal mist swirled into existence. In short order, the spectral form of an Umbral Mountain bear stood between them.
“Bor will protect you if this goes to pot. If I say scram, do it. No questions, no arguments, just scoot.”

Her brows rose. “Your serious. Why?”

“The moment I crossed the boundaries of Vesuvia's territory, something wasn't right. The lands sick, tired. Like too little butter spread over too much bread,” Germanius sighed. “The closer to the Palace we got, the worse the feeling became. Now, I feel like I'm covered in rot. Like the city had been submerged into a sewer.”

“And you think Lucio's the cause?” It wouldn't be the first time someone caught something from the man, but making land sick?

“Not the cause. At least, not directly. I had face to face dealings with the man before. He always felt a bit off, but not like this. But he's definitely connected.”

“Well, let's not keep this thing waiting.” With a rustling of silk, Nadia picked up her nightdress hem and padded up the stairs. Shortly after, the meaty *slap* of Germanius's bare feet echoed, joined by the muffled *clicks* of spectral bearpaws.

Once at the top and throwing up a ball of clear Magelight, Germanius took the lead. Casting his gaze around, he can see what was meant by ‘melting’; the air hovering above the walls twisted, like heat above cement. Scattered along the floor, gas lamps had been pulled out of their moorings, their twisted carcasses decorating the ruined rug going down the hall. One was still attached to the wall, but had actually melted. The metallic dribble ran down, strands of twisted metal curling over and burning through one of Lucio's many portraits.

Portraits that had their eyes gouged out.

Turning about, Germanius could see that every portrait, without exception, had been defaced. The man had been a known narcissist, commissioning dozens of portraits. This hallway had to have nearly forty such paintings, and none were spared of such treatment.

(The man had tried to tempt a few sculptors from Serenissima. Thankfully, they would rather chisel nude women than a blond twink. Lucio would have been insufferable to deal with if he had got his way.)

~Noddy? Is that you? Have you finally come to visit and say hello?~

A ghostly claw materialized. As it came closer, more and more of a shimmery form coalesced. Soon, the ghastly form of a bipedal goat/man hybrid stood before them. Before the creature could finish its reaching motion, Germanius's hand shot out. Curling his thick fingers around a cool, nigh-immaterial wrist, he sneered.

~YOU! WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE!? HOW!?~

“So. You're what's been setting the staff off,” tilting his head, Germanius took his time examining the apparition. “And to think, Rus WAS right. I'll need to take him out for a meal after this.” He also mentally apologized. Rus gets enough flak for a variety of things, but he wouldn't have guffed about this.

~ANSWER ME! HOW!?~ The ghost sounded near hysterical. And from how it spoke, it's tone…

Germanius's eye went wide. “You...you're not dead?” Well, this certainly puts a new spin on things. A weak snort ruffled his hair, cool air tickling his face.
~No. How? How can you touch me!? Nothing else has. Not even my sweet babies, no matter how they cry and try...~

The dogs. That's why Lucio is all in a tizzy; his hounds are missing. And considering the circumstances, they are probably the only things keeping him company.

Germanius actually felt sorry for the guy. Lucio was a major attention whore when alive. Going from being the life of the party to a (until recently) invisible presence, with only two dogs for company must be hard.

Releasing the other's wrist, he turned to Nadia. While stone faced, he could see how unsettled she was; short shallow breaths, face rigid, a pale complexion. It's not everyday you see the ghost-but-not-a-ghost of your passed husband. Despite everything, she was holding up remarkably well.

“Head back to your rooms. I'll take it from here.” Hearing a sharp inhale, he spun, finger up and pointed, “and YOU,” he jammed it into a goatly muzzle, “you and I are going to have a little chat about self control, young man!”

~What are you, my dad?~

“I'm old enough to be it. Now, half-dead or not, you are going to follow me, and don't think I won't bend you over my knee if you try anything!” Gods above, it was like dealing with his Gothicus again. Germanius was so happy when his bratlings moved out. They're somebody else's problem now.

(He got so lonely when they left.)

A low, growly moan sounded from Bor as he nudged a frozen Nadia. Snapping back to reality with a jerk, she gave a sharp, shallow nod. Turning, she made her way down the hall, pausing to let Bor down the steps before following. Giving a final nod to Germanius, she descended.

“Now, let's find somewhere to talk.”

***

Getting an elbow to the ribs, Ty woke with a snort. Rolling over, he blearily blinked at Julian. “'s wrong?” Getting another jab, he sat up, “Sweetheart?” Setting his hand on the other's shoulder, he pulled Julian onto his back.

Julian was twitching and jerking, clearly caught up in something unpleasant. His face was a mask of fear, and he let out the occasional whimper. Ty could see sweat glisten on his upper chest as it heaved.

“Hey. Hey, sweetheart. Wake up,” cupping the side of the others face, he gave a little shake. “C'mon.” A few taps and shakes later, and a loud cry sprung from thin lips. Soon, Julian's arms and legs started twisting, moving, almost like he was fighting...or running? The hand Ty had on Julian's face could feel the hard pounding of a pulse gone mad. Definitely a nightmare.

“No. No! I'm so sorry...”

Hearing the bitten apology and the sharp panting of the other made Ty want to give the him a hug. Being unable to wake the other, he did the next best thing; he rolled over.
Laying on top of Julian, nuzzling his face into the crook of neck and shoulder, the effects were immediate. The shuffling stopped and the panting started to lessen. In less than a minute, Julian had settled into a proper sleep. Feeling the others long arms wrap around his back, Ty wiggled into a slightly more comfortable position before dropping off.

Chapter End Notes

uuuh, I has a Tumblr? Don't know how much longer it will last with all the fuckery going on, but its ClasslessTulip.
Chapter Notes

At some point, the opening chords of Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get it On" are going to pop into your head.

Bringing the hammer down, Julian steadied himself with his free hand. Behind him, he could hear Ty shuck-off old, damaged shingles. Pulling a nail from between his lips, he lined it up. Tapping it in, he resumed hammering.

Waking up this morning was a trip. Feeling a weight on his front, he expected to be covered in dogs. He was surprised to find his blanket to be Tiberius himself. Sprawling, the other had nuzzled under Julian's jaw, the puffs of his breathing a pleasant warmth. Chest to chest, with their legs tangled together, it was hard to tell where one man ended and the other began.

He blushed, hard. The weight of the other, pinning him in place had satisfied a part of himself Julian hadn't known he had. Add in the feel of a firm erection cradled in the join of his leg to his hip, and, well, he was a fit young man! He couldn't control himself! And the quiet moan Ty made as Julian tried to slide out from under him…

Of course, Ty really had no choice but to wake when Julian tumbled out of bed. Julian won't be forgetting anytime soon how the other looked, leaning over the bed, peering down with sleepy dark eyes at the absolute fool sprawled upon the floor. They had stared at each other for several long moments before a pack of dogs had descended on a hapless redhead. Getting covered in slobber was not a good way to start the day.

Saving a trapped Julian, Ty then meandered down the hall, keen on bringing in breakfast and then a bath. Returning only a few short minutes later, he asked if Julian would be willing to help repair the inn's roof. In return, free room and board for their stay. Seizing upon the opportunity to save quite a bit of gold, he jumped at the offer. Pulling up a seat at the bar next to Ty, Julian got introduced to the innkeepers: An old couple who were sweeter than candy. Getting the lowdown from them, turns out the local carpenter was taking his time to fix their roof. The rainy season is coming up, and who wants to sleep under a leaky roof? Between bites of food, Julian and Ty assessed the information before agreeing. A few hours work for free food and beds? Count them in!

It wouldn't be wrong to say he's now regretting the decision, but it's also not quite right. Now, it was nearing ten. They had been up on the roof for a few hours now, prying off old shingles and replacing roof boards. Soon, they will have to break until evening. Already, Julian could feel the start of a sunburn on his face, neck and back.

(It's times like this that he wishes his Gift wasn't so finicky. Healing debilitating knife wounds is all fine and dandy, but real pain comes from paper cuts and sunburns!)

Finishing up with the plank he had been working on, he shifted into a sitting position. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ty pull himself up onto the split level behind them. Lucky for them, they were able to remove all the old shingles and replace damaged planks. If the weather holds, they may be able to start laying out the new roof later.
“I don't know, Fran. He ain't *that* good looking. What do you see in him?”

“Honey, it's not about looks. It's about other things he can do.”

“Uh?”

Slowly rolling onto his side, Julian shimmied over to the roof’s edge. Peaking over it, a group of women were sitting at a table just below him. Uptown ladies out for brunch, it looks like. Hearing a scuff behind him, he turned to Ty, a finger to his lips and a grin on his face. Soon, the other joined him. They were done for the day, what's wrong with a little bit of literal eavesdropping?

“You known what I mean. Yeah, he doesn't look that good, but that's only one head. The other one, on the other hand, *rrrrow*!”

“...I still don't get it.”

“Oh, you sweet summer child. Just wait a few years, you'll get it soon enough. Now I, on the other hand, enjoy something a bit harder.”

“Pshaw, we all know how you get into your cups, Mariann.”

“Hey, I like my men like I like my alcohol—”

“-what? Stuffed into a cask?”

Julian curled on himself, choking on his giggles. He could hear Ty muffle a snort behind him.

“-um, no?” The popping of a wine quark was heard, the glugs of pouring following. “I like my men like I like my drink: dark, strong, and full bodied...like this wine!”

Unable to resist temptation, Julian looked up, meeting Ty’s eyes. He knew the moment the other figured out he was up to something when Ty started shaking his head frantically, mouthing denials and warnings. Julian nodded just as messily, grin stretching up to his ears. Giving a shove, he rolled over the edge…

With a loud *SLAM!* he landed on the table below him. Lounging on his side, he propped his head in a gloved fist, one leg pulled up with his free hand resting on its apex. With great fortune, he had landed facing the three ladies.

“So,” he smirked, “you mentioned ‘dark, strong, and full bodied’?”

***

“I can't believe you did that.”

Julian snickered, stripping off his sweat-soaked shirt. Ty had brought up the bathtub, a long, oval-shaped wooden bucket that had a taller backrest. He was helping one of the tavern girls bring up the water pails, scrawling a few runes on their side. In moments, curls of steam drifted up from them. Pouring one into the tub, Ty decided to wait to do the others; don’t want to fill it up just to have it overflow.

“Seriously. I CAN’T believe you did that.” Julian would take Ty more seriously if he wasn't doing his best to not laugh. “And how Mariann looked at you? I thought she was going to devour you.”

Shoo'ing a blushing tavern girl from their room, Ty started stripping as well. The dogs were in the inn's dining room, getting massive amounts of attention from the local children. Not having to worry
about the furry monsters taking over the tub, Ty was looking forward to a nice, hot bath. Tracing his eyes up and down the sweetly toned figure of his partner, they locked onto the blushing start of sunburn on pale shoulders.

“Freckles!”

Julian jerked, listing to the side. He had been pushing down his trousers, bending over to pull off his boots when Ty shouted. Windmilling, he landed butt-first in the tub, sending a shallow wave of water surging over the sides.

“You have freckles! That's so fucking adorable!” Large hands cupped hot shoulders, gently smoothing over the curve of skin and muscle and up a long neck. Julian went with the twists and turns Ty was moving his head through, shivering as long fingers skimmed over sensitive areas. Hearing and feeling a muffled *thump!* as Ty kneeled, he gasped as a hot tongue laved a line along his left shoulder. A nibble of naughty teeth produced a moan.

“Wha-, what are you doing?”

Ty growled low, “playing connect the dots with my tongue…”

“Oh, um, continue,” another moan and shiver as Ty kissed a line of heat up the others neck.

A few quick, jerky motions later, and a nude Ty was in front of him, pulling off the boots and trousers still clinging to Julian's long legs. Scooping up a pair of ankles, Ty spun Julian on his rear, dropping a few more kisses up the ankles and to dusty calves. Setting them down in the tub, he slid in behind Julian, getting them comfortable before lifting a steaming bucket from the side. Bringing it over, he poured a stream of water down a flushed Julian's chest, feeling a deep satisfaction as the other bucked at the warm stimulation to a semi-erect cock.

Digging the back of his head into a hard shoulder, Julian let out a long moan. Feeling broad hands run firmly down his front his own joined in. Soon, two sets of digits were pinching and pulling at a set of milky thighs and hard nipples as a hot and hungry mouth nibbled and sucked a fluttering pulse point. He bit his lip hard and jerked as Ty wrapped a wet hand around his nigh-on painful erection, other hand dancing up Julian's flexing chest and twisting a nipple.

“Shit babe, you're a work of art. Makes me want to get on my knees and *growl* worship you…”

Ty continued mouthling a neck flavored in sweat. He had left a series of pinked crescents up and down a delicious neck and meaty shoulder, and was fighting himself so hard to not just bite and bend Julian over the nearest surface and just…fucking mount him hard.

Ty swallowed hard, mouth filling back up with saliva just as quickly as before. The roof of his mouth tingled and his jaw ached from holding himself back. Hoping to distract himself from such temptation, he turned his attention back to the junction of his sweet Julian's legs. Scooping up a bar of soap, he got a rich lather gathered before re-gripping a reddened cock. The loud gasp Julian let out shot straight to his cock and made something deep and dark inside him purr in satisfaction. Soon, he had a bucking and writhing redhead in his lap. The position and angle was just right to slot Ty's thick dick between soapy cheeks as Julian used his arms and legs to push himself up and down Ty's front. Despite there only being two buckets of water in the tub, Julian was doing his best to slosh it out and onto the floor.

A few pumps later, and Julian arched, mouth open and head digging into the shoulder it had been laying on as streams of salty cum shot out. Ty was fisting the spasming cock hard and fast, doing his best to milk it for all it had. Soon, poor Julian was shivering and jerking from over-stimulation, legs spread wide and stiff as he let out a low whine. He tangled long fingers into black curls as Ty laved...
sloppy kisses up a flushed neck and jaw, panting hard as they both chased Julian's second orgasm. Hips twitching and hands scrambling for purchase, he meet his second release with a broken, sighing cry.

Slumped back on a hard chest, Julian lounged bonelessly. He was breathing hard, nervous system just shy of being shot, heart beating so hard it may just leave his chest. Feeling movement behind him, he was soon graced with a lathered washcloth running up and down his torso. After batting away the cloth after some one spent a little more time than necessary washing some very sensitive parts, Julian shifted, just to stop in surprise. Ty was still harder than a rock. He may have not actually cum yet.

Getting on his knees, he turned to look back, gulping hard. Ty was flushed, blown pupils having taken on a golden sheen. A prominent canine was digging into a full lower lip, and his neck and jaw were repeatedly swallowing. He was looking at Julian like a starving man does a three-course meal.

Julian flushed. “You, ah, um...you haven't…”

“Yes. And what are you going to do about it?” Oh gods above, Julian's breath hitched, chest stuttering at hearing how low, how deep Ty's voice had gotten. It sounded like a big, rumbly predator on the hunt and that it had just cornered it's chosen prey.

Julian would be more than happy, delighted even, to be consumed.

He moaned, feeling something hot and thick nuzzle between his soapy cheeks. Twisting, he could see Ty had slipped his cock between them, giving out a deep growl of satisfaction. Knowing he wouldn't be able to handle getting pounded to hell and back so soon after two hard orgasm's, with a few shifts and wriggles Julian sat hard on Ty's lap. Twisting his hips back and forth a few more times, snuggling a thick dick between his ass and Ty's abs, Julian leaned forward, gripping the foot of the tub's edge before starting to grind. A squawk flew from his lips as large hands gripped his hips. Eyes wide, he could do nothing more but hold on as Ty pushed him back and forth, side to side, and up and down. Gripping wood tight, all Julian could do was pop his ass as he was used like a makeshift toy.

Ty was growling up a storm. The sight and feel of his cock slipping between slippery and sudsy cheeks was perfect. He slumped a bit further down, spreading his knees in his efforts to grind harder and longer. He won't be satisfied until he paints Julian's backside with his spunk.

(A perfect signature on a masterpiece. Art needs to be claimed.)

Wanting to see pearl spread over pale skin, Ty renewed his efforts. His end was approaching faster than he anticipated. With a pull and shove, he had Julian's hips up high, long legs spread as he was forced to his knees. Grabbing his cock with a low grunt, Ty pumped a few more times before placing the head on a pink and soapy entrance. Squirt after squirt of thick, white jizz shot up and over Julian's entrance, quickly covering everything in milky fluid.

Bent over the tub's rim, Julian panted. His breath hitched at each hot shot, loving the feel of cum dripping over himself yet equally desperate to have had it planted deep inside himself. “Ah! Yes! Darling, please, use me…” he hated that he had already been satisfied. Mentally, he wanted more; to be shoved face first into some pillows and used, but he knows that his body wouldn't be able to handle it.

(Maybe one day, when this is all over and they could have a few days to themselves, they could make that a reality.)
Feeling the heavy weight of the other drape over his back, Julian sighed. The ball of restlessness that had been buried in his guts had dissipated, literally having exited with his amazing orgasms. Another sigh escaped him as moist lips dropped butterfly kisses between his shoulders and up the back of his neck. He gave a disgruntled wiggle, not liking how the tub's rim was digging into his stomach, or the cool tackiness of drying jizz covering his ass. Moving to push himself up, a large hand on his upper back kept him in place.

“I got ya, babe.” A few swipes of a wet cloth followed. Moving up from his thighs to his lower back, warmth scooped up and removed cold emissions, leaving nothing but clean skin in its wake. Soon, a drowsy Julian was pulled to settle back against Ty's front. A few more buckets of water was added to the tub, and a brief flash of Ty's signature magic vanished the spilled water.

Hearing some quiet rumbles, Ty looked down. Poor Julian was out, and apparently snored when completely exhausted. He sounded like a quiet, happy kitten learning to purr for the first time.

Internally squealing like a bunch of schoolgirls over a puppy, Ty took his time cleaning them up. Getting them soaped up and rinsed, he started on Julian's hair. As his fingers lathered and shifted the sleeping man's head, the snores would briefly get louder. Shampooing and conditioning finished, he slid Julian onto the bed and ran a final damp cloth up and down long limbs before rubbing a silky lotion into moist skin. Tucking a rag-dolled doctor into bed, he quickly finished up his own washing.

Once dressed, Ty vanished the dirty water before bringing everything downstairs. A few questions to the Counterman later, he trotted back upstairs. Penning a note, he grabbed his moneybags and Writ's before dropping a kiss to a warm cheek. Shutting the door snugly behind him, Ty and the mutts left to do some exploration.

***

“So let me get this straight,” Cordelia muttered. “Ty's assertions about Lucio being a ghostly goat were correct, and it was throwing a fit of epic proportions, and you sat down with it for tea?”

“Uh, yeah?” Germanius doesn't see why that's such a big deal. Once he figured out just WHY Lucio was throwing a tantrum, getting the man...goat...thing to calm down and talk was a piece of cake. Making a promise to visit often greatly helped.

“Deh FUCK was dat, 'delia?”, he rubbed the back of his head, scowling. “Calm your tits, old man!” He had forgotten just how fast the man was, Germanius hadn't even known the other had moved until he got whacked upside the head.

“You DUMB fucking sunovabitch! Have you learned nothing about dealing with things stuck betwixt worlds!?” Cordelia doesn't look or feel it, but he's over a hundred, and he hasn't lived so long by giving himself heart attacks. Once he hits 120, it'll be smooth sailing, but not if Germanius panics him into an early GRAVE!

“Nah, it's all good. Pretty productive meeting iffin you're asking. Didn't get to asking about the night of his death or anything, but I'll wait a few more meeting before bringing THAT up. Actually felt sorry for the bastard.” Once notifying Nadia about the missing dogs, the Palace exploded into movement. Vivid memories of a Lucio in a snit ensured no expense was being spared.

A knocking on the salon door interrupted the men. Swinging open to reveal a flushed Portia, they settled back down. “Portia! Come in, join us. We may have requested a bit too much cake.”

She stepped in, wringing her hands. “I don't, don't wish to interrupt, but m'lady has received a hawk. It seems to be from Ty.”
“Already? Boy works fast...unlike some bratlings I can name,” Cordelia threw a side eye at Germanius, getting a rude gesture back. “Alright, honeychild, lead the way. Take us to your leader.”

***

Tubor is ready to choke a bitch. In front of him was an ashtray filled with the remnants of his chain smoking, and just passed that was a bottle of wine. Just knowing he wouldn't like reading these reports, he had forgone a glass and drank straight from the bottle.

And it's a good thing he did. After getting a full report from Marchessa, a group of his Necromancers, Lucile's Fortuna's, and a mishmash of others assisting in the investigation had gone to the hamlet where things had gone to pot. Finding the little abandoned tavern further north was as easy as Lucille after a few shots. What they saw, however, is throwing everyone for a loop and is why the reports are as thick as they are.

They found nothing. **Nothing.** No rubble, no scorch marks, dried blood. Nothing.

Nada.

Zip.

Zip.

Leaning back with a growl, Tubor stewed. Literally hundreds of pages, reports of observations from dozens of specialists, some of whom are world renowned for their knowledge and skill, and they could turn up or uncover nothing. If it weren't for Marchesa's reputation, then her recounting of what happened would have been chalked up to delirium or drunkenness. There should be a destroyed building, furrows in the earth, and a desiccated corpse. But there's not.

But it's **Marchessa**…

Tubor would **kill** to have a Time Witch present right now. Alas, they all got killed off during the Akhenti Purges. He has a gut feeling that time and space has been folded over at the massacre site, they just need to have it ironed out and they could possibly track where the Shambler came from.

Regardless, he had advised Nadia to do a quiet relocation of the residents. Currently, a new town is quickly being erected a bit closer to Vesuvia. Soon, the folk will be moved out and in. They'll be given a hefty sum of gold for their troubles and to get them through the winter. If he remembers right, she's going to have a 'surveyor's mine' opened in the old hamlet to 'legitimate' the move.

Chugging back more wine (knowing his family would be **horrified** at that), he grabbed a few sheets of scrap, starting to plot his compilation to pass around.

***

Humming under his breath, Ty entered the local Citadel outpost. Used more as a hub and for supply restocking, what it could offer was limited compared to a fully operational Hall.

But boy oh boy did it have supplies! Weapons, armor, healing items, they even had a fully staffed clothier and a variety of smiths. The building was large and sprawling, three stories high. It reminded Ty heavily of some of the Vesuvian shops in the Eastern Bazaar, stalls and sections jammed together all hurdy gurdy. After wandering around for a few minutes, he flagged over a Specialist, explaining what he needed. Presenting his membership credentials and Writs, he was descended upon like wolves on a lost lamb.
Specialist from different areas and floors dropped what they were doing, shouting up and down the walkways at each other. Person after person brought items to him, getting a ‘yay’ or ‘nay’ from either himself or the Head(!) of the building. Soon, a large trolley was filled to overflowing with clothing, uniforms, weapons, magical items, shoes...the list goes on and on. When the Head saw the look on his face, Ty learned Martel had sent out a Call to Arms on behalf of Ty. Any Citadel Hall or Outpost is required to give himself and his companion whatever they need to complete their mission, price be damned. Headquarters will reimburse them in full the stock sent out.

“Not that I'm looking a gift horse in the mouth, but why?”

“Fookin’ werm's, mate. Fookin’ werm's.”

Well, alrighty then. Deciding to look in each section himself, Ty started from the top. Upon hitting the second floor, he pulled up short at the field kit and uniforms they had, eyes wide like a kid during their first Winter Solstice.

On a mannequin was a full cover, deluxe-edition, multi-purpose Plague Doctors uniform and kit. Usually only available to senior members of the profession and worn during research investigations into compromised towns, when worn the uniform was air tight, with not a piece of skin to be seen. A mask, balaclava, hat, hood (attached to the chest and shoulders), several lengths of overcoats and gloves, high boots...From head to toe, Julian would have nearly three full layers of clothing and protective charms between his skin and the outside.

It's also dramatic as **FUCK**! If he doesn't get his sweetheart this outfit, he would forever be left wondering at what could have been.

“That. Gimmie that. What sizes do you have? And how much is it?” He'll buy it his damn self, regardless of cost. “And can I get it gift wrapped?”

“I don’t mean to tell ye ‘ow to spend yer money, Guv, but this'll be a pretty penny.”

“I don't care about price, only that I have a mighty need.”

“Suit yerself. It'll cost ye 5,000 gold.”

5,000? Pft, Ty's taken more expensive shits. “Gimmeeeee...”

A few hours later, a smug Ty left the Outpost. Reassured that his purchases would be sent to his room, a whistle to the pups signaled it was time for lunch. Getting a table at a local barbecue joint, soon he and the dogs were chowing down. They'll be here for a few days, the caravan set back slightly due to a series of storms. He'll need to bring Julian here tomorrow, this place does an amazing Surf'n'Turf.

***

A loud pounding at the door startled Julian out of his sleep. Flashbacks of what happened the last time this happened, he scrambled out of bed to answer. Long legs tangling in the bed sheets, he belly flopped onto the floor.

“Fuck! Ah, um, eh, just a minute! *Stupid...sheets...*” springing to his feet, he leapt at the door before stumbling back, scooping up and wrapping one of the sheets around his nude form. Bunny hopping back to the door, he wiggled out a hand before turning the knob. “Oh, so sorry! I was, I was napping and you startled me! Um, can I help you?” The uniformed young man on the other side just grinned, before holding up a large paper bag.
“Special delivery for Mr. Tiberius Principia, on behalf of the Citadel!” This was Mik's best day ever! The outpost was going to make a shit ton of cash, he got a free breakfast, and now he's staring up at a screaming hot glass of drink.

Mik is feeling mighty thirsty.

Dialing up the charm, he pulled a smooth grin. They just don't make 'em like this around here: hooded eyes, chiseled cheekbones, and oooh those lips? And don't get him started on all that hair. A perfect handhold as he gets fucking plowed by Pretty McRedhead.

‘Alright, Mikie m'boy. Here's your time to shine! Pull out your smooth moves and you'll be calling into work tomorrow. ‘Hey boss, I can't see my ass coming in.’ ‘Why's that, Mik?’ ‘Oh, no reason, it's just been fucked halfway to Saturnalia and back, and now I can't feel it.’

“So...where do you want me to set it down at? It's heavier than it looks.” First rule of seduction, get yourself and your target somewhere alone.

“Oh, don't worry, I can take it!” Firecraker reached out, long fingers curling slightly.

‘Oh, we'll be taking each other, all right.’ “Sorry sir, but Citadel deliveries have anti theft charms on them. I'll need to put the bag down before deactivating!” ‘A little lying never hurt anyone.’

“Ah. Well then. Um, come on in then! You can set it over there,” with a pointed finger, Cinnabomb motioned over to a spot between a table and the foot of the bed.

Strolling on in with a bit of extra pop to his step, Mik set the bag down in the indicated spot, making sure to put his ass on display. As he went passed, he could smell the musky, spicy scent of the other. Mouth watering, he turned back to the other, just now noticing Ginger Snap only had on a loose sheet. A part had sunk low over the swell of a pectral, showing a dusting of fine, red hairs decorating the chest. Mik gulped hard, another inch lower, and he'd be graced with a nip-slip.

“-sir? Sir? Are you okay?” Mik snapped out of his daydream of marking up a pale chest. “Oh, thank goodness! I was worried!”

Feeling a little bad about worrying his ‘soon-to-be’ boyfriend, Mik cleared his throat with a cough. “No worries! Just feeling a bit peckish. My lunch is coming on up. Can you repeat your question?”

Cocking his head to the side, Carrot Top gave Mik a once-over with a lavender eye, still looking a little concerned. “I was wondering, is it, hm, appropriate to tip?” He walked to the end of the bed, bending over to rummage through a rucksack before withdrawing a money pouch, “I believe work is work, so you should be paid accordingly.”

‘Oh, you can pay me alright. Pay me with your DICK!’ “No need sir, I've been informed Mr. Tiberius has already taken care of it.” Oh sweet, baby Savior, but Lava Bomb was standing at the foot of a pretty big bed. One single misstep was all that separates Mik from seeing a vision of glory, and him playing the innocent delivery boy stumbling upon a hapless customer before he gets just fucking railed in gratitude.

Before Mik could pull out the line that ensures his immediate carnal destruction, the door swung open. Four dogs loped in before an abso-fucking-lutely hawt piece of meat walked in. Tall, Dark, and Sexy started shucking off his boots. “Hey, Sweetheart. Sorry I was gone so long, had to procure some suppl-, uh, Julian? Who's this?”

The now-named Julian fairly glowed seeing the other, his smile just lit up his face. Mik’s heart
sank faster than a gambling loser in cement shoes. These two are totally an item. Maybe he can get a threesome? It would be his joy, nay, his *privilege*, to polish both their knobs! He runs! He's got strong thighs! He could bounce for a *looooong* time!

“Ah, he was here delivering your order. I was getting ready to tip him!”

“...were you going to flash him or somethin’?”

‘*Uh, YES PLEASE!*’ “I had just informed sir that it had already been taken care of.” Widening his eyes and nibbling his lip, Mik continued, “can I help yo-ERP!” A large hand spun him, shoving him at the open door. Turning back around with a snarl, he froze. Wet Dream had an arm wrapped around Julian, his free hand cupping the other's jaw. A few brief, gentle kisses were exchanged before Man Meat dove in tongue first, pulling a gasp from the other.

“So, I, um…”

With a gentle push, Julian sprawled on the bed, the motion pulling the sheet. In an instant, the only thing on Julian was a curl of fabric covering his dignity. Turning on his heel, Midnight Lover stalked over to Mik. With a glare, he picked Mik up, set him down in the hallway, then shut the door. Moments later, a few muffled moans that had to have come from Julian could be heard.

Contemplating putting his ear to the door, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning, he shrunk in on himself when he saw Head Ewen standing behind him, arms crossed.

“Uh, hi Dad. Heh, I can explain?”

***

Julian gasped, panting hard. His fists were twisted in the bedding on either side of his face, legs held open wide as Ty leaned back, using his thumb to push the cum he hadn't caught into his mouth. He shook, having received his third orgasm of the day in six hours.

That glint of gold was back in Ty's eyes, more intense than before. As Ty licked his swollen lips, seeking more of that salty slick, Julian *swears* that something in the air changed. It was more charged, and was thick and heavy. Something perfumed wafted pass his nose, smelling sweet and spicy like honeysuckle and cinnamon. The look on Ty's face plainly stated that Julian was going to *get it*, regardless of objections.

Bring it on.

Pushing himself onto his elbows, before he could goad Ty into letting loose, he was flipped and shoved onto his front. Hissing in delight as the bruises on his hips were pressed hard as his ass was yanked up, he moaned like a bitch in heat as a tongue slippery with copious amounts of saliva and cum wriggled passed his hole. Biting the blanket below him, Julian let out a moan of ecstasy as a clever tongue and lips licked and sucked his entrance and perineum. Feeling a nose sit snug in his crack as that *sinful* tongue licked long and deep, Julian widened his knees before bouncing his ass against Ty's face.

Flicking some wards about the room, Ty growled before shaking his head and stiffening his tongue. He growled again when he heard a broken whimper in response. As he leaned back, drool covering his jaw and making Julian's hole sopping wet, he shuffled a bit before diving back in. His hands came up and clawed into fleshy cheeks as Julian choked out a cry, strong thighs closing with a snap around Ty's face. Tongue stiff again, he bobbed his head up and down, relishing as he wrought a sob from the other.
Julian groaned hard, hands flat against the headboard, pushing himself against the face and tongue making him see stars. Despite the wonderful stimulation, he was still soft. Three hard orgasms in six hours will do that to anyone, but gods above if he didn't want Ty to use him like a damn cum dump. Pin him in place and just fill him to squirting.

“Ah! Ty! Please, I need, I need- OH!” Before even voicing his need, Ty had pulled back before lining himself up. Pressing a leaking head against a pink entrance, he sunk just to passed the head before pulling out completely. He breech Julian a few times, eyes locked on their joining and savoring each twitch and hitch he earned. With a snap of his hips, he buried himself to the hilt. Growling in satisfaction as a tight ass choked his dick while Julian bucked with a relief-filled shout, Ty gripped pale cheeks, spreading them as he started thrusting.

“Pl-please! Harder! I-, I need more…” eyes rolling, Julian buried his teeth in his bicep. “Just...fucking use me!” He shouted as one of his cheeks was slapped hard, the sound echoing around the room.

“More? Harder? What makes you think you deserve it?” Ty ground, loving the little kick he caused in the other as he absolutely nailed Julian's sweet spot. “You should have seen yourself: in nothing but a sheet, and that man, that boy, was ready to get down on his knees and slurp you down. All you would have had to do was ask.”

“But, but, nooooo! It wasn't like that!” Ty was jealous? Is that why he's like this? Julian let out a shout and his eyes rolled, the hands on his backside moving up to his waist, holding him in position as Ty started to hammer. If Ty acts like this over a bit of unwarranted jealousy...Julian is in for quite the ride.

“Oh, I bet that twinkly little fucker would have done so with little prompting. The way he was looking at you…” the tingling in his mouth was back, more intense than before. It soon concentrated on his canines, and he kept swallowing down what felt like buckets of spit. While it worked well when he was devouring Julian's ass, he can't just slobber all over the others back like a dog on a bone. Dick, yes, he can do that all day, but it's just rude to do that anywhere else.

“But, I-”

Ty bent low, tonguing the delicate shell of a pink ear, “Ohhhhh, don't worry. By the time I'm done with you, you won't be looking at anyone else.” Nipping up and down any exposed skin he could find, Ty growled in anger. “Fuck, your so damn delicious! I just want to sink my teeth in you.”

“Yes!” If he wasn't already flushed, Julian would have gone red. He sounded so wanton, so desperate to be bitten he was embarrassed with himself. “Please, just- oh FUCK!” With a long, drawn out and trembling moan Julian shot off his fourth orgasm of the day, weak as it was. Sharp teeth buried themselves in the meat where his neck and shoulder met, and he could feel a trickle of blood travel down his pectoral as he writhed and pushed back on the dick delivering a thick load inside him. He shuddered at the satisfied groan Ty made as he ground both cock and tooth deep.

Worrying the flesh caught between his jaws, Ty's eyes rolled in their sockets at the absolute racket Julian was turning up. Thankful that the wards soundproofed the room along with putting the dogs into a deep sleep, he ground deeper into a loose ass, giving a few more shallow pumps before he slumped forward. Licking the ruined flesh below him, he could feel Julian pancake with a quiver. His breath hitched as the motion caused his still buried cock to twitch.

“You, you can't, this is Lucille's all over again!” Julian takes it back: he can't take anymore if Ty's going to go this hard. He can't feel his legs, and his backside is burning something fierce. He'll die if
Ty keeps up this intensity.

Flipping Julian onto his back, Ty frowned apologetically. “I, fuck, I'm sorry sweetheart. I think I'm in rut, which doesn't make sense because I've never done that and I would ha-” feeling a thumb on his lips, Ty stooped cold.

“You said once, that you're, you're House is descended from Hedonism?” A rapid nod, “so, this could be related to that?” A whispered ‘yes’. “Then there's nothing for it.”

Ty was grinding his teeth hard, doing everything he could to not start bouncing the man stuck on his cock. “Just, shit. You don't get it. This is just the start! You can't leave me! I wouldn't let you! Fuck!” He threw his head back with a growl, clawing blunt nails up his thighs. Julian doesn't understand! A Principia Warlord in Rut, especially an unplanned one, can be dangerous. They fixate on their chosen partner(s) exclusively, and can devolve into little more than an animal in human skin. He's heard stories of stupid, dumb young couples not being careful and one ending up dead.

Ty's fairly certain his heart would break if he hurt Julian like that. It's early enough he could hole himself up in a shack outside of town, maybe tied down. Or take up some of the more dangerous jobs on order at the Outpost, he'll be pissed-off enough that nothing would stand a chance against him. Hell, he'd even visit a brothel, any one worth its salt would have a few employees trained in handling such a thing.

(He doesn't was to do that. He'd feel filthy, turning to someone else in such a manner, but he'd rather Julian alive and hating him than dead and Ty faithful.)

Snapping back to reality when long-fingered hands cupped his face, Ty looked down at the figure below him. His eyes zeroed in on a bead of blood dancing over flushed skin.

Pulling Ty down, Julian wrapped his arms around the other. Shifting with a sigh, he slipped a hard erection out, eventually grabbing it and pumping it. Feeling dexterous fingers clench his upper back, he pulled out every masturbation trick he knew to help the other out. Literally minutes later, a hot gush splashed over and between his fingers. Most of it dripped onto his own cock, mixing with his own cum.

“I, oh fuck, sweetheart...I need more.”

“Then it looks like I need to get to work.”

***

It was after dinner time when Ty finally fell into a fitful sleep. Before meeting oblivion, he tossed a few spells and charms, cleaning up and airing the room out. His arms had closed like a vice around a bedraggled doctor, a few loud snores emerging at random.

Needing some food after being covered and filled with several thick rounds of cum, Julian staggered down the stairs to the dining room after a hasty cleanup, the dogs following. Sitting heavily in a corner booth, a hearty meal was soon set before him. After thanking the barmaid, he fell upon it like a rabid beast, dogs doing the same.

As he was polishing off his dessert, he could hear a cough. Turning, he glared at his interruption: the delivery boy from earlier.

“I never got your name, mine's Mik, wha-”

“You,” Julian pointed his fork at Mik's face, glaring to kill and voice hoarse. “You're the reason
why I'm like this! Now, do me a favor: Piss. Off.” Even with his Gift, Julian knew he was going to be feeling this tomorrow. Hell, he'll be feeling this for the next week.

Fucking Mik. Go jump off a cliff and fly with the other garbage birds. Bastard.

Mik sputtered, astonished. Where had the sweet man from earlier gone? What foul creature now sat before him? Yes, Julian looks like a wreck, but Mik can't be blamed for that! “Why, you, I had NOTHING to do with your current appearance!” The nerve!

Sneering, Julian went to retort when a second interloper presented themselves. Old enough to be Mik's father, the other was fairly imposing despite his average stature. “Ey, wots goin’ oan ’ere?”

Bristling, the other opened his mouth as Mik smiled like the smug little bastard he was, but Julian cut him off. “This boy, sent my partner into rut. I've been dealing with it for the past several hours. And considering how Ty has made it clear we are an item, I don't need him nosing about me any further!” Normally Julian wouldn't be this harsh, but he's literally spent the past half day being used as a rut aid. He can't do it again so soon.

“Aye, so yer Ty's companion. I cannae say sorry e'nuff. I'll be speakin’ to m'boy ‘bout proper conduct. When ye can, stop on by th' outpost an' I'll set ye up wif somethin’ noice.” Putting his hand on Mik's shoulder, he started pulling them away before stopping, “oh, sorry. Th’ names Ewen. Outpost Head. Sorry again about m'boy, ‘e thinks more wif his head than brain, if ye know wha’ I mean.”

Shaking the hand offered to him, Julian gave a half grimace. “Normally I'm not so...crass, but, after the day I had…”

Ewen waved him off. “Unerstandable. Have a noice night. AN’ YEH! Come ‘ere. We need ta hava talk!” Soon, Ewen and Mik were out the door, Mik protesting the entire way.

Finishing up his slice of strawberry rhubarb pie, Julian placed an order for Ty. Sipping a mug of warm cider, he pat a furry head as he waited. A few patrons commented about the dogs, giving pets and scratches. In short order, Julian was carrying a loaded platter up to their room, dodging around doggy limbs as he did so. Sliding the tray onto the table, he was happy to see Malak bouncing on the window sill. Letting him in, the crow warbled a greeting before bouncing onto the floor. Soon, he was getting acquainted with Mazel and Tov.

Hearing shifting from the bed, Julian turned to see Ty push himself up onto his belly. Jaw cracking in a yawn, the other stretched like a cat before looking about. The golden cast to his pupils was greatly reduced, though still noticeable.

“Hey. If you're hungry, I brought you some food.” On the tray was a full beef roast, roasted vegetables, a small loaf of sliced bread, butter, jam, and a small berry pie. Not needing to be told twice, Ty wobbled on over. Taking a seat, he tore into the feast before him. Forking tender bits of beef onto a slice of bread, he ate it in two bites. The roasted vegetables disappeared faster than the blink of an eye, leaving only a puddle of juice in their wake.

Julian stripped the bed, putting fresh sheets on it. He had informed the barmaid of what happened, with new sheets being sent up along with more towels. Turning to put them in the linen basket, he stopped short at the thick sandwich Ty shoved at him.

“Oh, no, I'm fine! I already-”, another shove with a quirked brow. “Um, just let me, let me put
these sheets in the basket first.” Doing so, he took the sandwich. Sitting across from Ty, the other only stopped looking at him when Julian took a bite. Humming in satisfaction, Ty returned to his meal.

Being careful to sneak pieces of the sandwich to the dogs, Julian refreshed the bed. Hearing Ty set his now-empty tray outside, he filled a basin with water from the water closet. Giving a purring Ty a quick rubdown, both men soon tumbled back into bed.

Feeling the other wrap around him like an octopus, Julian soon dropped off. Hopefully, tomorrow will not be nearly as exciting.
Blowjobs, breakdowns, and barbecue. What more can you ask for?

Palpitating the skin around the bite, Julian grimaced. Each touch sent waves of a dull but deep pain radiating out. Thick scabs had formed over where Ty's teeth had broken skin, and the area around it was warm and swollen.

"...sorry, babe."

With a sigh, Julian carefully slid his shirt over his head. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I asked for, and you delivered it," turning away from the mirror, he threw a jaunty wink, "in spades." Ty truly had, the sensation of long, hard teeth sinking into his skin and muscle is what had done it for him. He would be more than happy to have Ty do it again.

And again!

Ty looked away. He was still sitting on the bed, only in pants and socks. One of Lucio's dogs had their head in his lap, begging for pets. When he had seen what he had done to Julian, he had been mortified. It took Julian nearly twenty minutes to reassure the other that he was fine. Even now, a faint blush of embarrassment dusted Ty's cheeks.

"Sorry."

Julian snorted. "I see no amount of reassuring from myself shall allay your fears. Guess you'll just have to make it up to me."

Ty's head snapped towards him so fast, Julian could hear a faint crack. Cocking his hip and splaying a hand over his chest, Julian affixed a very put-upon expression with his head turned to the side, "as it is, because of the damage your mouth did to my person, the only recompense that I can foresee as being acceptable would need to be delivered by it as well."

With a thud, Ty kneeled before him. Slowly rubbing his hands up and down slender thighs, Julian's breath hitched. Large, dark eyes were fixed to his face. "I can do that."

"Oh! I, um! Well I was, heh, being facetious? You don't really need to-, oh!"

During Julian's ramblings, Ty had been mouthing up clothed thighs, ending on 'biting' the resulting bulge produced. Feeling trembling fingers weave through his hair, Ty nuzzled deep into Julian's groin. Breathing deeply, he could just make out a musk of excitement, "oh, it wouldn't be a hardship. In fact, I'd love to. A great way to start the day.” Lipping the zipper fly, Ty caught the metal tab with his teeth, jerking it down. Each hard pull caused his 'meal' to hitch and twitch, and fingers to dig into his scalp. Nosing aside fabric, he drug his cheek up and down a hard erection, the soft material of Julian's underclothes adding more friction. Slipping his tongue between hot skin and waistband, he slowly pulled the top down. Catching the head of a firm dick in folds of fabric, Ty continued pulling the underwear down until the trapped cock sprung free.
With a meaty slap, it was caught under Ty's jaw. A quiet cry of pleasure escaped Julian's mouth at the sensation, and he brought up a hand to muffle his sounds. He nearly squawked as Ty heaved, slipping the others long legs over muscled shoulders. With a shove, Julian's back hit the wall. In seconds, he was literally sitting on Ty's shoulders as the other buried his face between lily thighs. With a final bounce, Julian was firmly seated and had Ty's hands in a vice-grip around his legs. To keep balance, Julian crossed his ankles as his fingers tightened in thick hair.

With a flat tongue, Ty licked a wet path from a salty root to a wet tip. Suckling a shiny head, he repeated the motion a few times. Puckering his lips, he laid a kiss to the tip that continued down, and down, and down. Tongue and cheeks, and then throat, worked to swallow down a hot cock. Soon, his nose was buried in a nest of red curls, and he gulped a few times. Feeling both hands spasm around his locks and pull, he purred in satisfaction. He started bobbing his head back and forth, sucking hard when just the tip was left in his mouth. Each time he did so his Sweetheart bucked hard, pulling his hair like a rider would a disobedient horse. The sharp pain of each tug went straight down to his own groin, causing his hips to twitch.

He can wait. Right now, he's going to milk Julian down to the last, salty drop. Each suck got him another taste of salty spunk, and he was thirsty for more. Deepthroating again, he hummed hard. Hearing the bitten back shout Julian stifled, and how his fingers curled around the back of Ty's head just fed Ty's desire. Pulling back, he could feel spittle drip down his chin. Slurping his way back down he gave another hard suck, pulling a bounce from his boy. Soon, his face and mouth and throat were being used hard, like a soldier on furlough at the local cathouse. The grunts and sighs Julian released as he used Ty were like music to his ears.

Julian can use him as hard and as often as he wants. Just, push him onto his back, slide onto him like a saddle, and go for a ride.

(The thought of his sweet, kind Julian just, taking what he wants, pinning Ty to the floor as he sits on him is just sooo… *growls*)

Relishing the feeling of a hard head hitting the back of his throat, Ty sucked, gagged, and slurped until Julian went stiff. With a bitten lip, Julian came hard, curling over the head buried between his thighs. Each sloppy gulp Ty made as he drank down a large load pulled a twitch from the other. Soon, Julian was tugging on the other's hair, trying and failing to pull the other off his cock.

“P-please! No more! I, I can’t…”

Feeling magnanimous, Ty pulled back with one final, slow and hard suck. He had worked hard to catch all of Julian's not insignificant shot, and was pleased. As the other trembled and leaned back, he kissed up and down salty skin, rubbing his hands up and down the outer thighs. As Julian's gasping petered off, Ty slid the others legs off his shoulders, guiding feet to the floor. As he stood, he put away and redressed the other, dropping a few kisses around a slack jaw.

“So...is this a good enough apology?”

Julian snorted, burying his face in a bare shoulder. “Fantastic. Now brush your teeth. You don't need to be breathing spunk all over everything.”

***

Lucille glared.

Tubor glared right back.
She upped her Wattage of Hate.

He responded with the Eyebrow of Loathing.

Asra slurped his tea.

Both shot looks at him.

“Now that I have both of your attentions, we can begin.” A snicker was heard down the table, Martel turning to the side. Nadia sighed, signaling Portia for more tea. Once finished, Portia moved on to everyone else. Soon, all who had been summoned for the meeting were settled with food and drink.

“So, Asra, it is my understanding that you had seen something?”

Blotting his lips, Asra sat down his cup. “Yes. After being informed of a possible lead, I shadowed a previously abandoned property. After watching for several hours, I observed only a single cloaked individual being granted access. Once I left, I went to the Archives to pull up a history of the address,” pulling a sheaf of papers from his bag, he put them at the center of the table.

“Nothing unusual. The property had been used in a variety of ways since it was built, but most often it was a residence.

However, a single common thread was with the owners. After the first few changes of ownership, it came into the hands of an Aoife ó Foghladh. Coming to Vesuvia as a displaced citizen of Áierlund, she used it as her home. Over the generations, it was inherited, passed down, sold and bought by her descendants.”

Germanius and Cordelia had been silent up until this point. Trading looks with each other, they listened with a keen ear as the others at the table passed around the papers and asked questions. Tubor and Lucille noticed how quiet the other men were. Usually, both would have been yapping away at this point. They knew something. Why they weren't sharing was a mystery, but if they were anything like Ty, Tubor knows that this is something that needs to be revealed with great discretion.

Ty is a lot of things, but he knows when to keep his mouth shut. He had to learn it from someone.

With the natural grace one could only have from years of practice, Lucille joined the conversation, keeping the others distracted. Tubor skimmed through the papers, trying to find what the two warlords knew. Nothing popped out, even turning the paper sideways to see if anything lined up.

“So, aside from being used as a home, several shops, and a storehouse, what else can you tell us? Because frankly, Asra, this doesn't really tell us anything. The last owner died childless and unmarried.” Leaning forward, Lucille met Asra's gaze head on. “To me, it sounds like you did a whole lot of work for nothing. It is time that has been utterly wasted.”

Jerking back, Asra frowned. This is not like Lucille. They had always gotten together well. Very well, especially where belladonna is concerned. For her to come as hard at him as she is means something is up.

Martel chuckled. “Now, now, Lucille. This is information we can use. The ó Foghladh's had the longest claim to the space. With them no longer being in Vesuvia, it actually narrows our scope. And these records show that it hadn't been used as any sort of magic shop, so we know that if the Worms are being Summoned in there, that they had to build the array's from the ground up. Therefore, they are recent.” Biting into a cookie, Martel continued, “as a result, we can now make a list of the most commonly required materials for creating Summoning array's and look at who sells and imports
them. If I remember correctly,” he turned to Nadia, “Class Four and up paraphernalia sales are required to have the full information of the purchaser recorded, yes?”

“Indeed.”

“Splendid. If we could get copies of those records from the past, hmmm, six months? That should be enough for us to start.”

“I shall have them available for you overmorrow.”

“Great! Now, if we have nothing else, Germanius? Cordelia? Would you like to join me for lunch?”

“That would be lovely, Martel.”

As everyone pushed away from the table, Tubor caught Lucille’s and the Principia's eyes. Giving a meaningful nod, he twisted on his heel. With a flash of light, he dematerialized in a cloud of ash.

***

Julian was tearing through packaging like a child on their birthday. Paper was scattered around their room like confetti, and the redhead was bouncing in place.

Ty sat in a cuddle-puddle of fur. After their morning ‘wake up call’, they made some progress on the roof. With over half of it done, they got some lunch before returning to their room. Reminding Julian of the bag of goodies, he reversed the storage runes on it. The other pounced, wanting to see everything Ty got. There were additional weapons, elixirs, weapons, ward jewelry, weapons, more clothes, weapons, bags, weapons, yarn(!?), weapons, and a few full-scale medical books and bags.

But mostly weapons. There were a lot of knives. And a bow and arrow set. And was that a fucking Morningstar!?

“What the fuck Ty?”

“Ey! I lost two good knives to that fuckin’ Worm. I don't want that to happen again. Besides, you missed one,” a long finger pointed to a brightly colored package halfway under the bed. A large red bow glinted in the early afternoon sun coming through the window.

Like a cat on a mouse, Julian snatched it. With a big grin, he held the very-obvious present up to an ear, rattling it. Hearing Ty snicker, he bounced in place before tearing it apart. In a hail of paper, a dark mass of clothing emerged, a very familiar looking mask on top.

Julian froze. Slowly picking up the mask, his hands shook. “Where...where did you get this?” He knows for a FACT that this was one of the full kits given to senior members of the Fellowship of Doctors, Healers, and Front Line Medics. Very few ever got this uniform, and it costs a fortune to purchase out of pocket, most just buying a piece or two that they would use most often.

“The Outpost.”

“Why? How?”

“Worms have been known to spread disease, and you need to be protected. There's a high chance we could encounter a Worm Nest, or go through a Blighted town.

As for how? I bought it. The Citadel is covering all of our supply expenses, due to how dangerous
our mission is. I thought, why not get you a present?"

“...so you purchased it. For me. With your money. For me to keep.” That's...a **lot** of money for Ty to drop just for a present. Maybe he got it on a discount? For being a member? “And, um, how much did it cost?”

“Yep. And it was a pretty good deal. Only 5,000 gold!”

Julian's heart stopped. 5,000 gold. That's enough to buy a modest house in Vesuvia, or a farm in Nevivon! And he blew it on a **uniform**!? *For him*!?

“Are you CRAZY!?” Julian leapt to his feet, arms wide.

Ty sat up, frowning. “What?”

“We're, we're Investigating a possible Worm *invasion*, something that needs to be taken care of swiftly, journeying to a land very few outsiders have ever gone to, and you waste your money *on me*!?”

“Hey now! I most certainly did **NOT** ‘waste’ my money on you! I'm *investing* it!” Smoothly standing up, Ty walked over to a near-hyperventilating Julian. Placing his hands over heaving shoulders, he continued. “I want, no, I **need** to keep you alive! I know you don't want me to bring it up but you're smart. **Really** smart. You're medical knowledge and aptitude will be sorely needed. And yo-”

“So is that it? I'm a brain? You only need to keep me alive to think for you!?”

“What? No! You're also great at reading people! Gilda told me about your stop at her stall! I wish I had been there to see it!”

“Yeah, sure, okay. Bring the brain attached to a set of legs with you. It would be a *shame* if he were to die, leaving you to do all the mental footwork and with nothing to warm your cock!”

Ty was bewildered. Just what had set off Julian? Where did his sweetheart go? “No. Never! I want you protected because I value you!”

“How can you value me?” Julian stepped back, out of Ty's reach. “Look at me!” He pointed at his chest, before slapping at it with his free hand. “I'm worthless! Outside of a lab, I have-” he choked, “I have nothing to give you.” He sobbed, face going blotchy as tears rolled down his cheeks. “I'm nothing more than, than a horribly broken man who has no value.”

Feeling lost, Ty's hands flexed in aborted actions. He wanted nothing more than to hug his crying...boyfriend? Partner? Lover?

Deciding to throw caution to the wind, he did just that. Wrapping his arms around shaking shoulders, the other fought him. Being persistent, he soon had his way.

“...I also enjoy our time together. The way your face looks as you read. Every emotion you feel dances across it, did you know that? You're also funny. I don't remember laughing as hard as I did when you rolled off the roof.”

A few sniffles were heard from the face buried in his shoulder. “You can only remember the last three years.”

“Hush. I'm trying to comfort you.” A wet laugh. “You have so much energy. You make me want
to go and explore. Before we left Vesuvia, every night we were apart, I went to sleep excited for the next day because that meant I was a day closer to seeing your smiling face again. We just fit together so well. It's almost like we knew each other, in a previous life.”

“...stop it.” Ty could feel the heat of embarrassment burning into his shoulder.

“No I will not,” he retorted. With a huff, he started rocking them gently side-to-side. Julian tried to stonewall the motions, but it was like a beaver building a dam to stop a tsunami.

It wasn't going to happen.

“What can I do, to make you feel better?”

“...stop spending ridiculous amounts of money on me.”

“Hmmmm, let me think about that. Nah!” Julian's head shot up, tear-streaked face incredulous. “I'm loaded, Sweetheart. House Principia increased my stipend for a year, to pay for my care. And Asra continued to pay me rent, despite him being my caretaker. And Ma came with many gifts, and left quite a bit of her investments to me. And Martel pulled a lot of strings keep me on the books.

My recovery took a long time. Time I spent relearning about money, trade, and investments. If I wanted to, I could probably raise a small army and take Vesuvia for my own. So, no, I will not stop spending money on you. What else can I do, other than share my joy with others?”

Julian...hadn't thought of it that way. Sharing joy through wealth. Ty wanted to see Julian happy, enjoying the process of giving gifts that the other could use and appreciate.

“...my previous partner used money, used gifts, as power. Anything that they bought or gave me was a way to shackle me closer to them. It was a reminder that only so long as I was what they wanted, I could be happy, could have worth.”

Ty felt his heart wilt. He will never understand how others could be so cruel. Especially to someone so sweet and kind as Julian.

Pushing away from the other, he helped Julian dry his face. “Well then. Just, tell me if I overwhelm you with things. Tybalt sent me a nastygram about spoiling him, but Belial is young enough still that he loves opening presents. I won’t stop gifting you things, but I can tone it down.”

Julian snorted, a hysterical giggle escaping him as he imagined a letter just saying ‘STOP BUYING ME STUFF! I'M AN ADULT!’ “I'll, I'll be sure to write you a stern letter when you get annoying.”

“'I'll take it. Now, let's get cleaned up. There's a restaurant I want to show you.”

***

Shutting the door behind him, Asra zeroed in on Lucille, “so, what was all that about?”

“No idea. We'll know once Tubor and the others get here.”

White eyebrows disappeared into his curls. Out of everyone aside from Ty, Asra knows Lucille best. For her to go along with someone else's plan without knowing the full story is very much not like her.

Settling down onto a settee, one of Lucille's girls plied him with some food and drink. The little
thing was blushing up a storm, she clearly fancied the Magician. Keeping his amusement hidden, he
could hear Lucille snicker.

With a bang, the balcony doors opened. Tubor, followed by Cordelia and Germanius entered, the
latter two carrying a few folders. Before they could get situated, Lucille pounced. “What do you two
know?”

“Damnit, woman! Can a man not get a drink!” Cordelia flopped onto a chair, “this is why I never
got married,” he mumbled.

Germanius snorted, “you never got married because you have no sex drive.”

“Why expend so much energy on nothing when you could do SCIENCE!”

“Uh, because it's heaps of f-”

“SCIENCE, GEMMY! SCIENCE! You will never understand the sensual curves of a beaker, or
the heat of burner flames! And the thick, heavy thunk of a knife slicing through a specimen? Oooh,
just the thought, the memory of a dissection just...ahh!”

Everyone's eyes were glued onto a man rambling in rapture, faces showing just how disturbed
they felt at the mention of blood being vacuumed out of a body. If Cordelia gets like this over his
research, then it may have been best that he never procreated.

“...you sick fuck.”

“ANYWAY,” Lucille cut in, “you two were looking a bit shifty at the meeting. What. Do. You.
Know?”

“Oh, you're no fun anymore,” Cordelia pouted. Ignoring Germanius's snort, he flipped through his
folders before sliding one to Lucille and Tubor. “In here is a family tree of Aoife. Starting from here,
there is five levels going down. Just, uh, tell me when you see what I see.”

Lucille and Tubor reached at the same time. Both hands tugging the thick paper of the folder, it
went back and forth a few times. Locking eyes again, both were determined to not let the other
‘win’.

“Ladies first, Tubor.”

“And when there is a lady present, she is indeed first.”

“Fucksakes. Get a room already, you two!”

Turning to hiss at Germanius, Lucille's grip lessened. Tugging hard at the same time, Tubor
rocketed backwards, chair-back landing hard on the floor. As he struggled to relearn how to breathe,
Asra gingerly wrestled the folder from slack hands. Ignoring Lucille's snickering, he started flipping
through the information. Finding the tree, he slowly read each line.

Cordelia and Germanius waited with baited breath. The amount of energy they worked to contain
could power Vesuvia for a year. Tubor pouted at them, angry that he wouldn't be the first to know.

Getting to the last line, Asra choked, eyes bulging. “What.”

Cordelia giggled. Germanius was breathing hard, fingers clenched over his mouth as he smothered
a snicker.
“No.”

Cordelia started chortling, loving the irony. Germanius let out hoarse guffaws, hand slapping the table. Tubor and Lucille looked at them like they were insane.

“There is no way that this is correct! None!”

Seeing paper slip from slack fingers, the other two lunged as Cordelia and Germanius lost it. Unhinged laughter rang through the room as the sheer schadenfreude of the situation finally hit Asra. As he buried his face in his arms with a mournful sigh, Lucille and Tubor finally saw what Asra did. They gaped.

Germanius howled in sadistic glee as Cordelia barked like a demented seal. “I KNOW! Isn't it GREAT?!”

“You guys,” Tubor drawled, “are fucking asses.”

***

“Um, Ty? Are you sure? This is some, um, really expensive food.”

“Eh, not really. I've had more expensive that didn't taste half as good.”

Gulping, Julian continued, “yes, I don't doubt that but, um, the menu is still pricey, if you know what I mean?” It didn't list the prices for anything. Only the really bourgeoisie places do that!

“Don't worry about it.”

“Ty, I can't afford this!” Not when Julian takes into account how long this mission is projected to last.

“What,” Ty blinked over the menu. They were in a cozy corner booth, looking comically out of place. Dressed in rugged, if clean, adventuring clothes made them stand out like a sore thumb against the backdrop of the fine cottons and silks and wools of the other diners. Already anxious about his appearance, Julian started feeling even more so when he saw the menu.

“I'm functionally poor! I can't pay for this!”

“It's called a date. I fucking pay for you.”

“...oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh’. Now, I recommend the Surf’n’Turf. Had some yesterday, and it was to die for! Of course, for a starter, I'm interested in the stuffed mushroom caps and a few grilled shrimp.”

Looking over everything, a still slightly keyed-up Julian flipped through the appetizer list. Eye squinting slightly, he shut the menu with a slight nod. “What would you like for a drink. It's been a...long time since I had a Franc vino.”

“Let's get a bottle of one, then! It'll be a long time before we get to sit down for something nice again.”

Orders placed, Ty bounced in his seat. Julian had ordered a few Frankish style hors d'oeuvres, pronunciation perfect. The poor waitress was left a stuttering mess, nearly stumbling as she went to the kitchen. Ty doesn't blame her: Julian sounded delicious, all rolling tongue and stretched-out
vowels. A slight simmer settled in his blood. “I didn't know you spoke Franc.”

“What, like it's hard? Learned it from a few merchant nobles one winter back home.”

Leaning on a curled fist, Ty shot the other a heated look. “What other languages do you know?”

Flushed, Julian nearly squeaked as the waitress returned with their wine. “Oh, um, I'm fluent in Franc, Venetian, and Áeric, conversational in broad-form Mang-woh and Southern Prakran, and telegraphic in, um, Silurian, Norman, and Ipponesse. And, um, there's my native Nivinesse and Common.”

Ten. Julian knows some level of comprehension and communication in ten languages. “That's... delightful.”

As confused as a puppy seeing a mirror for the first time, Julian blinked. Sipping his chilled wine, he asked “what do you know?”

“Common, Umbrian, Ingthoth, Phonian, and Antikithera. All fluent, both formal and gutter.” He grinned, “I prefer gutter! My uncles have aneurysms when I do that.”

“Do I want to know why?”

“Gutter Ingthoth has cinqtupple contractions.”

“Owwwwwww…” Julian's brain started to hurt. Ty just laughed at him.

***

“Uhhhh, I'm sooooo fullllll!”

Leaving the restaurant, both men started walking down the central avenue. Ty's eyes were glued onto Julian's back, and had been tracking the other man's every move since dessert. The moment Julian's Tiramisu came out...

'I need to learn how to make that.' The low moan Julian let out at the first bite made Ty sit up hard. He wasn't the only one to do so, with people from nearby tables and booths looking as well. It was only because of a fierce snarl from Ty that no one made a move.

And with how Julian had been licking his fork...

Giving himself a hard shake, Ty sped up. Linking arms, he started steering them to a local kennel and grooming shop. Letting their dogs in first, brightly lit aisles could be seen. Paws dancing, Lucio's hounds were dancing in place. The *tak's!* of their paws were loud, and Mercedes let out a high-pitched whine.

“Yes, yes. Go! Get toys! Get bicits! Get nummies to take home to mama!” Like a shot, two white streaks disappeared into the shop.

“'bicit'? ”

“Belial had a lisp for a while. Couldn't say ‘biscuit’, and the word stuck.”

Mazel and Tov had each picked up a hand basket. Clenching the handle in their jaws, each followed the borzoi's currently frolicking through the store. Occasionally, a puppish yap could be heard.
“So, what brought this on?”

Pawing through a collar display, Ty hummed. “Sent word about the dogs following us. Tubor was kind enough to send a portal to return them. We’ve got an hour to kill before it activates a one-way trip, and I figure sending the pupper back with some goodies will keep them occupied long enough for Nadia to get their little ‘escape’ route patched up.”

Grunting an affirmative, Julian detached himself and walked a bit further down the aisle. Turning, Melchior bounced up to him, a plush toy of some sort clench in his mouth. “What’cha got there? Is it for you?” With a muffled whine and wagging tail, Melchior doubled back. Tov had followed, her basket full of Melchior’s things.

Soon, Ty and Julian started herding the pack to the front. Getting to the counter, Mercedes and Melchior started picking up and placing their toys and treats in front of the clerk. Poor Mazel and Tov just stood there, one giving a doggy sigh.

Items paid for, all the dogs got a treat along with a bag to carry. While Mercedes and Melchior had large bags that they struggled to lift high enough, Ty had gotten a few things for his girls as well.

Once back at the inn, they quickly piled back into their room. With minutes to spare, Ty stuck a paper with a diagram on it to the wall. Countdown started, he and Julian sat and waited between bouts of keeping the borzoi’s from emptying their goodies out. With a quiet chime, the diagram glowed. The outline of a door appeared, before flashing. In the wall, the entrance to Lucio’s wing could be seen. Germanius stood there, a ball of Magelight floating over his shoulder. Next to him-

~MY BABIES!~

“The FUCK!?”

At Lucio’s and Ty’s near-simultaneous shouts, Mercedes and Melchior streaked away, whining happily and goodie bags bouncing. As they crossed the threshold, another chime could be heard. Seconds after they cleared it, the portal faded. Before winking out completely, Germanius throwing them a thumbs-up and Lucio dropping praise over his big fur babies could be seen.

“...I need a drink.”

***

~How have my babies been? Were you good? What am I saying, of course you were! You’re the best doggies ever!~

The dogs danced and whined, bags scattered around the floor. Further up the hall stood Nadia, needing to see the dogs return with her own eyes. Once assured of their safety, she gave Germanius a nod. Turning, she swiftly glided down the stairs.

~Oh, Papa wishes he could pet you...~

Turning from where Nadia had stood, Germanius could see the dogs tearing through their bags. Each was taking great glee in picking up and presenting their presents, not going on until Lucio praised them. He was obviously a man who dearly loved his dogs. Unfortunately for him, not many could say the same about the Count.

Taking pity, Germanius stepped forward. “Hold up,” he grasped a furry shoulder. Concentrating, he tried to ‘pull’ the others ghostly form a bit closer to reality.
~Hey! Hands off the merchandise! Fucking pleb~

Just like the first time, Lucio became a bit more firm. As Mercedes pranced closer, she brushed up against his leg. Everyone froze. In a flurry of fur and barks, the dogs curled up on their backs. Piteous, high cries escaped their throats as they begged for pets that they had been without.

For the first time in three years, Lucio was able to pet his faithful companions.

***

Shortly after the dogs left, Ty and Julian curled up on the bed, sandwiched between Mazel and Tov. The Doctor's eye was already drooping, the excitement from earlier and his small breakdown taking their toll. The heat coming off of Ty didn't help much, beckoning Julian to just drift off.

(He gets cold so easily. Back in Nevivon, once winter hit he wore multiple layers at all times. Mama always said he was more cloth than boy.)

Curling around Ty's chest, he pillowed his head on a firm pectoral.

“Tired, Sweetheart?”

“Mphrgl. Don't know why I've been sleeping so much. I've been an insomniac for years until I met you.”

Julian could feel Ty's dirty smirk. “Jus' means that I've been doing a good job tuckering ya out. Feelin' quite proud of myself,” he twisted a bit, dodging the pillow Julian whipped at him.

Blushing hard, Julian buried his face under Ty's arm. “Please don't remind me! Having the drive I do is embarrassing enough-”

Tilting the other's chin up, Ty met a lavender eye. “Don't be. The fact you find me so desirable and your body reacts the way it does is a point of pride to me. It means that I am satisfying a part of you and doing so enough that, even unconsciously, you know I am safe to go to.” Small butterfly-kiss were showered on the face below him. Try as Julian might, he couldn't hide the sweet sigh that escaped him.

Lips traveling all over warm skin, Ty eventually started laving attention on a graceful neck. Letting out a rumble of satisfaction as his precious Jules canted his head back, Ty eventually buried his face in the crook of neck and shoulder. Breathing in deeply, he went lax, wallowing in the warmth and scent of the other.

Wanting to feel more skin, he slowly started pulling up loose fabric. As his long fingers brushed a ticklish side, a quiet snort was heard. Looking up, Ty snickered: Julian was out like a light. Taking his time in undressing them both, he allowed his hands to roam, taking in their fill of smooth, pale skin and silky body hair.

He could do this all day. The hard plains of a firm chest, the small dips of toned abdominal's, the long stretches of slim legs…

Once getting them both comfortable, Ty rearranged Julian a bit. Draping a boneless redhead over his front, he tucked a curly head over his heart. Not quite tired yet, he reached over to the small bag on his nightstand, pulling out the socks he was working on. Wanting to finish them and start another pair, he put on his glasses and got to work.

Letting familiar motions relax him even more, Ty started to think. The caravan is going to be here
day after tomorrow. That morning, they will need to present themselves, show paperwork, and secure their wagon. If it was just Ty, he would just pull for a spot in a ‘sleeping cart’, but considering his relationship with Julian…

Principia aren’t prudes, but it would still be inappropriate for the both of them to use one of those wagons. Even if they had an open relationship, it would be wrong. Throw in the fact that he, at 28, had a Rut for the first time in his life, using a communal sleeping cart would be a nightmare. He won’t be the only Warlord present, and at least one will have a stronger Incubus lineage. Starting a pissing contest because someone looked at him funny would be ill-advised.

Someone looking at Julian “funny” would NOT be pretty.

He should see if the Outpost has anything about that. Having your first Rut so late is worrisome. Not everyone gets them, but usually they hit around 15-16. From what Ma told him, Tibbles was an utter, hormonal disaster. Ma told him he had to pretty much sit on his brother’s bratty ass after Tibbles tried gunning for Severus after the cantankerous ol’ bastard caught the youngster sniffing around a few of his daughters. And after finding out how he did-in Claxion, Ty is really happy he did what he did. Sev may be small-fry, magic wise, but man is he creative.

As it is, he needs to know if late Ruts are a thing. Usually once you start, they never really stop, just get less in intensity. Someone having one after a major life-altering event isn’t unusual, but fuckakes! Him getting jealous over some smooth faced twink isn't friggin’ “life-altering”!

Feeling snuffling on his chest, Ty shook himself. He hadn’t realized it, but he had started growling at the mere memory of that little boy’s eyes looking at something that wasn’t his. Dropping a kiss on red strands, he went back to his knitting, the deep red yarn sliding through his fingers soothing him.

He’ll also need to check and see if there are any skirmishes going on, especially east of Saturnalia. The nomadic tribes that call that stretch of plains home have historically antagonized each other, and about once a decade an all-out war springs up. He’d hate to get through one stretch of territory just for them to run into a raiding party. Add in the fact that the Scourge of the South are getting more bold and pushing farther North…

He started his decreases for the toe. Wiggling a bit, he made himself more comfortable as Julian settled more into the cradle of his thighs. Making a mental note to check if he’s exempt from his fiber quota, he got his tapestry needle ready.

Tomorrow will be their last day to do whatever they want. After that, it's travel, travel, travel. It may be possible to snag a rest day here or there, but it's not something they could count on. It'll be the better part of a month spent getting to the Eastern Continent, then who knows how long to get the information they need, if it even exists.

Ty admits, even if only to himself, that he's...worried. Worried that Julian may decide this mess isn't worth it. Worried that someone else will sweep the dramatic and devastatingly gorgeous Doctor off his feet. He knows that he has far less to offer than Julian thinks. He has no memory, and few true friends. The few times he returned back to Serenissima he heard the whispers: ‘what a pity, all that power and talent lost.’ ‘He’ll have a hard time finding a Wife.’ ‘Shame, Ionith had been so proud. She’s so strong, helping her son learn to walk, talk, and read all over.’ ‘Should have cut her losses, she has two other's.’

(He will forever be thankful that she never gave up on him. He just wishes that he could visit her Shrine. The two nights a year they could Commune and Abraxas acting as a messenger just...isn't enough.)
Putting his work to the side, he wrapped his arms around his partner, squeezing him in a firm hug. He loves his brothers, feels envious of them. They remember their whole lives, and don't have to worry about triggering an actual aneurysm trying to figure out what was lost. Tybalt is so **smart**, his father's lineage breeding true. Belial's father is a mystery, but even now he is showing a true gift of leadership and strategy. The few letters he got about them, little Bel's instructors have naught but glowing praise, detailing that he could easily be the next Warlord of Serenissima or even *Harmonia*.

What does Ty have to offer? Tiberius was well respected, had incredible knowledge and Insight. His instincts had been so honed and in-tune, many thought he was a Seer. Hundreds of families had offered their sons and daughters for his hand, with the heavy implication of multiple marriages.

Ty can fuck and flirt like a champ, with too much magic, and too little knowledge. Some days, he needs help to spell the word ‘house’. It took him a year to learn how to make a cup of tea and *tie his fucking shoes!*

Julian can do so much better than him. Ty just hopes he never realizes it.

**Chapter End Notes**

And now we get some insight into how Ty views himself!

My boy's are idiots who hate themselves and could probably fix this shit if they would have an actual conversation but are they going to? Nooooooo...
Cordelia grumbled, dressing for the day. His useless nephew, Germanius, still lay sprawled in his bed, jaw wide open as he snored. At odd times, he would let out a horrendous snort before going back to his usual sawing. It's times like this that Cordelia thinks that Pallas, Gemmy's wife, died to get away from the sound.

(That's a lie: while Germanius brokenly held his newborns, Cordelia went on a Hunt. The closure Gemmy got at seeing the assassins head was well worth Cordelia breaking his arm.)

Being woken so rudely and not being allowed back to sleep, Cordelia decided to use this opportunity for an early start. Before Lucio's dog's returned, Nadia had consented to allow House Principia to Investigate Dr. Devorak's...involvement in the Count's death. Her reasoning, Ty's reassignment to the Worm's, was the public excuse. In private, she confided that with how the Court had fucked up Vesuvia so badly in her absence, their statements about what happened the Night of the Murder can no longer be trusted.

“I do not doubt that the Doctor committed the crime. He confessed so himself. No, what I am now uncertain about was if he acted alone. Too many of the Court's actions have been less than honorable, and I know not everyone in the Court loved Lucio as much as they said they did. Please, see what you can find. Vesuvia should not be punished for my lack of action.”

After breakfast, Cordelia is going to track Portia down. Nadia has given them blanket permission to look anywhere they wish, with the handmaid having all the keys to the Palace. He hopes that, with her help, he can have this issue solved quickly.

***

“Pft! Pffft! Gerrof meh!” Pushing at a cold nose, Julian continued to be assaulted by a wet tongue. Jerking away from snuffling in his ear, he tried to pull up the blankets and roll over. The heavy weight of a fully-grown Standing Hound towering over him put the kibosh on that. With a moist snort, she started snuffling about over his face and hair.

Glaring straight at the wall, Julian sighed. Wondering where Ty was so he could control his beast, Julian rolled onto his back. The moment he settled, Mazel flopped over his gut. The mattress dipping signaled Tov joining her sister, and the furry monster proceed to lay over his face!

A sweaty Tiberius entered the room, covered in grime. The sight of a sputtering Julian smothered in dog, muttering muffled invective's as the dogs groomed each other was not something you see everyday. Deciding to save his lover from being crushed by nearly 400 lbs. of dog, Ty gave a whistle.

Julian squeaked as the dogs dismounted, a paw stepping on a very tender spot. Cupping himself, Julian rolled onto his side with a whimper. Why does it hurt so much? His Brundle, while not nearly the size of Ty's hell-hounds, had done the same once or twice, but it felt nowhere near as painful!

Shooing his girls out the door, Ty curled around a beleaguered Doctor. Rubbing his hand up and down a heaving side, he dropped a kiss to a pale shoulder. “Let me guess? Twig and berries?” Ty knew exactly what Julian is feeling. Standing Hound's have longer, thicker toes and toe pads than other large breeds, allowing them better grip on sheer, rocky surfaces. Unfortunately, that means that as the paw bends, there's more surface to press down. Great for traversing rock, snow, and ice. Not so much for human skin and ‘body parts’.
A choked off laugh floated up. “If it makes you feel better, they only flop on people they like?” A muffled ‘yay’ was muttered. “And I secured a spot at the local spa? Hot oil massage, salt baths, gourmet food? All you have to do is get out of bed, go down the steps, and down two blocks.”

Twisting to look over his shoulder, a muzzy Julian zoned in on Ty's face. “What about the roof?”

“Finished.”

“...the spa sounds tempting.” Like, really tempting. “What salt do they have?” If it's not from Nevivon, he's not going.

“Nevivon's, of course. As if I would take you somewhere that uses the inferior Saturnalian type.” What does Julian take him for?

“Only if you carry me there.” As if Ty would do that. He squawked, Ty heaving him up. He flung his arms over muscled shoulders, face brick red as Ty jostled him into a bridal carry.

“Done!”

“But! I mean-, it was just a, um, just a joke?” Sweet gods above, but Julian is praying hard to anything that would listen that Ty doesn't know just how much he is enjoying this. Ty had lifted him with ease, hell, he hadn't strained or was even breathing hard from his action. It just made Julian all the more aware that he would gladly let the other man do whatever he wanted to him.

“Sweetheart, I could carry you all day,” regardless of your erection, he left tactfully unsaid.

“Now, onwards! To the spa!”

***

Helping Marchessa sit up, Asra and Lucille proceed to change her dressings. The woman hissed in pain as Asra slowly unbound her arm, working as quickly as possible to unstrap the limb from her chest. Lucille had brought out a clear quartz pane, drawing some runes on it with her fingertip. With a flash and flutter, the stone cleared. Hovering it over areas of Marchessa's body, chimes and scripts would pop-up.

“Well, Lu? What's the verdict?” Marchessa had a low, smokey voice, slightly hoarse due to her recovery.

Clicking her tongue, Lucille scratched some things down on paper. “You're healing, but not fast enough. I've got indications that you were used in some sort of Ritual, but no idea which one or type.” Setting the quartz down, she started making notes in earnest. “They either cleansed you, or did something altogether new.”

Rubbing salve on a cleaned gash, Asra hummed. Considering what has happened so far, it seems par for the course. “Do you want me to speak with my Patron?” The Arcana system isn't exactly literal in their Titling, but the Magician's a Magician for a reason. Being able to embody these traits makes being a magician much easier.

(Rubbing salve on a cleaned gash, Asra hummed. Considering what has happened so far, it seems par for the course. “Do you want me to speak with my Patron?” The Arcana system isn't exactly literal in their Titling, but the Magician's a Magician for a reason. Being able to embody these traits makes being a magician much easier.

(Just like someone who embodies the Devil would be absolutely horrible at being a magician. Although, how Ty's theological pantheon can do half the bullshit it does just boggles the mind. It's plain broken, is what it is!)

Lucille huffed, “well, it certainly won't hurt us. Although, how much he can reveal is questionable, the Arcana system is relatively new. We'd have better luck Petitioning Hedonism, and the Horned One can be fickle.”
Oh, don't Asra know it. The amount of rants Ty went on about Hedonism picking the most inopportune times to answer a prayer or demand tribute is innumerable.

Marchessa had fallen back asleep by this point. The periods that she was up and talking were few and far between. Her inability to stay lucid was troubling, doubly so when Lucille and her girls were creating talisman’s of Good Fortune and they helped little.

“What information did your Pane give you?”

Washing her hands, Lucille huffed again. “Nothing aside from being used as an anchor. For who or what, I have no idea. When they were finished, the Cultist must of cleaned her. Her injuries are indicative of torture and fighting, but nothing stands out for ritual marks or brands.”

That is really...unhelpful. Looks like Asra will need to take a trip. The records Germanius and Cordelia brought in about Aoife had mention of a grand-nice living out by Nopal at one point. He may be able to find something.

***

Julian was a puddle. He has no idea how, but the hands of his masseuse had rubbed, pushed, and pulled his knotted muscles into tender submission. The warm, fragrant oil they used had a deep, heady smell. It was a mix of dark, spicy tones with high, fruity notes. If he had to describe it, he would say it was a mix of ripe cherry and a rich Merlot, with a hint of raspberry. A combination he would have never chosen for himself.

He was stretched out on a padded table, head pillowed in folded arms. He only had a thin towel draped over his backside, allowing his attendant to massage him with ease. Ty was on a table next to him, in a similar state. The Mountain View Spa must mix their own oils, Julian having never smelled such combinations. Ty's mix smelled of rose, sandalwood, and vanilla. Julian's mouth had started literally watering, and he made a mental note to buy some to gift Ty.

Once arriving at the spa, they had been shuffled to a locker room. Stripping and donning the softest robes Julian has ever felt, they were directed to showers paved in dark stone, the floor heated with geothermal heat. One quick scrub down later, and they were laid out for a deep tissue massage. Julian is embarrassed to admit that he had let out the loudest, lustiest moan he ever had when Jurg (his masseuse) had started working on his spine.

Once the massage is over, the next step is to soak in a hot salt pool. Attendants will scrub and wash their bodies and hair, before applying conditioners and facial treatments. After they've relaxed in the water, it will be on to lunch on the Main Balcony, with them finishing up with some leisure time in one of the solarium's.

But that can wait. For now, Julian is just going to enjoy loose muscles and try not to drift off. Judging from Ty's chuckle, he's not doing a great job.

***

“Here we go, Mr. Cordelia! One stuffed omelette, baked potato fritters, rye toast with whipped butter, a fruit parfait, and milky tea!” Sliding multiple plates and bowls onto the table, Portia listed everything. She and Cordelia were in a parlor off the main Dining Hall, balcony doors swung wide. Beams of bright sunlight painted the floor in a rainbow of colors, and a light breeze played with gauzy curtains.

“Thank you, Portia. This looks lovely. Won't you join me?”
“Oh, don't worry about me! I've already had a filling breakfast!”

“Surely you can sit for a cuppa tea? I fear I may be putting you through your paces today, and I would feel horrible if you canceled your date with Valora due to tiredness.” Cordelia smirked over his teacup at the bright blush that lit up Portia's face.

Sliding into the chair across from him, Portia quickly fixed herself some tea. By the time she took her first sip, she had her flush under control. Cordelia cooed internally, finding her adorable.

Passing the time with some minor small talk, Cordelia made progress on devouring the fluffy, ham-and-cheese omelette before him. He only really slowed down once he mixed his second cup of tea, adding an obscene amount of sugar. He chuckled, the disgusted sneer Portia was sporting nearly identical to Julian's.

“You and your brother have the same ‘disgusted’ look, you know that?”

If he wasn't looking for it, he would have missed Portia's flinch. “I don't know what your talking about, sir. I don't have a brother.”

“We have the same goals as Ty: keep Julian alive. If shit goes down, he's coming with us. You're welcome to join.” Taking a few bites of his parfait, he continued: “Now, what can you tell me about the lead up to Lucio's death? Where particular people were, where Julian spent most of his time, a possible timeline?”

“I can't really tell you much, having only started working at the Palace after the Countess went into seclusion. I know that Ilya spent quite a bit of time in the Main Library. Oh!” Perking up, Portia wrapped her fingers around her cup, giving a little bounce in her chair, “Tiberius asked me for a list of names before he abruptly left! He forgot that along with a few things. I put them into storage. I can retrieve them for you?”

“That would be lovely! But, that can wait. What can you tell me about the Courtiers?”

This was heaven.

Ty was sitting on a warm, stone bench, hair being brushed and clipped by an attendant. Once a few inches are taken off, she'll put a conditioning treatment into his hair and he'll join an already cared-for Julian in the baths.

Julian sat in the deep bath, submerged up to his shoulders. The familiar scent of Nevinesse salts permeated the air, and the treated water curled and cradled his long limbs in a blanket of warmth. His hair was soaking in conditioner, and he was ecstatic to learn that all of his products will be mixed with what is now his custom scent. If he ever wants more, the spa gave him a card with the mix name, oils, and their parts. All he has to do is send them a letter with payment, and he'll get his refills.

He can't wait to bury his nose in Ty's neck. His mix of spice and floral did things for Julian. He could wallow in Ty's presence all day.

(Ty smells good on a normal day, but damn if the spa's Scentologist didn't know her shit. She turned a snack into a three-course meal!)

Ty was led over to the washing station. Due to the amount of hair he had, two attendants were assigned to him. A few others stayed nearby, muttering with astonishment about the thickness, curls, and color of his locks. A few looked over to Julian, one mugging a look. Julian preened, head back
with a smirk. Adding a bit of sass to his nod, he got a look of envy in return.

Hearing some murmurs he gloated. Ty could leave him any day now, but until that point, Julian will flaunt it.

“*whistle* My my my, Ty! Just look at you. You're looking like a snack. Can I, hmm, get a nibble?” Julian added an eyebrow waggle for effect. He grinned at the short laugh Ty let out, and felt a bubble of delight burst in his chest at the blush the other sported.

Ty stood, making sure the clip his conditioned hair was spun up in was secure. Pulling on his robe, Julian noticed his Mark stood out in stark contrast, the three darkened spokes glistening in mist-heavy air. “I don't know, babe, what kind of snack am I?”

“Hmmmm, tough to say, you're a lot of things, including meaty and filling,” Julian pillowed his face on folded arms, laying on the bath's edge. “But, I would have to say, a fruit. Something sweet and suck-ulent!” He added a bit of a *pop!* with his tongue between the last two syllables. A few attendants tittered, causing him to grin.

“Pffft! And what sort of fruit would that be?”

“A fineapple!”

He got a few boo's for that, but it was worth hearing Ty laugh.

***

Tubor was chain smoking again. He was lounging in his chambers, glass of wine in one hand, cigarillo in the other. Over his lap was a desk, paperwork spread out. It was warm today, unbearably so. Anything heavier than the thin robe he currently wore caused him to break out in sweats.

Sipping his wine, he clucked. Spread over the desk was additional research about the Worm and the suspected Cult house. A few Initiates tried to contact Aoife through the Wall, just to get nothing.

Which shouldn't be possible.

Everyone who dies leaves a trace behind, regardless of belief system or pantheon. Even those who claim atheism, their souls wander a barren afterlife for the rest of Eternity or until Claimed. If a Necromancer, regardless of rank, attempts a connection through the Wall (the metaphysical barrier between the living and the dead), some thing should answer. There have been times where Tubor would try to connect to a soul just to be blocked, but that either has to do with the soul not wanting to speak, or its Patron denying the Connection. Either way, the Connection at least tries to take place.

Aoife's soul is just throwing that out the damn window. At first, the Initiates who tried to Connect thought that they were just not powerful enough. While Aoife's home was never set up as a magic shop, that doesn't mean she wasn't a practitioner when alive. Some magics, if powerful enough when living, could deny the Connection in death. As protocol dictates, the Call got passed up the line.

It was when it came to Grell, Tubor's Third in Command and a Calling Specialist, that things started getting weird. Tubor may be the Head of the Vesuvian Necromancers, but Grell is the undisputed Calling Specialist of the southern reaches of the Stellaris Empire. Literally only four others have a higher rank, and it's not by that much.
Lending Grell his own magic did nothing, baffling the rest of the group. Even if she had been reincarnated, a scrap of what made Aoife, Aoife, should still be fluttering around. The only time it’s **not** possible to call out to a soul is if the person it belongs to isn’t dead.

In the midst of taking a puff, Tubor froze. The cigarillo slipped from slack fingers, rolling down his bare chest. After a few moments he shrieked, flinging it away as he hissed, trying to soothe the burn that was very, very low down his abdomen. Skulling his wine, he messily searched for pen and parchment.

Aoife ó Foghladh isn't dead.

***

Giving a little clap of his hands, Julian bounced on his lounger, excited to try the dish currently coming his way. Next to him, Ty stifled a snort at his antics.

Over the last hour, they had been teased and tantalized with a variety of delicate finger foods as hands and feet were attended to. Thin slivers of pear and prosciutto over Gorgonzola and herb bread, brie and leek tartlets, artichoke dip bites topped in rich black caviar, the list goes on and on. His personal favorite was the feta-stuffed fig slices with honey drizzle.

Now was time for the main course as they took in the view. The Mountain View Spa was appropriately named, the top two floors having an unbroken view of the snow capped Frostback Mountains. From this high up, all one could see was the rolling plains give way to hills, and then sheer rock face. The sky was all clear except for a few fluffy clouds, and the sight made Julian want to go adventuring. His toes twitched and his legs shuffled, restless, trying to act on his desire.

Good thing they’ll be leaving soon. Once they get their accommodations with the caravan secured, they’ll be leaving either that day or super early the next, depending on a few factors. Ty earlier had seemed certain that they would be on the move by ten the day of joining.

“Sir…” a fluted platter was sat in front of Julian. After a quiet ‘Thank-you,’ he looked to see what the main was, and was not disappointed: Veal Piccata, with sauteed spinach and roasted, mashed carrots carved to look like flowers. The sauce was thick and rich, clinging to delicate cuts of tender meat, and the carrot flowers were multicolored, lending credence to the belief that multiple types of carrot were used. Looking closer, Julian could see that the flowers had some sort of glaze to help keep their shape.

Looking over to Ty, Julian caught glimpse of some sort of pork loin in a pale herb gravy. Taking a discreet sniff, he could smell rosemary and sage, with a shot of wine. Multiple thick slices had been fanned across the plate, a generous serving of the gravy topping it. Along with it came a serving of roasted potatoes and apples along with a flower made of what looks to be mashed parsnips.

Anticipation boiling in his gut, Julian cut a square of veal. Popping it in his mouth, his eyes rolled back and he let out a moan at the salty, sweet, and tart flavors. Ignoring the quiet chuckle of the attendant, he cut another bite, rosy cheeked.

Accepting his wine, Ty took in the sight of a rapturous Julian. The delighted quirk of his lips at each bite he took, the little hum he made as he nibbled the spinach, even the tortured expression he wore as he cut into his carrot flower's held Ty captive.

Before they leave, Ty needs to get in touch with the cook. He’ll pay whatever they're asking for the recipes if it means putting such a look on the others face.
Gilda hobbled along, clutching her purse tight. She was making her way up to the Palace, grumbling the entire time.

Time was of the essence. During the lunch rush, someone had left something behind. Not unusual in and of itself, no, but what was left is. As she was clearing cups away, she noticed a small pendant, little bigger than her gnarled thumb. Making to place it behind her counter, she noticed what it was at the last moment: the Sign of the Worm.

She has no idea who left it, and knows that it was not intentional from glancing at the broken clasp. She had been chastising Prew (again) for badgering poor Asra, so she has no identifying information that she can give on who it could possibly belong to. All she knows is that some foul fucking Cultist had literally been within inches of her granddaughter and she hadn't noticed! All she could do was wrap the twisted artifact in a scrap of cloth and bring it up to the Court.

“WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING, HAG!”

“GO JUMP OFF THE RAMPARTS, YOU LIP-FLIPPING FUCKDUCK!” With a jerk and a sneer, the poney bastard who had pushed into her flounced off, nose high in the air. Gilda hopes he walks into an open sewer, unable to see it because he was so up his own ass.

“Fucking kids these days, no respect I tell you…”

After an hour of pushing through thick crowds, Gilda finally came to the front gate. Taking a few moments to catch her breath (who's idea was it for multiple flights of stairs!? She just wants to talk...), she marched up to one of the guards.

“The name's Gilda, and I may have something that will aid in the Worm investigation.” There. Nice, simple, and straight to the point. She'll talk to the Captain of the Guard, leave her details, and waddle back to her stand.

“Yeah, you and everyone else, lady. Move along.”

Gilda growled, a snarl twisting her wrinkled face. “Now you listen here, boy. I literally have, in my bag,” she shook her purse in the bored guards face, “an object that was left that I have good reason to believe belongs to someone who is involved with that damn Worm that popped-up!”

“Mmhmmmmm, I bet you do. Let me just put that with the rest of the garbage,” he thumbed over to an open garbage pail. Before he could open his mouth again, he let out a girlish yelp and covered his head, ears still ringing from the clobbering he just got.

“Why, you sleazy douchbag fuck! You don't get to fuckin’ decide if what I's got is legit!” She smacked him again with her heavy bag, “now, do your damn job, get off your fat and pimply arse, and tell your boss he needs to stop pumping into that merkin-wearing wench from down the docks with one eye and to ATTEND ME!” She whacked him a few more times, chasing him a few steps as he yelped, his arms flapping like an overweight duck trying to fly.

She stood, red-faced and huffing as she waited. Hearing a deep chuckle, she turned with a glare. On the other side of the gate, a tall gentleman stood. Short silver hair stuck out despite being pushed back, and he had a stocky build that his scholar's robes could not hide.

Gilda pulled back her arm, raising her purse high. “You wanna piece of me!?” There was plenty more where that came from.
“You must be Gilda,” the newcomer demurred. His grin was large and sudden, “Rus said you were...unforgettable, and I can see why.”

“Ya know my boy?”

“I changed his diapers. And he is the same now, as then: full of shit.”

Barking out a laugh, Gilda resettled her purse before putting her hands on her hips. “Ain’t that the truth. Ya gotta name, Diaper Man?”

“The name's Cordelia, and you, my good woman,” his grin became a bit more predatory, “have something that I am very interested in.”

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The solarium was full of greenery. Small trees, bearing both fruit and flowers, created paths through the garden. The walkways were made of finely crushed white stone, winding through emerald grass and leading to various small enclosures. Finely carved wooden benches and padded couches were tucked away in little alcoves, allowing couples who wanted a little privacy to have it.

A large construct of glass and finely wrought metal covered the area, taking up the entire top of the spa's building. Large and rectangular, smaller, pagoda-like offshoots anchored the building at the four corners. It was possible to book one for exclusive use, the well-maintained foliage and discreet privacy wards ensuring no peeping.

Julian had been amazed when Ty brought him into one. They entered through a Nipponese Cherry Blossom tunnel in miniature. On the other side of the soft, pink blossoms was a small pond under a flowering wisteria tree, a padded bench concealed under its boughs. Next to it was a small serving table, desserts laid out for sampling.

“So why are you spoiling me so?” The cost for this day here must be outrageous! Shepherd's Stop gets a lot of flack for being a 'trading post', but they are located in an advantageous spot. It's the only viable crossing this side of the Frostback Mountains, otherwise you have to continue through Iriq's Sh’har cave system until you come out the far eastern side. As a result, a lot of money gets spent here. The spa itself is proof.

“Hedonism demands tribute. And I wanted to spoil you. I don't have much to spend my money on.”

Turning, Julian caught sight of a wistful Ty. “But, your brothers? Do you not also have a house? Even Asra?”

“I get to see my brothers very...infrequently. Haven't seen them face-to-face since Ma's death, outside the walls of Lux Æternia. All other communication has been through letters or mirror. I don't want to risk them becoming Ostracized with me.” Grabbing a long fingered hand, Ty pulled Julian towards the bench. In a repeat of Lucille's dining room, Ty only started nibbling the sweets laid out before them after he had fussed over Julian. After a few small bites, he continued: “I also didn't move out after my recovery. It, I felt too lonely. Hollow. Like I was an empty vessel. I truly believe that if I had tried to stick it out, I would have fallen too deep into depression.

And Asra? What gift can you possibly give someone who helped you learn to be, again? I'm embarrassed to say it, but before Ma could come, he took care of me like a baby, literally helping me go to the bathroom, put on my socks, and speak. He went out and got the primers Governesses get for their young charges, taught me letters, shapes, and colors. For a few months, I couldn't feed
myself! And the first time I tried to make a pot of tea? Shattered the whole set. How he didn't kill me I'll never know, that pot belonged to his parents."

“Besides,” Ty chuckled, “he’s really stupid when it comes to money. I asked him for the rent once, and he gave me a sparkling seashell. He looked so proud for remembering the rent I didn't have the heart to get mad! Another time, I asked him to swap some of my silvers for coppers. Dumbass gave me a small ruby and got confused when I said never mind. It's why I got so good at money. Stock markets, company shares, going public, the works. Between the two of us, we have a ridiculous amount of money that was just sitting around.”

Humming, Julian took a delicate bite of a strawberry tart. He knew that Ty and Asra had a close relationship, he just didn't know they were that close. And Ty has a point: it would be very difficult to repay someone who cared for you so intimately. “How did you and Asra know each other? Before the accident?”

“Don't have a lot of details, m’afraid.” Ty scratched his head, squinting, “any time I’m given too much info about my past, I suffer what is essentially a mini-stroke. What I do know is that I had been sent to Vesuvia to start another Citadel guild hall. Possibly even head it. Asra was one of the local magical's I had been working with to get everything sorted.”

Debating between two different little cakes, Julian gave in and picked one of each. One a decadent chocolate mousse, the other a white cake with honey and almonds. He geared himself for his next question, already having an idea to the answer.

“What does it mean? To be ‘ostracized’?” He didn't miss the wince Ty gave. The melancholic expression he now sported was depressing.

“It means exactly what you think it does. I'm an exile. Can't go home, or to any major Umbrian city. And as for House Principia? I can't even enter another member's home. Most won't even talk to me…” Ty hopes to the heavens that he’ll be treated well by the caravan. Nomadic Principia are notorious for following the beat of their own drum. This will be the first time in, well, his current memory that he’ll be interacting with his old House.

Ty sounded so bereft, so lonely. It made Julian angry. How can someone turn their back on a family member who was in such dire straits? Who doesn't even know why he is the way he his?

A hand covering his own startled Julian. He hadn't even realized he was shaking until Ty moved. Meeting the other's eye, he felt a strange sensation in his chest at the warm look Ty was giving him.

“You don't need to worry about me, but it's nice that you do.”

***

Asra dodged about the crowd, making his way to the Western Gate. He ducked his head, pulling down the brim of his hat, plumed feather bobbing at the motion. If he can get clear of the city walls in the next hour, he should be able to meet Url the Beast and fly to Nopal.

“ASRA!” A delicate hand pulled at his elbow, a high, feminine voice calling out. Twisting, he shut down the sneer creeping onto his face. Not fast enough, apparently, as Prew shrunk back at his look. “I...I didn't mean to startle you, but I haven't seen Tiberius lately. Is he alright?”

“He has left the city,” Asra's response was short, clipped. “While he will return, due to the nature of his assignment it is unknown when.”
Prew withdrew her arm, curling her hand against her chest as she looked down shyly. If she expected to fool Asra, than she was stupider than he thought. Her coy actions may blind many others, but Asra has been in the presence of those far more beautiful and charismatic than she. Even Lucio had been more captivating, knowing how to move and schmooze, who to butter up and who he could disregard with a sniff.

Shame Lucio was so self indulgent. If he had only turned his gaze outward, he could have been so GREAT...

Asra jolted, a perfumed letter being abruptly shoved into his face. The overly sweet scent sent his eyes watering and nose itching. It took everything he had to not sneeze all over it.

“If, if you could? Please, give this to Tiberius?” Prew nibbled her lip, eyes wide as she looked to the side with a blush. “I find myself enthralled, and only wish to spend time with him.”

“As we have mentioned before, Miss Prew, Tiberius has no interest in you.” Each flat word that passed his lips had an effect on the woman, her flinching at the last statement. “I’m afraid that Ty has entered into an exclusive relationship with someone, and is being quite firm in where his affections lie.” The rude snort Prew retorted with startled Asra.

“Oh, you mean the dramatic, Devorak-wannabe? Hmph! I’ll admit, while he is handsome, the fact that he tries so hard to imitate the Count’s Murderer shows he is of low taste! Tiberius needs a partner of equal standing. Someone who can meet him on equal terms of wealth, grace, and appearance. Not someone who stumbles over his own two feet.” Really, seeing the man trip over thin air and nearly take out an entire fruit cart before entering the Bazaar those weeks ago was cringe inducing. And seriously, an eyepatch off all things? Sounds like someone is trying too hard. If she didn't know better, she would think it was the man himself. As it is, his overdoing the ‘tortured protagonist’ shtick put him out of the running entirely. If he entered a look-alike contest, he wouldn't make the top five!

Asra shook himself, wondering just how daft one needs to be to not connect the dots, but also feeling blessed. If she knew, Prew would cause no end of trouble. “Be that as it may, Tiberius has made his choice. While I personally believe that he could do better, Ty thinks otherwise and is happy with his current partner,” Asra gently pushed her letter back. “I would suggest you move on.”

Shaking, Prew fisted her hands, letter crinkling at the action. Lips pressed into a thin line, her face flushed, clashing horribly with her pale hair. Stiff, she spun on her heel. “You'll regret this, Asra! Both of you!”

Turning to continue his path out of the city, Asra caught sight of one of many Notice Boards. Tacked up on it, between updates of events and the weekly almanac, were a variety of ‘Wanted’ posters. Smack dab on top was the one for Julian, both portrait and in profile. Feeling a bit mischievous, he pulled it down, folding it away.

Papers processed, he walked at a brisk pace. As he moved, he brought back out the poster. Folding and creasing it carefully, he soon had a paper crane in his hands. A lavender snout peeked out of his coat, bumping the paper construct.

~Present for Ty?~

“Not exactly, Faust. Although, he should get a kick out of it.”

Curling upside down, Faust *bleeped*, cocking her head. ~Funny?~
Smirking like the fox his Patron favors, Asra blew on the crane. Mixing charms for flight, speed, and tracking into his breath, he watched as the paper construct took flight. Provided there is no headwind, it should reach Shepherd's Stop by evening.

“Oh, if his companion reacts as I think he will, Ty will be in stitches.”

***

Julian was sad to leave the spa that evening. As they were checking out, they received a gift basket to take with them. In it was all sorts of goodies, including small samples of their 'signature scents' to use. As Ty was finalizing their payment, Julian had to be sneaky, quietly asking the counter attendant what the cost for a full bottle of Ty's scent would be. His eye bugged out at the cost. It was quite expensive, but he could swing it. And the sum is nothing compared to the gifts Ty has already gotten him.

A little return spoilage is due.

Helping to distract Ty, the Scentologist had a batch whipped up in no time. Quickly paying for it, Julian then shuffled a bewildered Ty out the door. Throwing the small crowd of attendants a jaunty wink, the door closed, cutting off the cloud of giggles they got.

Heading down the street, they passed their inn, heading for the pet store. Just like them, the girls had a little spa day of their own. A full bath, brushing, clipping, and filing. When they had been dropped off, Ty had been bouncing on his toes. Turns out, the girls get extremely fluffy when freshly washed. Julian can't wait to see them.

Door chiming, the two walked to the counter. As they were getting a progress report, the familiar clicks of big doggy paws galloping was heard. In an instant, Mazel and Tov were leaning across the counter, tongues lolling as their tails fanned.

“Oh my goodness look at you!” Julian was cooing. The girls were so fluffy! Running his hands over their heads and necks, he leaned in for kisses. Their fur was silky soft, and smelled so clean. Not that they were dirty before, but dogs smell like, well, dogs. “And what's this? Awwwwww, you've got little bows! You look so pretty, yes you do!”

Sliding the money owed across the counter, Ty was interrupted as two big furry heads slid under his arms. “Hey now! Give daddy a minute, he's got to finish paying before he can fuss over you!”

Getting his change, Ty led the love fest outside. Getting compliments on the dogs as they went back to the inn, it was a boneless party of four who entered the dining room. Making arrangements for the girls to get a snack and lay about by the hearth (where many children immediately set upon them), the two men went to their room to finish packing.

As Ty started looking over their list, Julian opened their window, letting in the last rays of a dying sun. Leaning on the sill, he took a deep breath, trying to imprint the smell of the town they had so much fun with.

“OW! The fuck?” Looking over in concern, Ty spotted a miffed Julian. He was rubbing the skin of his forehead, freehand clutching whatever it was that had hit him.

“You okay, Sweetheart?”

“Yeah, just more startled than hurt. What in the world…” getting a closer look at the object, Julian could see it was a paper crane that had literally rocketed into his face. He frowned, knowing Asra's
work when he sees it. “The nerve! The audacity!” When everything is said and done, someone’s gonna get shanked!

Malak had hopped onto Julian's arm, bobbing his head as he investigated what had hit his master. Warbling, he pecked the paper construct. He let out a startled ‘CAW!’ when Ty plucked it from Julian's hands.

“Alrighty, let's see what Fluff'n Stuff has sent us.” Ignoring Julian's guffaw at Ty's nickname for the magician, Ty started to carefully unfold the paper creation. Soon, he was holding a creased ‘Wanted’ poster for Julian. Before he could look at it fully, Julian snatched it back.

Holding it out at arms width, Julian started frowning before he sniffed. “Seriously? After all this time! No wonder no-one's ever turned me in! Look!” Shoving the paper into Ty's face, he continued. “They still can't get my nose right!”

Leaning back, Ty broke out in a belly laugh. In the portrait was a headshot of a smirking Julian, sans eyepatch. The sketch artist had actually done a good job, until they reached the nose. Here, instead of a regal, Atreian nose was a hooked monstrosity. It looked more in line as something a villain in a Bardelian play would be sporting. The sight was just comical.

Quieting, Ty dropping a peck on a miffed Julian's nose. “If it makes you feel better, I think your nose looks cute.”

“Hmph!”

***

“I hate my life, and all that is in it.”

“Don't worry, Tubor. Life hates you, too.”

“Isn't there a dick you should be bobbing on?”

Tubor and Lucille were at a table, documents spread between them. The Necromancer was scribbling like mad, paging between different piles of parchment and a few books. Occasionally he would mutter something nonsensical under his breath before either stilling or exploding into more movement. Lucille merely sat and watched, sipping shots of a hard spirit from a dark bottle.

“So. What bug crawled up your ass? You just burst into my manse, screeching about someone 'not being dead' and 'fucking Aoife'. There maaaaaaay have also been a 'I'm too young for this bullshit' as well.”

“I will have you KNOW, I was NOT. SCREECHING! I was merely stating that, due to my young age, it is ENTIRELY REASONABLE for me to not realize that Aoife ó Foghladh was still among the living, despite it being nearly at least 150 years since her 'supposed' death.” A disdainful sniff followed Tubor's declaration.

“So...screeching.

...why do I even fucking bother.” With a huff, Tubor threw himself back into his chair, hands massaging his temples. The motions caused his robe to gape at the chest, giving Lucille quite the view.

Who knew Tubor was so fit? Shame he's such an ass.
“Stop undressing me with your eyes, harlot.”

“Whatever, I do what I want.” Taking another sip of drink, Lucille wrinkled her nose as she let out a low belch. Ignoring Tubor's look of disgust, she pulled one of the papers he had been scribbling on closer to her. “So, what do you mean, Aoife isn’t dead?”

“Do you need a dictionary, woman? It means exactly what is sounds like!” Lucille could almost hear the unspoken ‘duh!’ at the end.

“No shit, Shinola. What I mean is how. Stop being an ass for a minute, come down from your mountain, and explain to us lowly mortals how a woman, who by all rights should be dead, isn't.”

Tubor let out a gusty sigh, summoning a bottle of wine as he did so. Pulling the cork out with his teeth, he gave a slight swish before taking a long pull. “We don't have any records or registration, but Aoife may have known magic. She could have used it to greatly expand her life, or she entered a Patronage. These books here,” he made a sweeping gesture, “hold records of the deities that she could have encountered during her travel from Áierlund to Vesuvia. Thing is, while she claimed ‘Displacement Status’, we don't know when or where exactly she left.”

Tubor wants to hang himself. There is a ten-year period where Áierlund had been in dire straits. During that time, there had been a famine, then an outbreak of Silurian Influenza, followed by fires that had ravaged the main farming valley, and then the Pict Genocide. All in all, without knowing just where Aoife had been living, plotting her main course of travel is a damn nightmare.

One book had been opened to a map, current as to when Aoife would have been traveling. Tubor had used chalk to outline several paths, some by sea, others by land, and their possible dates and causes. Other books and scrolls had marks sticking out, presumably denoting possible Patrons. All in all, it was a damn mess.

“Shit, Tubor. I almost feel sorry for you.”

“Weep for me.”

***

Julian straddled the small bench near the room’s table, folding and rolling various pieces of clothing before placing them in one of his bags. Ty was doing similar, except he was also sorting their extra shopping that was to be delivered to Tubor for storage. The dogs had long since fallen asleep, exhausted from a full day of pampering. Malak had squeezed himself between them, letting out the occasional *peeeeeeep* of a birdy snore.

Checking his boots over for any damage, Julian startled as muscled arms curled around his waist. A pair of warm lips pressing against his neck alerted him to the culprit. “Hmmmm, do you, ah, need me to move?”

“Nah, Sweetheart. You’re perfect just where you are.”

Finished with one boot, Julian moved onto the other. As he bent over, large hands smoothed down his stomach before heavily dragging themselves over supple thighs. His breath hitched and a shiver walked down his spine as a hard torso molded to his back. “Ah, wha-”

A low, rumbled ‘as you were’ reverberated across his skin. With a gulp, Julian did so, hips jerking as hard fingertips dug into sensitive inner thighs before being slowly pulled back up. Coming to the join of leg to hip, those same large hands flattened, palms now making slow circles up and down,
coming just shy of brushing against a now-awake erection.

Julian gulped, starting to lightly pant. Ty had been dropping soft, near whispers of kisses up and down his neck and collar as his hands moved. Turning, Julian begged for a kiss, just to get the softest touch of skin. He wanted so much more.

He should beg. Ty likes it when he begs, is unable to leave him unfulfilled. “Please-”

“Back to what you were doing, Sweetheart.”

Sucking in a breath, Julian did as he was told. His fingers shook as he moved his boot, checking the laces and leather. Placing it on the floor with its partner, he pulled over a pair of trousers, letting out a sharp hitch as a thumb was pushed down his clothed cock. He bucked as it came back up, slack fingers dropping the pants. Twisting, he caught Ty's lips, tongue giving tiny, kitten licks as he quietly begged for more. This time, he was indulged, his chest starting to heave as long fingers sunk into his hair.

“Gods, I can kiss you all day…” Ty moaned. And he truly could, Julian's mouth was as sweet as honey and as hot as the sun. Each and every sigh and moan that escaped him was swallowed up by Ty, and he wanted more. The hand not occupied with spun auburn locks had been slowly inching over, a hot palm surreptitiously covering a hard erection. That same hand danced over sensitive skin, and Ty relished in the fine twitches of tormented hips and short gasps that flew from between bitten lips. Cradling a flexing jaw, he left softer still open-mouthed kisses on a graceful swan neck as the other hand gently squeezed a firm erection.

It was only when he felt Julian's fingers dig into his legs that Ty decided to bring the party to the bed. In moments he had a breathless doctor on his back, bed rocking as Ty straddled the other. Lips delivering whispers of heat, he slowly stripped what little clothing was still on himself and his precious Jules.

Indulging in long, slow, and deep kisses, Ty slowly brought Julian's hands up to the headboard. Molding the other's long fingers to the bars running up and down, Ty slowly kissed back down a warm neck. “Keep your hands there, luv.” Ty could feel a tremble wrack the other's frame, a shuddering inhale followed by a loud gulp. As he came down to a fit chest, licked and sucked clean skin to his heart's content. Each nip produced a twitch, and he could feel Julian's arms jerk. His poor Sweetheart was trying so hard to be a good boy and not let go of the headboard…

Soft yet wiry hairs tickling his chin and cheeks, Ty slowly migrated over to a nipple. Giving a teasing nip, he continued his journey downwards. Coming to a furred navel, his tongue dipped in before he started nipping and sucking the area between belly and groin.

“P-, please!” A ball of fire burned in Julian's core. He wanted Ty to do so much more! He wanted teeth and nails to dig into his skin! Wanted large hands to make their mark with bruises and redden his hide! He wanted Ty to make him hurt.

Ty knew what Julian wanted. And Julian wasn't going to get his way. Ty was going to take his time and savor his sweet, sweet boy.

Shifting writhing legs to hang over his shoulders, Ty flattened his tongue and drug it up a slick shaft, moaning as he scooped up salty emissions. Snapping his fingers, wards went up, ensuring that they wouldn't disturb anyone or vice versa. As he suckled, trying to get more, he could vaguely hear Julian murmuring and begging. Burying his nose in the thick thatch of curls at the base of the cock lodged in his throat, Ty had to plant a firm palm on Julian's abs as the other bucked up with a pitiful
Pulling up and off, Ty took in the sight bequeathed to him. Julian had at some point bitten his lip, a
dewdrop of scarlet clinging to thin lips and his face was screwed up in his painful pleasure. His arms
and hands shook and strained, but he did as Ty said and hadn't let go of the headboard.

Wanting to reward such good behavior, Ty reached over to the side table. Pulling over a now-
familiar bottle, he spilled some oil on his fingers. Rising up high onto his knees, he settled a slim calf
over a shoulder as he pet a clenched entrance. Slowly working a finger in, he rumbled at the hard
inhale and sweet 'thank you! Oh, please! Thank you!' Julian mewled. Dragging out the preparing for
as long as possible, Ty wasn't satisfied until he could easily insert three fingers and Julian had tears
clinging to the corners of his eyes.

And still, Julian hadn't let go.

Slicking up generously, Ty lined up and slowly slid home. As each inch sunk in, a long moan
breathed passed Julian's lips. Once he bottomed out, Ty leaned over, locking lips with the set below
him. Almost immediately, Julian tried to make everything frantic and hard. Working a hand to the
base of Julian's skull, fingers fisted a mussed mane as Ty tugged Julian's head back, humming lowly
at the desperate cry he got. Slowly pumping his hips, he hovered his lips near a delicate ear.

"Just look at you. So flushed, soooooooo... enticing. The sounds you make are enough to feed a
man for days..." giving a slight snap of his hips, Ty delighted in the sharp cry Julian emitted. Kissing
madly along neck and jaw, Ty eventually buried his nose behind an ear, pulling in sweet, perfumed
air with a low and hungry growl. A growl that was giving Julian flashbacks to their first coupling. It
was the sound of a predator cornering its prey, KNOWING that there will be no escape.

If Ty was a lion, then Julian would be happy to be a gazelle.

A shout reverberated around the room as Ty picked up the pace. Julian's legs fell open and curled
simultaneously, arms straining in the effort required to not let GO of the headboard. His knuckles
were white, and he just knows that there will be red crisscrossing his palms after all is over.

Large hands covering his, Julian sobbed in relief as Ty pulled them away from the headboard.
Shuddering, he snaked his arms around the body smothering him, nails digging into the firm muscle
above him as a litany of 'thank you's’ passed his lips. Long furrows were carved in scarlet as Julian
tried his best to crawl into Ty's skin, not wanting to ever leave.

Using a freehand to hold Julian's face in place, Ty smothered lips, cheeks and jaw in sloppy
kisses. "You're such a good boy," he breathed against parted lips. “Soooooo gooood." Pulling and
shifting long legs, Ty maneuvered them to wrap around his waist. Holding them in place, he started
thrusting harder and deeper than the methodical pace he had been at, praising his Sweetheart the
whole time. As he nuzzled back under Julian's amazing neck, he must of hit his spot. Nigh instantly,
Julian was scratching up and down an already marked up back as he gasped in surprise, an early
orgasm hitting him with the force of a freighter.

As Julian melted into a puddle, spasming occasionally, he could feel as Ty worked to reach his
end. His face went scarlet as he realized just how quick he had come. Moaning in embarrassment, he
folded his arms over his eyes, mortified. Hearing a chuckle, he batted at the vicinity of Ty's head,
stopping as he felt something wet on his hand. Peeking, he shot up in alarm.

His hands were covered in blood. Coagulating fluids were caked under his fingernails, and his
fingers and palms were just smothered in scarlet that has started going tacky. Look over at a kneeling
Ty, his eyes bugged.
"Oh dear gods above, Ty!" Ty was facing him, but Julian could just make out rivulets of blood along muscled sides. Making a spinning motion, Julian urged the other to turn. Amused, Ty did so, nearly giving the fugitive doctor a heart attack.

Ty's back looked like it had been mauled by some savage beast. Not just red skin, but areas where Julian's... enthusiasm had broken skin and drawn blood. Taking a closer look, he winced; Ty will definitely have some new scars.

"Ooooooh noooooo...Ty I am so, SO sorry! I'll just, um-" he reached out, attempting to make skin contact and transfer the injury to himself.

"Don't worry about it babe."

"But I-"

"Hey. It's cool. Next time I get into a pissing contest with someone about scars, I'll just show them these!"

"Ack! And tell him what? That you got attacked by a hellcat!" It certainly looks like it.

"Naw, just a wild Julian."

"That's it," Julian threw his hands up, bouncing up from the bed. He walked to the water closet, ignoring Ty's snickering. How the man could find amusement in the situation he has no idea. Julian should be the one fucked up and reassuring his partner, not the other way around! He's the one with regenerative abilities, and he's the one who likes blood, and biting, and...pain.

(He's so friggin' embarrassed, shooting off as he did from a few pretty words…)

Scrubbing his hands up with warm water and soap, Julian startled as arms wrapped around his waist. Hot skin melded together from shoulders to knees as Ty nuzzled red ears. "I'll be fine babe. I'll wear these scars as a badge of honor, a sign of my mighty battle with the ravenous creature known as...Devorak the Devourer!"

Julian snorted, hiding his face in his bicep as he continued washing. The blood under his nails will take days to flake off. He started guffawing as Ty 'attacked' his neck, making loud kissing noises. Trying to turn in the other's grasp, Julian froze, a look of panic on his face.

"You okay, Sweetheart?"

"...please stop making me laugh. Cum just started dripping down my leg."

Wheezing, Ty snagged a washcloth. Looks like both men will have to clean-up.
Chapter Summary

Julian has Feels, meets more of the fam, has more Feels, and gets foiled by an interrupting!grandma.

Asra landed in Nopal late at night, headwinds giving Url the Beast some trouble. It extended their flight by long enough that Asra decided to turn in, looking into the Aoife issue next morning.

Rousing a sleepy Faust, he made sure that everyone was fed and watered before heading to the Headsman's home. Getting greeted warmly by Hal and his wife, Asra was soon sitting in their cozy sitting room, a glass of iced cactus juice in hand.

“So, Asra m'boy! What brings you out here? I must say, your last visit wasn't so long ago.”

Taking a sip of his juice, Asra continued, “unfortunately, it isn't for pleasure. I'm assisting in an investigation, and someone related to a key individual once lived here. I was hoping to learn more about them.”

Heaving himself up, Hal wandered over to an overflowing bookcase. “Well, now. What can you tell me about who you were looking for?”

“Her name was Sorcha ó Foghladh. She would have lived here around 110-years or so ago. Unfortunately, I don't have a birth or death date,” pulling out a sheaf of papers, Asra handed a scrap over. Hal's wife, Lyra looked it over, humming.

“Ó Foghladh? Where have I heard that before…”

“She's the one who stayed here as a healer, love. Remember how your granddad went on and on about her?”

“Oh, yes! I remember she caused quite the stir,” Hal chuckled. Picking out a book, he waddled back over to his seat. Cracking open the aged leather, he started to gently flip thru yellowed pages. “Lyra, do you remember anything else? I know you went and reorganized a bunch of records not too long ago…”

“She lived out near where Asra currently does. I want to say, next door?”

Grabbing a few more books, Lyra passed one over to Asra. “Look near the back, hun. It should say her last address and when she left or died.”

Doing as she said, Asra flipped about. Meanwhile, Faust slithered over to Lyra, getting scritches under her jaw. Catching sight of Sorcha's name, he looked about the page. Following to her residency dates, snowy brows raised. “I'm actually living in her house!”

“Wonderful! That certainly helps things. Do we have a date of death?”

“Unfortunately, no. Just a date of departure. But it shows that she left with her daughter. Looks like her name was Niamh?” Great, more traveling. “Would you have records of where they went?”
Spending a few more hours going thru books and scrolls, the group broke for lunch. Waiving Hal and Lyra off, Asra returned to his house. Preparing a simple rice dish, he looked through his notes as he ate.

While he hadn't had his hopes up, he was still disappointed that the answer he was looking for wasn't simple. The only good bit of news he had was that the family seemed to be matrilineal. With such a distinctive name, Nadia should be able to send hawks out to neighboring city-states and get information fairly quickly.

Hopefully, more progress should be made after a break and a meal. Asra would like to have more information to give Nadia.

***

For once, Julian woke before Ty. Despite their antics from last night, he didn't get much sleep, too excited for the next day. He spent quite a bit of his time reading, picking back up *The Two Towers* after they got clean.

Taking a few moments to laze, he looked out the window. He hadn't woken too early, the sun just starting to peek. Deciding to wallow in comfortable sheets, Julian looked over at Ty.

Sleeping on his stomach, turned to face Julian, Ty looked very different in sleep. When awake, his face was very animated, constantly moving. Weather it was his eyebrows arching and furrowing, or his mouth smiling and pursing, Julian cannot honestly say he's ever seen Ty's face in rest. In sleep, his dimples disappeared, and you could actually see what his lips looked like. A wide, fuller lower lip with a thin but defined upper. The romantic in Julian would say Ty has a perfect Cupid's Bow.

Ty also looked more...relaxed? It wasn't until now that Julian noticed, but Ty always seemed like he was thinking about something, even if only in the back of his mind.

It's a nice look on him. Julian wishes he could look more like that when awake. Damn worms.

His musings were cut off at the sound of a gentle chime. Ty snorted, burying his face into the pillow he had his arms wrapped around. The chime got louder.

“Murphrgl…”

Julian snickered. “Rise and shine, sleepy head!” He snickered again at the disgruntled growl he got. “C'mon. We gotta get dressed, fed, and out the door.” He could vaguely hear something mumbled into the pillow, no doubt uncomplimentary. Swinging his leg over, Julian sat on the small of Ty's back, giving a little bounce. Being careful of the scabbed over scratches, he leaned forward, nosing behind an ear. “Hey now-” he squawked as Ty bucked, getting onto his knees. The abrupt motion flung Julian forward, burying his face in the pillows at the head of the bed.

Giving a short but satisfied laugh, Ty slipped out from under a pouting Julian. Mazel and Tov soon hopped onto the bed, concerned over the sounds Julian was making. Once satisfied that all was well, they proceeded to flop on top of him. Again.

As Julian proceeded to sputter and try to get the girls off him (including praising them and offering outrageous bribes), Ty stole away into the water closet. Finished with his ablutions, he emerged to dress. Julian was still stuck under dog, only now he was resigned to petting them. Pulling on some clean clothes, Ty then pulled out a set for Julian. With a quiet whistle, the girls dismounted, leaving a flattened Julian.

Leaning over, Ty dropped a quick kiss onto pouting lips. “Up and at'em, Sweetheart!” His tone
was only *slightly* mocking. With a sniff, Julian minced into the water closet, sniffing again as he closed the door.

Going over their bags again, Ty cast a short-term Shrinking Charm on them. Right before his eyes, they slowly got smaller and smaller, only stopping when they reached a third of their original size. Putting them into a large, empty duffel, he was finishing the process as Julian emerged.

“Already got your clothes laid out babe, along with a small bag of important stuff. Once we dress, we'll grab some quick breakfast before heading to the north side of town.” Hearing a hum of accent, Ty then started putting on some socks and boots. He could hear Julian start dressing before the sounds of cloth on cloth abruptly cut-off.

“You okay?” A hoarse croak was his answer. Turning to look at the other, Ty was confused. Julian sat there, on the bed, half-way dressed as he held up his socks with a shocked face. “What's wrong?”

“You-, you made me socks?” There was *no* way Ty mixed up their clothes; he's MUCH bigger than Julian, and that goes for shoe size. Not only that, but these were the socks Ty had been working on since they left Vesuvia. An intense scarlet, the ribbed band would start just below Julian's knees. Up the back, a wedge of cables ran, honeycombing wider and wider the higher up they went.

“Um, yeah?” Ty doesn't know why Julian is so hung up on it. He doesn't trust those machine made ones, and he can knock-out a pair a week between other tasks. It just makes sense. Julian needed socks, ergo, Ty makes him some socks.

Julian is *really* starting to think Ty didn't come out of his fight with the Worm unscathed. Ty took time and energy out of his day(s) to make, *just for Julian*, a pair of socks. “This is. This is the nicest gift I've gotten in...in years.” He hopes Ty understands what Julian's trying to say, because he's totally speechless.

“Ummmmmmm, okay?”

“Gods, you're so stupid!”

Before Ty could take offense, he had an armful of Julian. Kisses, both light and quick and deep and probing were lavished all over his face and mouth. He had to grip a svelte waist and plant his stance to make sure they wouldn't topple over.

After several long (and to Ty, confusing) minutes of frenzied kisses and roaming hands, they detached. Both were panting, and Julian had a high flush.

“Sorry! Sorry and, um-”

Ty waved him off with a crooked grin. “I think I get what you were trying to say. Or rather,” he waggled his brows, “**kiss!**” Dropping another kiss to soft lips, he continued, “I'll be sure to spoil you with woollies from now on.”

***

After a light breakfast, the two dashed towards the town's northern gate, dogs bounding at their heels. Getting close, they could see a large group of wagons and people just outside the wall. Once outside, it was a matter of minutes to find the table set up for joining the caravan. With judicious use of his elbows, Ty secured themselves a spot in line.

It was only when Julian caught his breath that he started having issues. Namely, the fact that he
was surrounded by hundreds of Umbra. He's always had a weakness for them, he can't help it! The long legs, fit bodies, and the hair… being tall helps, too. With very few exceptions, he's always been the one to bend down/over, pick up and swing his other, be the big spoon and so on. It's just nice to have someone who could do the same to him. Meeting Ty, Julian never thought he would get further than a few tumbles in the hay. He's so damn lucky that its lasted this long. This relationship has (dare he say it) lasted the longest, on par. He would be lying to himself if Ty being what he was didn't have a hand in it, and now?

He's just praying Tiberius doesn't notice how fucking hard he is. Thank the GODS that serape's exist!

***

Ty is having the time of his life! Watching Julian wiggle and squirm is the epitome of comedy. He just wants to coo, the embarrassed flush on the other's cheeks and the little jump Julian does every time another Umbra brushes past is tickling Ty to bits!

As Julian's breath hitched again, Ty leaned to the side, lips just brushing a pink ear. “So, how stiff are you right now,” he whispered.

Snorting in a combination of arousal and mortification, Julian sputtered. “What? What do you mean!? I'm not-”

“Sweetheart, your so ‘excited’ right now, I can smell it. Hell, the Umbra around us can smell it. And with your devilishly handsome good looks, your interest will be broadcast among the caravan by the time lunch rolls around.”

Ty is not lying about that. While Principia are descended/mixed with Incubus blood, they won't be the only such House represented. In just the last ten minutes, he's spotted a Valentine, two Corvega, a family of Tenebre, and a couple that looks like its composed of a Silvainia and a Draconis of all things! That's a lot of mixed heritage right there.

As Ty was saying, everybody is gonna get a whiff of young, virile male. One who is fertile and ready to go. Men and women are going to be on Julian like cats to nip.

He snickered as he watched Julian surreptitiously glance about, just to get redder at the looks he was getting. Heated glances, one or two taking a deep breath, trying to imprint the scent in their minds so they could track it's source down later, with one brazen woman actually making her way over.

Before she could get within ten feet, another woman's voice started screeching out. “ALRIGHT NOW! WHICH OF YOU FUCKERS IS BROADCASTING!? IT SMELLS LIKE A FUCKING WHOREHOUSE UP HERE!”

Ducking his flaming face, Julian whimpered as Ty lost his goddamn mind. Howling in amusement, it took him a few moments to calm down. “S-SORRY! MY PARTNER JUST, HE CAN'T HELP IT *snrk* HE THINKS WE'RE ALL BEAUTIFUL!”

“Ty, shut up…”

During this exchange, people had been parting like the sea. A short woman, who looked like she could be anywhere between the ages of forty and sixty, was marching towards them. She had long, steel-grey hair in a tall ponytail and a very curvy figure dressed in high-quality travel clothes. She had her hands on her hips as she stalked right towards them, glaring.
“YAYA!”

She stopped. “Rus!? Baby, is that you?”

Dashing forward, Ty swept the woman off her feet in a massive bearhug. They started chattering at each other in a language Julian didn't know, mouths going a mile a minute. At some point, ‘YaYa’ pulled her arms free, using her hands to twist Ty's face back and forth, both yakking away the whole time. Numerous people in the crowd had started laughing.

It's obvious that these two know each other. Julian feels a bit envious (and left out).

Eventually, Ty set ‘YaYa’ down. Turning to Julian, he grinned widely, “Jules, this is my grandmother, Serafina Cavallo no Principia! YaYa, this is Julian! He's mine!”

“Nice to meet you, ma'am.” Julian is pulling out all the stops. This is Ty's grandma. You don't just act like some, some hooligan in front of Grandma! You use your manners, watch your language, and clean up after yourself! And if she offers you food? Even if your not hungry?

You eat it, and you like it.

Serafina looked up, craning her neck. Julian was nearly a full foot taller than her, but then again, most people are. “Hmmmmmm…”

“YaYa, be nice…”

She squinted at Julian, causing him to fidget. “Well, he's cute. I'll give him that.” She snorted at the chastising ‘YaYa!’ Rus barked out. “C'mon now, git. Yer GiGi's gonna want to meet 'im.” Turning, she started tugging Ty along behind her.

With a jolt, Julian trotted to catch up. Coming up close, he could hear the two talking, again in the same language as before. It was a nice sounding one, full of deep tones from the chest and rolling tongue. If he had to describe it to someone, Julian imagines it would be what lion's would sound like, if they could speak.

Coming up to the head of the line, Julian could see a man sitting at a port-a-desk. He was just as large, if not larger, than Germanius and built like a bull. His hair was snowy white like Cordelia's, but was neatly brushed back, coming to a slight crest. It reminded Julian a bit like the twist of a meringue, but much more dignified.

“Heya, Tony! Look who's here!”

“Hi GiGi!” Ty was waving like a little kid. Julian kind of edged behind him, much more nervous than when he met Ty's uncles. Oh dear gods, he's meeting the family!? Shit, he should have made himself more presentable! Oh, what would Mama think, seeing him as...as disheveled as he was!? And no gift!? Oooohh, he hopes she doesn't find out…

A hand clapping on his shoulder nearly sent him sprawling. Looking up, he saw Tony grinning down at him (giving Julian a glimpse at 60+ Ty, and it's looking nice!), white teeth gleaming. His other arm was wrapped around Ty, holding him under his shoulder like a barrel. Ty was doing his best to wriggle free, shouting what must have been curses. The bystanders surrounding them had settled in for the impromptu entertainment. Julian swears that a few had even broken out snacks!

“Nice to meet you, young man! The names Antonius! Let's get you boys settled in, hm?”

***
Sitting down for an early lunch, Germanius and Cordelia looked over Ty's leftover things. The list Portia had originally provided him was tucked between some pages of a notebook. Flipping thru, it looked like a journal, full of random musings about magic. Where Ty left off was on his estimations about some sort of ritual, and that Nadia may have been trying to do something.

“Yeah, I'm calling bullshit on that one.”

“Just because, nephew mine, you're sweet on the Countess doesn't mean we can just disregard Rus's thoughts on the manner!”

Sipping his glass of juice, Germanius snorted. “That has nothing to do with it, old man. The theory Rus has down is correct. Rock solid, actually. No, I'm talking about Nadia's involvement.”

“Um-hmmmmmm…” Cordelia didn't need to verbalize his ‘get on with it’.

“From speaking with others, Valora had mentioned how, adamant, Nadia had been about bringing Devorak to ‘justice’,” Germanius rolled his eyes so hard, it's a wonder that they didn't pop out of his head. “And with Rus's notes, including the short time-span he had been given, makes me think that there is a third party involved.” The sheer amount of time that passed since the murder until now? Very suspect, if you ask him. There was no reason this couldn't have been taken care of in her absence. There must have been a reason for this exact time-span.

(Three is a very auspicious number in Principian Numerology. Three days to solve a murder three years after the fact? Where's the final ‘three’? Germanius has fears that he won't like the last third.)

Taking a bite of his chicken and rice dish, Cordelia skimmed back over the last journal entry. Tossing Nadia's involvement in a ritual out is folly, but there actually being a ritual? “The numbers do add up. Hm.” Another interview with the Countess herself will be needed, but that can wait. In the meantime, after lunch they will split up. One will head to the Library while the other inspects the late Counts bedroom. Hopefully, something will turn up.

“I've noticed that you never objected to my musing about your feelings for Nadia? Is there something you want to tell your Uncle?” Cordelia's smirk made Germanius want to punch the smug bastard right in the nose.

“Aside from there being nothing there? Cool it, old man. Nadia, while a refined and beautiful woman, has her heart set on someone else.” Despite Germanius being more than willing to accept her affections.

She reminded him so much of his Pallas. It makes his heart ache.

“...I'm sorry to hear that.”

Germanius waived the apology off, “it is what it is. Now, which of us is going to do what?”

***

“Here it is! Here it is! Here it is!” Ty bounced over to ‘their’ cart, Julian close behind. His eye was glued to the fine woodwork before him, amazed that a literal piece of artwork was going to be their home for the next week and a half until they hit Saturnalia.

As Ty climbed in, two bushy tails following him, Julian took the time to really look at it. It had a few squat, swinging windows that were comprised of stained glass. The wooden frame and roof, while sturdy, was dyed different deep colors and had organic, vine-like carvings running all over it. Bits of dark metal framework slithered all over, ending with dainty leaves. It was very similar to the
Art Nouveau style of Silures, just a bit more organic.

To be honest, Julian is a little afraid to get in it. He's being heavily reminded of Great Aunt Olga's house, full of fine china and spun glassware. One touch, and she was on him, smacking his little hand away.

“Babe! Babe, get in,” Ty poked his head out, grinning wide enough to worry Julian about a dislocated jaw. “It's bigger on the inside! It has a King bed!”

“Nu-uh!” Julian’s arm span is wider than that wagon! There is no way such a big bed can fit in it! Scrambling up the short steps, he ducked his head to get past the frame. Looking up, his eye bugged, “this doesn't seem to be physically possible!” Hearing Ty chortle, he rounded on him. “Is this a magic thing? This has to be a magic thing!”

“Hehehe, yep!” Each wagon had expansion runes worked into the frame, allowing the area on the inside to be up to seven times the size of the original plan.

Ty flopped back onto the bed, cuddling up to the girls. Julian allowed his bag to slide from his shoulder to the floor, the loud *thunk!* of canvas hitting wood buried under the sound of scrambling boots. Smiling in amusement, Ty watched the other dash out the door, stand at the base of the stairs, and swivel his head in disbelief. Each time he turned from the outside of the wagon to peer inside, his face got more and more confused. Ty could see passerby snicker at the sight.

Eventually, Julian trundled back up the stairs, shutting the door. The cabin had a King bed, a small little breakfast table that flipped up/down, and a modest cooking nook. Framing the door was a set of chairs, and some coat pegs were on the wall. The bed was set into a solid box frame against the wall opposite the entrance, and it looked like it held additional storage space. Just over the head of the bed was a sliding window, but no way to get onto the drivers bench.

Flopping face-first onto the bed, Julian whimpered. Tov nosed his temple, giving a little whine. With a shove, he rolled onto his side, eyeing a snickering Ty with a baleful glare.

“This is making my head hurt.”

With a chuckle, Ty scooted closer, pulling a discombobulated Julian close for a cuddle. Ignoring the disgruntled grunt he got for his fussing, Ty settled in for the time being. The caravan isn't going to be moving for a few hours yet.

***

“ALRIGHT! WE'RE MOVING OUT IN ONE! TY! JULIE! GET YER BUTTS OVER HERE!” Serafina smirked as she heard two angry men scramble about, a few loud *thuds!* accompanying them. A flustered Ty stuck his head out the wagon, glaring fit to kill.

“YAYA! STOP TRYING TO COCKBLOCK ME!” A loud ‘DAMNIT TY!’ could be heard from Julian.

“DON'T MAKE ME COME OVER THERE!” Serafina admits, she's having lots of fun with this. Serves the little shit right for being a hellion as a kid.

A grumbling Ty and blushing Julian presented themselves. “So, boys. I need to assign you somewheres. We have a fair few things you can do as we travel, but I need to know where your talents lay. Ya still able to sling yarn, Ty?”

“Yep! I'm also still classed as a Citadel Journeyman, Tier-4, subcategory-2(b) Sorcerer!”
“Good! I'll set you to spinning frogweight. Picked up a shipment of Olenburg wool, and our spinner for it ran off shortly after. Last stop before hitting Saturnalia is where it needs to go.”

“Got it!”

“And you,” she pointed at Julian, “I already know who you are. You'll be working with our healers. What can you do? Surgery? Setting bone? We have a few pregnant women with us, and some can go any day now. Would you be able to help with that?”

Julian blinked, making a vague ‘who, me?’ gesture before thinking. “Hmmm, most of my practice is in Pathology, but my mentor made sure that I was well grounded in most other fields. I would, hm, say I was more of, ah, a ‘General Practitioner’.”

“That'll work. Okay, so here's how it's gonna be: Rus, you spin like your life depends on it. If we're gonna get paid, it kinda does. You'll get the amount the first spinner was going to, plus extra for the rush. Julie, you'll be on standby. We have several healers already, so you'll just back them up as needed. Probably won't be needed unless we run into bandits. As it is, when we stop for meals, the two of you will help with the cookin’. I expect a nice roast dinner for tonight, Rus.”

“Yes, YaYa.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Good! Now, get your cart settled, we'll be leaving soon. Oh, and Julie? It's nice to meet you, young man.” And with that, Serafina was off, barking orders.

“...I like her. If only she didn't call me ‘Julie’.”

“Yer kind stuck with it, babe.”

***

They just got back into their wagon before it started moving. Julian was again rendered confused, trying to understand just how it was self-propelled. The only horses in the caravan were for the guards and messengers. During his travels, Julian has seen motorized carts, but there were no sounds or smells to signify such a contraption was being used.

“Runes, Sweetheart. Runes.”

Ty had settled down into one of the chairs, dragging it over to the breakfast nook. On the little table were a few support spindles and a handful of combed Olenburg wool top. Splitting off some fiber, Ty pulled an end, overlapped it with the starter, and with a twist was spinning.

Julian parked himself on the bed, dogs wedged on either side. Laying on his stomach, he had stuffed a pillow under his chest. “What do you mean, ‘runes’?”

“A lot of Umbrian magic relies on runic inscriptions. Essentially, pictograms that mean various things and aligned to different aspects of magic. I bet that if you look under there,” Ty pointed with a free finger at a part of the wall, a small tapestry hanging from it, “you'll find a rune circle. And you'll probably find another similar one on the front, where a drivers seat would be located.”

A long-fingered hand had been slowly creeping towards the wool top, digits twitching. Julian wanted to touch that woolie goodness, it looked like a cloud.

“Pft! Pfft!ubht! Pft!” Julian tried to bat the fiber flicked at his face away, sputtering as it got
caught in his lips. He turned to glare at a snickering Ty, just to stop short as his fingers finally caught the wool. Eyebrows climbing into his hairline, he took a few moments to properly pet his prize.

“Ty. This is, this is **so soft!**”

“Mhmmmm.”

“How much would, ah, a pair of socks made out of this cost? No! Wait! A pair of underwear!” This shit is **amazing.** It feels like he’s petting a cloud! The closest thing he can think of, in terms of softness, is the time he found a baby chinchilla sleeping in his boot.

“Really, really expensive. Enough so that a pair of skivvies in only this material will be equivalent to a down payment on a Vesuvian house like Mazelinka’s.”

Oh. Well, a man can dream.

“Now, if you just want a square to rub on your junk, that's doable.”

Julian is serious thinking about taking Ty up for that. This shit's **soft!**

***

At some point, Julian had picked back up *The Two Towers.* Ty found out that the man is not a still reader. Nearly every ten minutes, Julian was squirming about, flipping position. Currently, his lanky form was curled up on the bed, resting on his side. He was nibbling his thumb (again), and Ty could see his eye fly back and forth across the page.

They could feel the wagon come to a stop. With a gentle rock, the signal for lunch was given. Book marked and spindle set aside, both men departed, dogs hopping out and tearing off to the shallow woods beside the road. Walking further down the line, they reported for lunch duty at a large covered wagon.

Sliding a large awning into place, the Matron of the Kitchen (an actual *title* that Julian was surprised to learn existed) gave them their assignments. Julian went to join the others unloading long tables and retrieving cutlery, while Ty was shoved inside, with a shouted *'Back to the kitchen!'* for good measure.

It couldn't have been more than an hour later that Ty emerged, covered in flour and holding aloft a large platter. Dozens of others followed him, each woman holding some sort of food item. Coming to the tables, a variety of dishes were placed. Fruit salads, rice dishes, cheese wheels and breads, with Ty placing an oversized platter with multiple fucking *racks of lamb* in the center.

Julian is now very **happy** that he said yes to coming along. He's gonna eat like a king!

***

After lunch (and a debate where Julian again asked how all that food had been fresh made so quickly, and Ty said 'magic'), it was back on the road. It was going to take a few days to leave Vesuvian territory, and the caravan passed a variety of travelers going the other way, including a patrol.

Julian decided to make himself comfy in the doorway, door propped open to allow a breeze. He continued reading, one leg dangling as he paged about. Behind him, he could hear Ty mutter occasionally. At random, the musical sound of wood on wood could be heard.
Wanting a spot of tea, Julian stood, joints cracking as he stretched. Heading to the cooking nook, he found the hanging kettle and filled it with water from a jug. Seeing a rune circle under a grille, his guess that it was some sort of stove was correct when flames sprung into existence, scaring the stuffing out of him.

Ignoring Ty's snicker, Julian decided to treat them with one of Gilda's teas. Dropping tea balls composed of Jasmine and almond, the kettle was whistling in no time. Preparing the cups, Julian slid Ty's down the counter.

“Thanks, dollface.”

Ty had already wound half of his spindle, and Julian could see that a new tuft of wool had been split. Fingers itching to play with the fiber more, Julian instead buried the digits into one of the dogs fur. With a whine, a fuzzy belly was presented.

“So, what's the usual, uh, schedule for a caravan like this?”

Grunting, Ty held up a finger as he carefully wound up the spindle. After a few moments, he answered. “If we were going horseback, we'd be there in about six, seven days. Caravans move much more slowly, and we'll have a few detours for trade. Actually, by mid-afternoon tomorrow we should be making one such stop at a hamlet. All told, provided we hit no bad weather or bandits, we should be at Saturnalia's gates in a week and a half.”

“Considering how important our mission is, why a caravan? You said so yourself, horseback would be quicker.” Worms are no small issue. Every time the Worm Cult pops back up, bad things happen. Towns wiped out, whole environments tainted, even empires and kingdoms have fallen. One would think time was of the essence.

“Safety. We're lucky that we hadn't hit any bandit parties yet. As it is, if we do get hit, it's all hands on deck. Speaking of,” setting his spinning aside, Ty opened the storage cupboard making up their beds base. Pulling out a bag, he started riffling thru it, setting aside some of the extra knives he had purchased. After a few minutes, he let out a loud ‘Ah-HA!’ of victory before passing the item over.

“A pistol!? TY, where did you get this!?” These things are expensive, rare, and deadly. Not to mention they can be a bitch to reload. With glossy wood and high-polished metal, this thing was both a work of art, and an instrument of death.

To be honest, Julian didn't feel too comfortable handling it. His Oath as a Doctor (unlicensed he may be) weighed heavily on him still, and something like this has only one purpose. It was also reminding him way too much about his involvement at Thunder Gorge.

“I'm not saying you have to use it. But, it's always good to have an ace up your sleeve. If it comes down to it, I'd rather you alive but guilty than dead.”

After a few moments, Julian decided to take Ty's previous offer for a listening ear, if for no more than to explain why he was so apprehensive. “I was...involved in a pretty big, um, battle. Years ago. I was just a young medic, and got put into a pretty, ah, difficult position.”

Scooting closer, Ty grasped Julian's free hand, giving a comforting squeeze. While he's happy that the other is finally reaching out, out of his own volition, he also knows that he can't interrupt. Julian is making progress in seeing them as a viable relationship, and Ty will be damned if he destroys it!

“The medical tents were in our camp's center and I was trying to keep the guy on the slab alive while the surgeon worked on him. A, a firebomb went off. On top of the tent. After I, um, after I got
back up, I-i saw him. Mernun. He had no head and our patient had been staked with shrapnel and then I heard war cries and just all **hell broke loose**…"

Julian was sweating, slight tremors wracking his frame. He wanted to stop himself, not wanting to have gone this far but it was like once he started talking he couldn't stop. A hand put the pistol to the side before grasping both of Julian's slack ones. Large, warm palms rubbed gently, trying to bring heat to his now-freezing fingers.

“I just. I got **so MAD!** Most of the people we were treating were just, bystanders! Farmers and peasantry caught in the crossfire. The man I was working on had walked over a shrapnel mine.”

Ouch. Ty now knows that it's Thunder Gorge that his Julian is talking about. Ty himself had been involved, but he has no memory of it, the incident being over five years ago. He's never seen his lost memories as a blessing until now.

“I knew that the, um, usurpers had created new weapons. Things like mines, bombs, crank guns...I just.”

“It's one thing to know, and another to witness.”

Julian licked his lips, nodding. “The tent was destroyed. I think maybe myself and a few nurses survived, if only due to our location. We had been on the far side, getting supplies to help Mernun. We just barely got out before a second one went off. Somehow the usurpers had broken the defensive line and overran the camp. **So many people** were, were running and fighting! All because some shitty royal didn't like the fucking line of succession!” If Julian could, he would go back in time and **strangle** Gustav Von Hannmark the Third in his cradle. The entire camp had been destroyed. Out of nearly five HUNDRED people, only eighty-one survived.

“So, I picked up a fallen guards pistol and bandolier, and just, started shooting. If usurper colors got near, I used my combat knife. I kept shooting until I ran out of bullets, then picked up another pistol. It was only when someone in loyalist colors shook me that I, uh, ‘woke up’.

They gave me a medal for killing thirty-two men. Twenty with bullets thru the head.”

Not liking the broken sound of his Sweethearts voice, Ty scooped Julian up before plopping him in his lap. Julian was stiff as Ty cuddled him close, before he eventually relaxed. With a tired sigh, Julian ducked his head under Ty's chin, nuzzling into a warm neck.

“Thank you for telling me.”

***

“Thank you for your assistance, Portia. This is making my job much easier.”

“It's no problem, Mr. Cordelia! Anything to get this issue solved!” Fiddling with the keys at her belt, Portia eventually found the desired one. The two were standing at the secluded Library entrance. Cordelia was admiring the mechanical tree door, very approving of the fine detail. His respect for the artisan went up several notches as the locks were tripped and the door opened, everything moving quietly and fluidly.

“I must say, the craftsmanship on this door is exquisite. I would like to meet the crafter and see about possibly having one of my other grandnephews apprentice under them. Tybalt would be ecstatic.”

“I'll be sure to tell m'lady that she has an admirer of her work,” Portia said mischievously. The
look on her face was similar to a cat that got the canary AND the cream.

“Oho! Really? Wonderful!”

“Yes. The Countess quite enjoys the process.” After replacing her keys, Portia entered the library. It was a cozy set-up, filled to the brim with books and scrolls. A few small tables with chairs were scattered about, with a nest of pillows off to the side. While not small, it certainly couldn't compete with the Library of Harmonia or with the one located in Estrigal, at the Stellaris Empire's seat of power.

Over to the side was one such table, paper and books scattered about it. It was nuzzled in a nook between two bookshelves, and looked to have been undisturbed for some time. Portia led him over to it, a quiet sigh escaping her lips. “This was the table he did most of his research at, during the height of the Plague. Trying to find the root of the disease.”

Cordelia hummed, remembering how vexing the Vesuvian Plague was. Reports showed that it didn't react or respond like other illnesses, befuddling most researchers. He himself had been lucky enough to get a living victim, and his experiments were...less than fruitful. The autopsy he had conducted after the patient died was less than enlightening. Cordelia even ended up discovering new zones of the brain in his search for answers.

All that work, all that time, all that death, and the medical community has nothing to show for it.

“Well, I'll leave you to your work. The desk had been left as it was since Julian last used it, so if there are any clues, you'll find them. I'll be down the hall if you need me.”

“You're a treasure, Portia, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Hearing the door shut behind him, Cordelia sat at the table. It was buried under books and papers, with a quill in a dried-out inkwell on top of the stand. Deciding to start from the top, he picked-up and examined each and every page, both front and back, before setting it into one of two piles.

He could see the progress in reverse of Julian's thinking. Near the end of his time in Vesuvia, he started researching magic-based diseases and blights. Cordelia admits that the youngster started looking into it far sooner than he, but then again, there's a reason why he wanted Devorak in his labs.

Too bad that Vesuvian Plague isn't rooted in magic. It doesn't have any of the hallmarks of one, the structure. The Akhenti Flu was one, and was actually the root cause of the Purges all those years ago. Magic-based plagues have a defined formula to them, and Vesuvia's…

...well, let's just say, Vesuvia's Plague was like nothing ever seen. There was no rhyme or reason to its spread. A pregnant victim gave birth before her death and her baby never contracted it, but a farmer a few miles away on an isolated farm drowned in his own blood.

Snorting, he continued his sorting. It looks like Julian left a few notebooks alongside the research tombs. He'll just take the whole lot with him. It'll take more time to go thru those than loose leaf papers.

***

Letting Julian nap his worries away, Ty continued making progress on his spinning. Mazel and Tov had decided to flop on top of the redhead, joining in the napping.

Ty was pouring a lot of anger into his work. From how Julian just vomited forth his experience, it's clear that the man never got any actual help. PTSD is a hell of an issue, and being so young at the
time is doing Julian no favors. He couldn't have been more than twenty, twenty-two tops. Such a young age is a delicate time mentally and emotionally for anyone and to go through something like that? It makes Ty want to spit nails.

He wants to meet the officer who made the decision to send an unprepared Julian out. He just wants to talk.

Winding up what he had, Ty nodded in satisfaction. The spindle was nearly full. If he keeps this up, he'll have all the wool spun and plied for lace-weight yarn with a few days to spare.

Standing, he stretched, letting out a quiet groan as his back and shoulders popped. Slipping his boots on, he hopped out the still-moving wagon's door. Trotting behind the treeline, he relieved himself before jogging up the caravan line. Finding the ‘kitchen’ wagon, he swung himself up the back before ducking in.

Begging the Matron for a few sweet rolls, an over-encumbered Ty tottered back down the line. It was a bit of a struggle to get back in his wagon, but he succeeded with only one or two rolls lost. Getting them squared away, he popped one in a shallow pan, letting the stove gently warm the bottom for a crispy bite.

Hearing stirring from the bed, Ty tossed a few more rolls into the pan. No doubt Julian is going to have a headache, and a load of sugar should help right him. Ty also put the kettle on for good measure. Sweet rolls always taste better with a nice berry tea.

***

A few hours later, the caravan started pulling aside for the night. A tired but lighter Julian followed Ty to the ‘kitchens’, helping to unload tables and benches. As he walked, he could hear the pitter-patter of small feet behind him. A few muffled, child-like giggles were smothered behind grubby hands.

Making sure to not give out that he knows he's being followed, Julian casually slowed his pace. As the children behind him got closer and closer, he took careful measure of them. Sounds like three youngsters, two girls and a boy, about five or so.

Coming to the edge of a cart, Julian abruptly spun, flinging his jacket wide as he raised his arms. “RAH-HA!” Squealing, the little gremlins tripped over each other. Scrambling back onto their feet, the kids dashed off back into the camp, shrieking all the way. Giving a satisfied chuckle, Julian continued his journey.

In a repeat of lunch, furniture was set out and plates made available. Just like last time, everything was settled just in time for the food to be brought out. Unlike last time, a variety of desserts and sweets joined the parade.

Wanting to wait for Ty to be finished with his chores, Julian picked out a spot for them. A few caravaners were already sitting and greeted him warmly, asking his name and the like. Most of them were older, and a majority were women. They reminded him very much of the grandma’s back home.

“Hey babe,” Ty set a full plate in front of him. A few others followed. Soon, the two were snug as bugs and chowing down, Julian doing so in rapture.

“Oh my godssssss, Ty! This is so good! Just, how? How are you such a good cook!? This doesn't seem physically possible!” Julian took another few bites, ignoring the laughs he got, “and don't you
tell me magic! I'm tired of hearing it!"

“...‘magic’?” Ty had to dodge a growling Julian, arms up to stop the headlock the other tried to put him in. Soon, their antics devolved into a slap-fest before Ty caught both hands, kissing pale pink lips. With a huff, Julian sat back down, throwing the occasional side eye Ty's way.

Soon, plates were cleared and tables put away. They meandered back to their cart, perching on the back steps as they drank a few after-dinner pick-me-ups. Lanterns and Magelight illuminated the area, with children and dogs tearing thru the camp as the stars peaked. Mazel and Tov had joined the antics, one with a child on her back. Ty's girls were much more sizeable than the other dogs, making them stand out with ease. Soon, a whole passel of kids were trotting behind them.

Ty had gone up the line to speak with his grandparents when Julian got his first ‘suitor’. A handsome man hand ambled up, a nice big smile on his face. While fit and trim, he was definitely quite a bit older than Julian.

“Well now, it's always nice to see a new face. And quite a lovely one as well! I don't think I ever learned your name?”

He has a nice smile, Julian will give him that. Pretty attractive, as well. Shame for him that Julian is already taken.

“The name's young enough to be your son,” Julian said archly. He'll be honest, if the guy was an Umbra, he might have played along just to see this guy's game. As it is, it's kind of disappointing.

“Nice to meet you, Young Enough to be Your Son. You can call me Daddy.” A saucy wink was thrown Julian's way.

“Pffft! We all know your a sherbert daddy at best, Miller! Leave the man alone! Let someone a bit, closer, in age have a shot,” the woman from earlier, before Serafina had outed Julian, was back.

Just a tad bit shorter than himself, she had the long hair and legs he so loved that the Umbra are known for. Pair that with her comely figure and Julian knows he's in trouble.

“Oh, um, ah, hi?” Oh, Julian can feel his face burn. His heart rate had jumped up as well, and he can feel himself warm all over. “Can I, can I help you?”

“Mhmmmm, I bet you could. I could smell you a mile away. And how you were earlier? I bet you taste reeeealllll nice.” She came a few steps closer, bumping Miller out of the way with her hips. “I was thinking, why not dump that Ostracized thing and we can get,” she cupped Julian's jaw, “better acquainted.”

“Hm, yeah. No.”

“What?”

Julian gave her a hard glare, lips curled. A faint growl could be heard beside him as Mazel and Tov joined in, one standing at the base of his feet. His own proverbial hackles were raised sky-high, not liking one bit her callous insult to his Ty.

“I said, no. To be honest, I would have been perfectly fine to settle in for a nice flirt, but then,” he sniffed, “you had to go and ruin it.” Standing up, he propped a fist on his hip, “They may be low, but I DO have standards. And you, miss,” he sneered, “have fallen far short.”

She stood there, gaping like a fish out of water. A few others who had witnessed the interaction
were not-so-quietly quietly whispering. Hissing like a tea kettle, she spun and speed walked away.

“Flounce, little girl! Flounce like the wind!” Julian normally doesn't like to rub it in other's faces (with a few exceptions), but he will NOT stand for anyone besmirching Ty in such a manner. With a final sniff, Julian sat back down, praising the girls for being such good girls.

Minutes later, one of the children terrorizing the camp came skipping up, sucking a lollipop. She was a cute little thing, covered in dirt from her play and hair in messy pigtail-braids. She stood, staring at Julian for a few moments, head to the side.

“Are you lost, little one?” It wouldn't do to have a misplaced child running amok.

She blinked a few times, slurping loudly on her treat. “I like ducks!” Nodding in satisfaction about her informing Julian about this very important thing, she spun and skipped off. For a few moments all Julian could do was stare in confusion.

Hearing a snicker, he turned to see Ty leaning against the wagon. “I see you've met Antigone.”

“I had forgotten just how weird children can be.” At that age, it's nearly impossible to predict what they'll do next.

“Mhm. I also saw how you handled Miraz. You can be quite biting when you want.” It was also doing things for Ty. Not many would stand up for him outside of his family and Asra, so it's always been a novel thing for him. And that one liner? Damn. Harsh.

Strutting over to his lover, Ty pulled him up by the lapels. Before a startled redhead could say anything, lips were stealing breath and speech. Sliding in some tongue, Ty delighted in the shuddering breath Julian released. Before the other could truly join in, Ty released him.

With a stumble, Julian caught himself with an arm on the corner of the cart, slowly sinking down into a seat. Slumping somewhat, he sat in aroused confusion, trying to get around the sudden assault on his person. It took him a few moments to realize Ty had started walking away, the sounds of a few hoots from onlookers pulling him back to reality. “Oy! Finish what you started!” Ty tossed back a playful ‘make me!’ over his shoulder.

Knowing that this was something he cannot let stand, Julian burst into a flurry of motion. With a quick hop and dash, he barreled into Ty with a war-cry. Coming in low, he wrapped his arms around a muscled waist before heaving, widening his stance as he slung a man definitely doubly his weight over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Grunting in exertion, he turned back to their wagon.

“BEHOLD! VICTORY IS MINE! THE SPOILS OF WAR SHALL BE SPREAD AMONGST MY CHAMBERS, TO BE ENJOYED AS I SEE FIT!” Loud cheers greeted his proclamation, with his ‘spoils of war’ laughing as well.

Slowly, Julian made his way back to the wagon, getting shouted encouragement the entire time. Each step was harder than the last, with Ty growing heavier by the minute. Soon, he was reduced to an uneven, staggering gait and Ty laughing at him was not helping.

Coming to the base of the stairs, Julian encountered another dilemma: going up them, then going in. The doorway for the cart was small, being just wide enough to go thru without twisting sideways. There will be no way Julian will be able to get through it without bonking Ty on the sill.

“Are you a man? Or a mouse?”

Oh? Was this Ty, challenging him? Questioning his manliness? He is no mere mouse! He is a
man, getting ready to carry another man, over a threshold and onto a bed where greatly athletic carnal activities are about to take place! They will accomplish what no mouse could hope to do, and break the bed! Nay, the WAGON!

Full of manly pride, Julian straightened his spine (well, tried to), put on a determined grin (that was very strained), and marched thru that door!

Or, well, he tried to. He almost succeeded, but the small entryway combined with his current cargo made it all but impossible to close the door after entering. Resigned to the fact that he'll need to dump Ty on the bed, shut the door, then come back for some rather adult quality time was going to crimp his style, Julian made it work. After completing the aforementioned actions, he had been looking forward to more lips and hands and other things when there was a knock.

“**OY! PULL UP YER PANTS AND GET DECENT! I WANT TO FORMALLY MEET MY BOY'S MISTER! Y'ALL CAN BOINK LATER!”**

Julian wanted to scream. From the look on his face, so did Ty.

“STOP COCKBLOCKING ME, YAYA!”

“DON'T MAKE ME COME IN THERE! I WANT TO SEE YOUR CUTE FACES IN FIVE!”

Ty growled and Julian let out a frustrated scream. All he wants is to get dicked by his boyfriend! Is he asking for too much!?  

“Darling, I swear to all that is holy…”

“I know, I know. Let's go see what the old bat wants.” The sooner YaYa is seen to, the quicker they can get back to diddling each other.

And Julian really wants to get Ty naked. For reasons. And science.
Of Fighting and Fucking

Chapter Summary

Bouncing baby boy’s, a fight, another fight, and a dragon.
Oh, and they get naked.

Chapter Notes

Just remember kids: don’t get your sex education from fanfiction!
In the meantime, Julian will teach you just why you shouldn’t be a cumdumpster, and how to take care of the aftermath without making a mess.

Serafina and Antonius were party animals. After dragging him and Ty away from each other, Julian had been sat smack in the middle of the two. Between questions about his life and family, he was plied with various bits of food and drink. After the first awkward (for him, at least) fifteen minutes of the interrogation, he eventually loosened up.

His causing the lovely Serafina to swoon may have helped. Along with the off-the-cuff remark that if Antonius looks that good at his age, Julian has quite the sight to look forward to with Ty.

As it is, it wasn't until late that the two men got back to their cart, stumbling along the way from a few bottles of wine. Before tottering off, Serafina told them not to worry about preparing breakfast, as it was her fault they were up so long.

Unfortunately, they were unable to sleep in for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the girls needed to be let out to take care of business. Kicking the mutts out, it was seemingly mere minutes later than one of Julian's admirers came calling. Other's witnessing Ty scare her off didn't seem to be much of a deterrent, as soon many others came up to introduce themselves and bring gifts.

Standing at the breakfast nook, Ty watched an embarrassed Julian blush and stammer at each ‘invitation’ for dinner or proffered gift was extended. He was going to have to do something about that, otherwise it was going to be a loooooong week-and-a-half.

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“Thank you for meeting me for breakfast, Nadia. I understand that today will be a busy day for the both of us, and I'm sorry to snatch what little relaxation you'll be getting away from you so quickly.”

Sitting on a softly-padded chair, Nadia waved off Germanius's apology. “Please, worry not. I know that you wouldn't have asked if it was unnecessary. Now, what can I help you with?”

Portia was buzzing around, setting out dishes of light and fluffy omelette’s and chopped fruits. In the meantime, Germanius fixed breakfast tea's for the two of them. Once finished, Portia left with a curtsy. It was only as the door shut behind her with a soft *click* that Germanius started.
“Cordelia and myself were going thru Rus's notes and the like when we came across a few theories he had. One of which, if correct, has some potentially disturbing consequences. I was hoping you could enlighten us.”

Stirring in a final spoonful of honey, Nadia sipped her tea. “I will do my utmost to render you assistance.”

“Very well. There is no way to ask this delicately, so I'll be blunt: are you involved in a ritual to Summon Lucio back to the mortal world?” Germanius was treated to the sight of a Countess nearly dropping her teacup.

Blinking widely a few times, Nadia set it down before letting out an incredulous laugh. “You must be joking!”

Germanius sighed. “Unfortunately not. Please, m'lady, answer the question.”

She sniffed, leaning back and crossing her arms, “I don't know where you got that idea from, but no. While a few of my sisters may be involved in mystical doings, magic has never been my forte.” Really, her? Trying to bring her loathed husband back? Hogwash.

“Is there anyone in the court who may? And did anyone suggest that, now that you've reappeared in the public eye, that you do so?”

Nadia stood with a sneer, backing a step away from the table, “I find your queries and questioning of my authority insulting! Please refrain from doing so in the future. How I run my court is none of your concern, and the fact that you are ‘butting in’ as you are is both supremely disrespectful and makes me question your motives. Good day.” She spun on her heel, gliding to the parlor's door.

If Germanius wants his answers, he’ll need to act fast. “Someone in your court is trying to bring back Lucio, and may be using you as the sacrifice.” That should get her attention.

Nadia stopped with her hand on the door, back still to him. After a few moments, she gave a single nod before exiting. As the door clicked shut a second time, Germanius sighed. Gathering back up his thoughts, he slowly resumed eating his breakfast.

And today was looking up to be a nice day.

***

As soon as the caravan got up to move, Julian dropped back to sleep. While not normally a snorer, he apparently turns into a set of deep mining equipment when he's had a few and is exhausted. He was loud enough that the girls jumped off the bed and dashed out the door.

Knowing that once he's awake there’s no return to sleep, Ty picked back up where he left off on his spinning. Grabbing another tuft of wool and an empty spindle, he got to work. Going faster than yesterday, now that he's acquainted with how Oldenburg spins, he was soon grabbing more. As he reached into the wool bag, his fingers brushed feather's and he got a loud *WARK!*

Hopping out of the bag, Malak shook himself before shooting Ty a glare. As he grumbled, he scratched at the wood floor, gently turning in a circle as he did so.

“Well gee, sorr-ry for disturbing your rest. Not like you should have been in there in the first place.” Like master, like bird. Seems both like to get into areas that are off-limits.

(However, unlike Malak, Ty greatly enjoyed showing Julian the ‘consequences’ of breaking and
Before getting back to work, Ty dug out the last *Lord of the Rings* book, *The Return of the King*, and set it nearby. At the rate Julian's devouring them, he should be ready to crack it open either later today or tomorrow morning.

He roused a sauced doctor when they stopped for lunch, not wanting Julian to sleep too long. Making a lunch consisting of roasted chicken rubbed in Drakarian spices, Ty made sure Julian ate plenty.

It was as they were packing up that Julian's medical expertise was sought. A young woman came trotting up, a worried look on her face. She was a bit plump, and her hair was pulled back in a messy bun, wisps of blond escaping in her frazzled state. “Um, excuse me, but are you Doctor Devorak?!”

“Ummmmm,” Julian began, only answering when he saw the slight nod Ty gave him, “yes. Yes I am. How can I help?”

“Oh, oh dear, I don't know if you can. It's just, your my only hope! I don't know why no one in this damn caravan isn't specialized in this considering it's a physiological Princip-”

Putting his hands over the hyperventilating woman's shoulders, Julian looked her dead in the eye. “Okay now, we're going to take a few breaths, nice and slow. Breath in for a count of three, hold for a count of three, and exhale on a count of three.” He spent a few moments breathing with the woman, calming her down. “There now! Now, I'll follow you back to your cart, and you can tell me what's going on. I may not be able to help, but I'll do my best.” He said this as confidently as possible. It's important that he projects a calm and in-control exterior, with most hospital and clinic mishaps happening due to over-excited concerned family members.

Grasping her hand, Julian followed her back to her wagon. It was slightly bigger in outside size than his and Ty's, but the gaggle of children gathered outside led him to conclude that it was likely a ‘family’ cart. Snaking between curious stares (the oldest looked like he was ten, the youngest four), he trotted up the steps. Once getting inside, he stopped in his tracks, eye as wide as a pie. He only shook from his stupor when Ty popped his head in, asking if Julian needed his bag.

“Um, darling? There's a baby in here.”

“From my understanding, Phaedra's littlest is sick. That's why you're here,” one could almost hear the unspoken ‘duh!’ Ty held back.

“Yeah, no shit, but last I checked, babies don't have wings!”

Hearing a quiet ‘the fuck?’, Julian stepped to the side as Ty came in fully. Coming up to a confused doctor's shoulders, Ty blinked before grinning.


Flipping through loose parchment, Cordelia set aside the last of the stack. He had gone through all of the unbound pages left of Julian's desk, getting more and more impressed at the depth and breadth of the youngsters intelligence and creative thinking. When possible, he's going to sit down with him and have a talk. Cordelia may be old (obscenely so, a Rus-sounding voice chirped in the back of his
mind), but he’s never stopped learning and thinking. In all his years he never encountered a thinker quite like Julian.

Turning to the notebooks, he cracked one open. Seeing a date on the first page, he checked the others. Soon, he arranged them by date, oldest to newest. Starting from the beginning, he pulled a few spare sheets of parchment and a few bookmarks his way.

The first notebook seemed to be dated to just over a month before Julian was called to work in the Palace. The first few entries were small and simple, rambling really. Doodles filled the margins, stick-figure cats, a smiling sun with a happy flower, an ‘S’ spinning off into a treble clef.

If Julian’s this creative just jotting down simple journal entries, Cordelia can’t wait to get him into the lab.

***

Julian had his nose buried in a thick book, one hand keeping Indigo the Cherub firmly in his lap as the little one did his best to reach for deep red locks. The book he was reading was about Incubus physiology, and what to expect from a human/Incubus offspring. This also included the malaise that little Indigo had been suffering from until recently.

Ty had been cuddling the chickadee until they got back to their cart. He dug out the book Julian was currently reading before tearing off in the direction of Serafina, cursing under his breath the whole time. Phaedra had fluttered and fretted for a few minutes before going back to her cart, not wanting to leave her oldest in charge for too long.

According to the book, little cherubs need a lot of skin contact with both their parents in order to develop properly. If the Father (a word that is always capitalized, and Julian hasn't yet found out why) is unavailable, another male will suffice. Preferably a relative, but any will do.

Sitting cross legged on the bed, Julian looked down. Indigo was resting in the cradle of his legs, laying on his back as he tried to eat his toes. His big gold eyes were darting about constantly before resting back on Julian. Seeing the other looking at him, the cherub let out a soft coo.

“Those tasty?” Another coo, longer this time. “Well now, don't let me interrupt you!” Long fingers tugged chubby toes, pulling a happy screech from the babe.

Clattering at the door heralded Ty's return, both of his grandparents with him. As Julian put the book aside, Indigo rolled onto his knees, making curious baby sounds. Developmentally speaking, Julian would have placed him at being a few months short of a year, physically. Mentally though, he's a bit out of his depth. Most babies are speaking words at this point, simple ones like ‘mama’ and ‘dada’, or the names of their favorite things. Indigo, on the other hand, is just making soft, musical birdlike ones.

“Oh, well look at you,” Antonius toned, picking up Indigo. He bounced him a few times, getting a few happy giggles. “Almost reminds me of Rus when he was that little. Now,” he turned back to Julian, “I see you figured out what was going on, yes?”

Julian nodded. “Yes. But, what I don't understand is...Phaedra asked the other’s for help, and apparently none of them knew anything! This is a Principia thing, right? Or Incubus, at any rate.”

The clatter of boots signaled Serafina leaving the wagon with a growl. “Indeed,” she growled, “seems to me that I have some questions to ask. Have fun with the squeaker, Tony. I'll be back.”
Antonius chuckled, doing so again when Indigo put both hands over Tony's chest. He let out the deepest rumble he could, sending the little one into amazed laughter. “I'll talk to Phaedra. See what arrangements I can make for her. Would you boys be opposed to baby cuddling for the next few days? Day after tomorrow is Phaedra's stop.”

Exchanging glances, Ty and Julian nodded. “Well, I have no issue. And Julian seems fine with it, yeah?”

“No problem at all! Besides being a fine example of a big brother, I am also a great nappy changer and baby entertainer!”

“Hmmm. We'll take you boys up on that. In the meantime, I'll occupy Indigo until we can talk to Phaedra. See yous in a few.”

***

Portia scurried about her cottage, humming under her breath. On the stove, a saucepan with diced potatoes was bubbling away, and resting on the counter was a bowl filled with marinated beef tips.

Valora had cancelled their date the day before, needing to run an errand for Germanius. Today was a makeup, and Portia was finishing some last minute tidying up. As she schlepped about, Pepi the Cat batted at her ankles, meowing despondently at the lack of attention.

Speaking of, “Pepi! You stop that!” She snapped her dust rag at the curious cat, who had been in the midst of sticking his face into the beef bowl. “Go on now! Shoo!” Letting out a low ‘wong！’, Pepi dropped from the counter, rebuffing Portia with cat butt as he strut his way to her bedroom.

“I swear, your as bad as Ilya…”

With one last sweep, she returned to the stove. Draining the potatoes, she warmed her trusty cast iron skillet before dumping her meat in. As she was giving a few last stirs, a knock sounded at her door. Heart aflutter, Portia sped on over, taking a moment to fix her hair before opening the door with a smile. “Valora!” She blushed prettily at seeing how well the other cleaned up.

Resplendent in red leggings under draped golden shorts, a simple red linen top and boots completed the look. Valora had forgone any makeup and had her hair pulled back in several thick braids knotted into a chignon. In one hand she carried a bottle of wine. She held it aloft, “I brought drinks! Raided Gemmy's stash. But shush, don't tell him!”

“Your secret's safe with me!” With a mischievous grin, Portia tugged the other woman inside before shutting the door.

***

Dinner was a bit of a hectic affair. Before stopping, some of the advance guard had come back, warning that there was evidence of bandit activity up ahead. This particular section of the caravan's rout split off into a fork. The main road would take them directly into the mouth of the ambush, while the smaller, secondary one would allow them to bypass, but if ambushed there, the likelihood of getting assistance was greatly reduced.

Under orders to make something light but packed with carbs and protein, Ty and the others put together things like sandwiches, pita's, and veggie salads. Once he whipped that out, Ty made his way to Phaedra's, adding extra runic protection to her wagon along with setting Mazel and Tov to guarding.
Everyone was being efficiently discreet, going about their business quickly but...not? Julian would liken the energy surrounding him to be similar to a housewife at market: things to do and see quickly, but not frantic.

At Ty's suggestion, Julian added a few more blades to his person. Aside from his sword he brought from Vesuvia and its matching dagger, he added another three knives of various types, a crossbow hung from his shoulder, and (with great reluctance) the pistol Ty presented him with.

Julian was armed to the teeth, and he'll be damned if any of the kids got hurt. Hippocratic oath or not.

Ty had been pulled to go with the advanced guard. The idea was to ambush the bandits before they could ambush them. Julian had overheard that the group was estimated to be over fifty, which was unusual. From what he remembers, most don't get that large, infighting keeping most groups around twenty or so. Maybe two came together to reap bigger rewards?

As it is, Ty was gearing up at the same time as Julian himself. If Julian thought he was ready to take on an army, Ty could topple an empire. When all was said and done, Ty was clothed neck to toe in boiled leather armor, burnished a dark brown with walnut oil. High-waisted close-cut leather trousers, over which knee-high leather boots tied off. A thin, silky undershirt was under a thick, reinforced leather jacket. Pockets and buckles were placed in strategic spots, allowing Ty to attach his two short swords and numerous smaller blades. Julian could see a couple of heavy duty snaps keeping the jacket on and closed, allowing for a quick rip-away if needed.

Watching Ty ruck-up was hypnotizing. The fluid motions he went through as he checked, put on, and secured everything reminded Julian that Ty was a member of the Citadel. And if he remember correctly, Ty's licensing credentials put him in a sorcerer combat class. He really wants to see Ty at work.

After a quick kiss, Ty was off. In any other situation, Julian would be worried. Fifty is a lot of bandits, but Ty took on a juvenile Fell Worm and won. If anyone should be worried, it's those bandits.

Julian settled in Phaedra's cart, talking with the kidlets and cuddling a sleepy cherub. Ty will be back in no time.

***

Keeping his steps steady and measured, Ty crouched thru the undergrowth. He had been dropped off further up the road, putting him at the ambushes back. He was to go in, eliminate the perimeter guard, and head into the main cluster of bandits and raise hell. He'll be joined by the rest of the caravan's guards at that point.

Sidestepping a tree and a cluster of bushes, he caught a glimpse of two bandits. Both male, dressed in a mishmash of armor. Backs to him (a supremely stupid decision, really), they were shooting the shit instead of doing their job.

Summoning an ethereal bow, Ty knocked a ghostly arrow before drawing back. Holding his breath as he sighted, he counted to three before loosing, exhaling as he did so.

"HOLY FUCK GEN! WHA~" the second guard went down before he could say anything more, arrow dissipating from his eye socket. Both corpses twitched in their death throws as a few last spurts of blood soaked the ground.
Listening for a few moments and hearing no reinforcements, Ty quickly drug the bodies into the underbrush, mentally marking their location so he could loot them later. He advanced slowly, taking down another four before someone cottoned onto him.

Arms had wrapped around his middle as he was stashing another body, trying to wrestle him to the ground. It was only quick work with a dagger that saved Ty, his back and shoulders faintly warmed by the blood that gushed out of a slit throat. Pushing the bandit to the side revealed it was Kurl the Weasel; she had a minor bounty on her head. Big enough that he could get Julian something nice.

Hearing a yell, Ty knew the jig was up. Where Kurl went, Borus the Maggot followed. Following his yell, several other bandits came running.

Surrounded on all sides, Ty grinned. Looks like he'll be having some fun.

***

Flicking his blade sharply, a thin stream of ichor sprayed the ground as Ty sighed. Taking a moment to readjust his braid, he looked around. Bodies littered the ground and the sickly smell of copper stained the air.

This is it? How disappointing. He thought that, with the high numbers of the bandit band he'd have some sort of challenge. As it is, this is just sad! Lookouts not looking out, shorties trying to wrestle someone nearly three times their weight to the ground, and, his favorite, a group surrounding a single person and fighting them one on one.

What, did someone write a book on how NOT to properly run an unlawful organization and the bandit leader found it, read it, and thought ‘hey, this is genius? Let's do this!’ and did the opposite!? He's already taken out a dozen of 'em!

“AIEEEEE!” A man came barreling out of the foliage, arms holding a longsword up and over his head. With another, more exasperated sigh, Ty stuck out his sword arm, eyes rolling as the bandit impaled himself with a wet cough. With a jerk, Ty pulled his blade out, stepping over a choking dead man as he looked for more trouble.

***

Dear diary; jackpot!

About a half-mile from the caravan, the main group of bandits had set-up their ambush spot. Hiding in the ditches running along the road and up in the tree's, Ty could make out around twenty of them. More could be there, but it's more likely that the others were scattered, similar to what Ty had run into. He knows the other caravan guards that went out were taking care of a group that had set-up in a small cave overlooking the road. Apparently it was a good sniping spot.

Trying to decide how to handle this one, Ty had two options: stealth, or bedazzlement. Will he go in quiet, take out as many as he can discreetly? Or be loud and hit hard and fast?

Eh, go big or go home. He's bored and wants to diddle his precious, and YaYa is a massive cockblock.

Decision made, he sheathed his blade. Walking into the center of the road, he clapped his hands as loudly as possible. Grinning wide and impishly, he belted out “HEY! ANY OF YOU GUYS LOOKING FOR A FIGHT!”
The effect was instant: people dropped from the tree's and jumped out of ditches, hooting and hollering as they rushed him, weapons and teeth barred. Grin turning animalistic, Ty snapped his fingers, hands wreathing in flame. As the first bandit reached him, he palmed their face, turning up the heat. With an agonized scream and the sound of sizzling flesh and bursting eyes, they dropped seconds later. The next came at his back, their face meeting his elbow. With a crunch of snapping cartilage, they fell back. With a kick of his heel, Ty snapped a neck as he ducked a swinging blade, driving pointed fingers into vulnerable eyes.

Finally feeling satisfaction at the challenge before him, Ty turned into a swirling dervish of death. Each blow was calculated to take every bandit down, and down permanently. He was leaving no chance that this group will reform to prey upon others.

“OW! That hurt!” Someone got a lucky blow, and Ty had to fight hard the instinct to stop breathing as his ribs burned. Snarling, he snapped out a heel-strike, feeling more than hearing as a jaw snapped shut and cut thru a meaty tongue. He turned to the next opponent as his previous one fell, gagging on the now-useless muscle stuck in their throat. One flaming hand shot out, gripping a bare throat as his free one wrapped around a different bandits wrist, both shrieking as Ty fed more magic into his hands. In seconds, nothing but flaking ash was gripped in his palms.

Well, that's new. He couldn't do that before. Makes him wonder what else he could do. It would be cool if he could breathe fire like a dragon…

...oh dear gods, he has to try that! Dragons are the coolest! He wants to be one in his next life!

Breaking out of the riot he had caused, Ty backpedaled about a dozen feet, snapping arms and breaking kneecaps as he went. Once he was a satisfactory distance away, he dropped into a crouch, feet shoulder width apart. Taking a few deep breaths in rapid succession to hyper-oxygenate his lungs, he held the last one. As the bandits stormed closer, the burning of his lungs built. Imagining a match being lit in his chest, he opened his mouth and...coughed?

Ash and smoke drifted out from between his lips, the burning in his chest increasing. Soon, it felt like a kerosene lamp had been knocked over in his lungs. The heat turned to searing pain, and in a desperate attempt to get rid of it, Ty let out a deep, raspy exhalation.

Purgatory. Sheer, cataclysmic flames shot out, slamming into the bandits. Screams of panic and agony rose from the inferno. The group scattered, flailing limbs covered in flames windmilling away. Several dropped to the ground, rolling frantically in a bid to put out the flames. Those not hit by the divine light (for this fire was too golden, too stubborn, to be earthly in nature) were fleeing, trying to run just to be cut down by the rest of the guard that had just arrived.

Tuning out the screams, Ty sat heavily on his rear, dizzy from lack of oxygen. He gave a few phlegmy coughs, spitting out ash-tinged mucus as he did so. A few more ‘old man’ sounds emerged as the captain of the guard came up, his mounts hooves clomping heavily.

“Well. You don't see that everyday. Thought a dragon had joined the fight for a minute there. That was you!?”

Flopping onto his back, Ty chuckled. He threw his hands up and wide, chuckle turning into all-out laughter. “I'm a dragon, man.” His laughter took on a slightly hysterical tinge, “a fucking dragon.” He shot up, fists high in the air.

“WOOOOOO! I'M A MOTHER FUCKIN’ DRAGON!”

***
Seeing the guards return, the caravan breathed a sigh of relief. A few guards had brought back trinkets and jewelry, things looted from their kills. Some were gifting them to other caravanners, others showing off their new bits and bobs. Over to the side, a few were competing, trying to outdo one another when it came to their loot.

Indigo in arm, Julian looked about for Ty. A few of the returning guards had injuries and were being seen to. From his observations, Julian was relieved to note that there were no casualties, although a few had some injuries that would need a close watch.

Paying half-an-ear to a cooing cherub, Julian eventually spotted Ty, his unique hair helping him stand out. The man was two-stepping into camp, bedecked in various gold necklaces and rings. When Serafina and Antonius came up to greet him, Ty danced around them before flicking sparklies their way, backing off with a laugh and shake of the head.

Nancing about the camp more, Ty eventually shuffled towards Julian. Pecking a relieved doctor on the lips, Ty danced around him as well, dropping jewelry around a neck or down a shirt as he kissed each cheek as he went by. Others laughed at his antics.

“Not that I'm complaining, darling, but what brought this on?” Another pass, another drop of something pretty, and another set of kisses.

“*kiss* Oh, nothing. *kiss* Just wanted *kiss* to show you *kiss* how much I *kiss* adore you *kisskisskiss*.” The last set of kisses were delivered to both cheeks and then pink lips, Ty adding a bit of heat. He pulled back just enough to kiss down a warm neck, nipping as he did so. It was only when an indignant Indigo squalled that Ty let up, giving the baby an over exaggerated glare.

“*Hmph! I see some one* isn't happy to see me!” His lips curled up in an approving smile as the cherub growled, doing his best to bat Ty away.

“Mine!”

“Yeah, naw, little bit. Julian's mine. And while I'm glad you're finally starting to act like a proper cherub, back to yer Ma ya go.” With deft fingers and quick hands, Ty plucked a pissy baby from Julian's arms, walking towards Phaedra's cart as the little one threw a fit of epic proportions, even smacking Ty in the face with a flailing wing as he crowed a chorus of 'mine!'s as they walked away.

Blinking confusedly, Julian went to walk back to their cart when some of the jewelry Ty showered him with tumbled out of his shirt. Scrambling to catch everything, Antonius came up, clapping Julian's shoulder. “Looks like Ty knows what he's doing.”

“Um, begging your pardon?” Not for the first time, Julian has no idea what's going on.

Antonius chuckled. “You'll learn soon enough. I'll keep Serafina distracted,” he waggled his eyebrows, cluing Julian into just what type of distraction he's talking about, “while Ty showers you in...affection tonight. Good luck, you'll need it!” And with that, a cackling Antonius walked away.

What? What does Antonius me- oh. Oh!

Well then. Looks like Julian only has a short amount of time to get ready. He'd better make it count.

***

Dropping off a cranky cherub, Ty headed over to a medical wagon for his 'post-mission' check-up. As he stood in line, he bounced on his toes and tapped his foot, adrenaline still buzzing in his
system. At odd times he shifted his weight, the clinks of metal ringing out. He also shifted his hips a bit, the leather of his trousers not really helping the half-erection he was currently sporting.

He wasn't the only one. Nearly all of the men and most of the women who went out were in the same boat. It was one of the realities of fighting; get the blood flowing and adrenaline pumping and BAM! Hormone city.

Ty's wagon won't be the only one a rockin’ tonight. One of the ladies was eye-fucking one of the caravan healers. Poor man was a blushing, stuttering mess. Everyone knows who's topping in that couple. And one of the guys was throwing flirty grins to a group of girls off to the side. And just a few spots before him…

“OI! HANDS TO YERSELF!” The amorous couple who were getting a little too frisky jumped apart with a blush, the girls skirt falling back to her knees as she hid her flaming face behind her hands, her partner throwing a heated glance at her as they sucked two of their fingers.

Fuckin’ kids. Get a room, gods!

***

Julian had just put the final touches to his ‘outfit’ when the wagon's door slammed open. Before the door could even shut Ty was stripping, quick and jerky movements accompanying his harsh breathing. Julian lounged across the bed, waiting for Ty to pay attention to him. Any moment now…

“Fuck. Damn babe, you are so gonna get it tonight and oh HELLO THERE!” Pulling off his boots, Ty had only looked up as he pushed down his trousers. “You know, it's not even my birthday, but damn if you're not the finest piece of cake a man has ever seen!”

Julian had bedecked himself in all of the jewelry and sparklies Ty had looted. Multiple gold and silver chains with pendants, each finger and both thumbs had at least one ring if not more, and his wrists were packed with bracelets and bangles. “Oh! Almost forgot!” With a twist, Julian plucked a goblet of wine from a shelf hanging above the bed, twisting to lean on his side and elbow as he did so. Taking a sip as he waggled his eyebrows, he smiled at the shocked laugh Ty belted out.

“You’re such a dork,” Ty sniggered.

“Um, yes I am. A dork who's spent some time prettying himself up and fluffing the pillows for dick. Now,” Julian rolled onto his back, shimming his hips to bring attention to the proud erection jutting up from between his legs, “you want to make me jingle jangle?”

“Oh, I'll do more than make you jingle,” Ty kneeled, walking up the bed and pulling long legs around his hips, setting the goblet aside. “You're gonna fucking sing like a songbird, babe.”

“Oh hm. I'll believe it when I see it.” Leaning up, Julian slotted their faces together, slipping his tongue between willing lips with a moan. Hands tangled in each others hair as the kiss grew more heated. Pulling away with a gasp, Julian panted, “fuck, just, just pin me. Now, before Serafina tries anything.” She’s such a cockblock. Julian needs some dick and he needs it now!

“Well, someone's a little bossy,” Ty snarked. He leaned over, reaching for their oil (one of the first things he unpacked, to be honest), wanting to get the prep out of the way. He let out a strangled grunt as a hand grabbed hold of him, guiding him to an already slicked entrance as Julian locked his heels at the small of Ty's back and impaled himself with a relieved moan. “Fuck! Shit, babe! Warn a guy next time!” Ty squawked as long fingers tangled in his braid, Julian pushing himself up to glare at Ty nose-to-nose. “Alright already! Jeez, bossy bottom…”
Before Julian could snark back, Ty snapped his hips hard, burying himself to the hilt. Falling back onto the bed with a jingle of jewelry, Julian was breathless for a few moments before bouncing back, doing his best to meet Ty's thrust. His fingers dug into the others shoulders and biceps, legs spreading high and wide to allow the dick spearing him to get deeper. Each time his spot was hit, he let out a loud grunt, teeth clenching at the hard and fast pace Ty set for the two of them.

One that was perfect, both needing to expel as much of their keyed-up energy from earlier as possible. Serafina better NOT interrupt them.

It was as Ty was pulling them back down the bed, having bounced Julian up to the head that they were disturbed. The door rattled, despite Ty putting up the runic equivalent of a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on it. It started opening, “ey Ty! Julian! I need you to—”

“Fuck OFF, Yaya!” Ty swears to Hedonism, if YaYa doesn't leave them alone right now…

“Antonius! Do your fucking job and dick down your wife!” Julian is about to commit murder, and he would probably be let go due to extenuating circumstances!

“Why you little shits!” The door finished swinging open, a glowering Serafina back-lit by the watch fires.

“PISS OFF!” Two very angry men picked up and chucked anything they could get their hands on. A book, a boot, and a half-full goblet flew thru the air, hitting a hastily closed door. A yelling Serafina could be heard briefly before she was abruptly cut off, her renewed chastisements doppler ing away as someone (presumably Antonius) did his fucking job and corralled his wife.

“FINALLY!” Gripping milky thighs hard, Ty got back to work. Hammering away at a hot and tight ass, he was startled as Julian gripped his thighs hard around Ty’s middle and heaved. Rolling the other, he ended up on top, chest working hard to bring oxygen to his lungs. During the roll, Ty had slipped out. Steadying a thick cock, Julian reseated himself with a moan, Ty's joining him as dick speared Julian deeper than before. Giving a few test rocks, Julian then started bouncing with gusto, moaning loudly the whole time.

“Oh shit!” Ty was in heaven. His sweet boy was using him good, and riding Ty for all the he was worth. Ty's never been harder than he currently has been in his life, greatly enjoying the fact that Julian was comfortable enough with their sexual relationship to take such a liberty. He's going to have to reward him with a nice, thick nut…

Splaying his palms over the hard pectorals below him, Julian started bouncing harder. Each hot, meaty slap of sweaty skin on skin rang thru the wagon, grunts and moans along with it. By this point Ty had ceased trying to get a grip on Julian, now doing anything he could to just hang on for the ride.

Ty came first, shooting off with a shout. His hands scrambled to grasp slick skin as he bucked up into tight heat. At each spasm he ground, wanting to plant as much cum as possible as deeply as possible.

Long minutes later, Ty collapsed back onto the bed, letting out a shuddering breath as he did so. His head lolled as he shakily pushed back his hair, braid loose from their antics. He twitched and let out a cry as Julian ground himself, smirking at a tortured Warlord.

Giving the other a few moments to cool off, Julian returned to bouncing. He was determined to get not one, not two, but three thick loads of cum shoved inside him. He's not unfamiliar with the effects of battle lust, having helped a few thru the side effects a few times when he was younger. And
considering Ty's mixed ancestry, Julian's got his work cut out for him. It's going to take a lot of effort on his part to milk his Darling for all he's worth and damn it, Julian ain't no quitter!

Reversing, he moaned at the results of such a slight change. Widening his knees he leaned forwards on his palms, working his hips up and down the hot, thick shaft he sat on. At each grinding bob, heat buried itself low in his gut. At some point, hot palms planted themselves on Julian's gently jiggling cheeks, their fingers helping him in his motions.

Ty dug in his heels, raising his knees slightly to get traction as he started directing their thrusting and grinding. He moaned at the startled cry his work received, and he held slim hips still as he started thrusting up and in shallowly, aiming his head to rub over Julian's spot. So close to his second orgasm of the night, Ty started thrusting up hard and fast, arms bulging while they brought Julian down to meet him, jewelry jingling the whole time. With a last thrust, Ty came for the second time that night with a loud, rolling growl.

Legs flattening, Ty fell back onto musky bedding. “Shit. Babe, no more! Your a, a damn succubus! Fuck!” He jerked hard, overstimulated cock throbbing as Julian started to slowly grind back and forth. Thru watery eyes, Ty could just make out red locks as Julian's head tipped back, and he suspects Julian was working himself over slowly.

“Just, just one mooooore…” Julian groaned, thick and lazily. He felt drunk, like he had just slammed a few drinks in quick succession. He also felt full, and not just from cock and cum. It was almost like he wanted to burst out of skin, like an overcooked sausage. “Please, Ty? I need…”

With a buck of his hips, Ty caught a dazed Julian as he tumbled back. Still connected, they were now back to chest and heart to heart. Butting his heels against the backs of his thighs, Ty wrapped an arm around a svelte waist, guiding Julian's legs to drape around his own raised knees. Digging in his heels, Ty slowly started thrusting into a worn-out hole. He carded his free hand thru sweat-soaked locks, a finger hooking into an eyepatch and bringing it away. He nuzzled a cut cheekbone, dropping lazy kisses as his hips slowly worked a steady rhythm.

Hearing a pathetic whimper, Ty caught parted lips in a searing kiss as the hand wrapped around a furred waist grasped a neglected cock. As he did so, he thrust in as hard and deep as he could, delighting in the way Julian's eyes bugged in pleasured shock and the gasp he swallowed.

It was only after a few more thrusts and squeezes that Julian came. Ripping his mouth away from the soft lips and sinful tongue that had been drinking his ecstasy, he dug his head into the swollen shoulder below him as he screamed in completion. He barely felt it as Ty bit again into his neck as Julian finally got his third and final creaming along with a much desired orgasm.

Hand covered in cum, all Ty could do was lay there, licking his digits clean as his free hand held a trembling Julian close. Once his hand was as clean as he was going to get it, he shifted them to lay on their side. Swinging both an arm and a leg over Julian, Ty nuzzled into a bruised neck, absently noting that he had bitten the same spot as he had a few days ago before drifting off to sleep.

Oh well.

***

Julian woke with a snort, aching all over and utterly exhausted. It took him a few minutes to ‘wake up’, and he did so with a shake of the head. Squinting at the window, he could see it was night. Stomach grumbling, he pushed the arm and leg draped over his side off before starting to wiggle away. He stopped mid-wiggle, eyes going wide when he realized that Ty was, uh, still ‘at home’ so to speak. Casting a steadily panicking gaze around, Julian spotted a discarded shirt. Long fingers
twitched for it, and he stretched for all that he's worth to get it without 'undocking' and spilling all over the bed.

Choking back his crow of success, Julian, well, ‘dismounted’, using the shirt to soak up the frankly freakish amount of cum that Ty had pumped into him. Relieved that he hadn't soiled the bed more than it was, he now had another dilemma on his hands: what is he going to do with a cummed-up shirt?

Another quiet panic attack later, Julian had dressed in whatever was at hand and stuffed the nasty shirt into the bottom of the laundry basket in the end of the breakfast nook. Forcing himself to remember to be the one to take care of the washing, he slipped on his boots and eyepatch before exiting.

While it was far past dinnertime, it was still early enough that he could beg a plate from one of the Matron's. Waddling off to take care of business (and learning the hard way that no, as hot as it is, he shouldn't be used as a cum dump without proper bathing facilities!), he made his way over to the kitchen cart. As he passed the other caravanners still out and about socializing, he got many a knowing look and thumbs up. Julian even passed a woman doing a walk of shame, her head held high as she showed off the marks of lust bitten all over her neck, chest and shoulders. Getting a jaunty wink from her, Julian decided to take a page from her book.

Strutting his stuff, he soon was at the foot of the desired cart. Rapping his knuckles on dark wood, he was soon greeted by one of the Matron's. She took one look at his fucked up appearance, sniffed, and turned away. Minutes later, a different Matron came out, smirking like the dickens as she passed a large covered basket over. “Judging by your looks and smell, you've had quite the evening. Here, dinner and breakfast. Don't worry about you and Ty reporting for duty tomorrow. If Serafina gets all up your ass, tell her to take it up with Aria.”

Taking the basket with a grateful smile, Julian trotted back to his cart. With a hop and a skip, he entered, setting the basket down with a rattle. Arms wrapping around his middle startled a squawk from him as Ty buried his face into a bitten neck. “Hey, uh. I brought dinner. Get settled while I plate it?”

“Mrph.” With a jaw-cracking yawn, Ty backed away. Scratching his hip, he stumbled towards the door. Before Julian could catch him, Ty waltzed out the door as naked as the day he was born. Not giving a flying fuck that all and sundry could see his hanging brain, he answered the call of nature before heading back inside. Re-entering, he caught Julian in the middle of a face-palm. “Whut?” It's not like he hasn't seen Ty naked before.

“You just. Argh! Why are you like this?”

“I'm a Principia. We don't give a fuck.”

“But! But the children!”

“Remind me to take you to one of our cities. Lots of us go about our business skyclad.” Ty snickered to himself. If Julian had issues just standing in line the other day, his libido would implode when brought to Serenissima, Harmonia, or even Varulla!

Wait. Scratch that. Varulla is where the current High Queen is from, and she's the one who Ostracized him. Fuck Varulla. All of her inhabitants are ugly and should wear clothes by law. They have no taste and can't cook. And are prudes.

As Julian sat in thought, Ty put together a massive sandwich, and then another for good measure.
It was as he started rooting around the basket for something to make Julian that Ty heard the sound of a tea kettle. Knowing he didn't put it on, he looked over. Not seeing one, he turned to Julian to find that he was the source of the noise. Ty just chuckled, knowing what it was that the other just realized.

“Say...Ty? After uh, after all this is done. Can we, like, take a vacation? I would *really* like to see some of these cities you speak of.”

“Umhmmm. You just wanna see some ass.”

Julian looked affronted. “Why, how DARE you insinuate that I, a paragon of human virtue,” Ty barked out a short laugh at *that,* “would merely use you to feed my baser impulses! I sir, am insulted!”

“Whatever you say, Sweetheart.” Ty will let Julian sputter a bit longer. Just enough for Ty to shove some food down his gullet before engaging in more sleepy cuddling. They'll need all the sleep they can get, tomorrow means stopping at that hamlet and setting up for trade and those days *suuuuuuk.*
Of Furries and Fuckery

Chapter Summary

Both Indigo and Julian, where Ty is involved, are full of fight. I'll let you guys figure out which type.

Chapter Notes

Julian say's a naughty word!
Cyka: Russian for "Bitch". Pronounced like 'soo-ka'.

Cordelia wanted to die.

Sitting at his desk, the man moaned as he covered his eyes. Internally he was reciting the Dark Mother's Prayer, hoping either her or Hedonism would give him the solution to his problem.

Or the numbers for the local lottery. Cordelia is a humble man, and will take what he can get.

He had read thru nearly all of Julian's diaries before he caught a break. Similar to Cordelia himself, Julian had exhausted all avenues of research and theory when it came to Vesuvian Plague. He even took a page out of *The Sorcerer's Handbook of Sketchy Shenanigans and Superfluous Summoning* (written by T. Principia, three guess who the author was, first two don't count) and had essentially shrieked his desperate query into the Void. The last entry was his excitement over getting a 'nibble' back.

And that's it. Nothing about what ritual he used, or who/what he contacted. Either Julian started a different journal (unlikely, given that there was a third of this one still blank), or he didn't record anything in case he was found out.

Nowhere, in either the scraps or the diaries, was there any sort of mention or premeditation of murder. Considering how Julian notated his every day (including things like his meals or just plain weirdness in his surroundings), it's highly unlikely that he just snapped. There are too many steps to account for. Most random acts of violence have a three-step process: Snap, weapon, and act. Your grasp on reality disappears, you grab the easiest to access weapon (even if that means leaving the premises), and commit the act. From everything Cordelia has available to him, there are just too many variables and stopping opportunities when it came down to Julian's act. Everything from guards, masquerade goers, the various wings...as it currently stands, the evidence before him points to premeditation.

Or, someone's fibbing. Cordelia never got the impression that Julian is prone to violence. He's a man that needs to be pushed to those actions, and even then he would not relish in the motions. Someone must have told him something about Lucio. Maybe the Count was holding a family member captive? But, Julian would have wrote that down. It's even possible that Lucio didn't do anything, but someone set the Doctor on him.
Even then, that doesn’t really add up. Julian had access to a great many substances to commit
murder with, more so than normal seeing that Vesuvia had lifted most of the ethical research/testing
guidelines towards the end of the Plague. A simple dose of wormwood or pure alcohol to the
bloodstream would have done the job. Hell, just an empty syringe of air would work! It would look
like a heart attack or brain aneurysm, depending on the shot site. Therefore, setting Lucio on fire
would have been far more work than the Count warranted.

“I need a drink.”

***

Gilda was busy puttering about her kitchen. It was a modest one, in a modest home with a modest
yard. It had neat but modest furnishings, and was more than enough for a widowed woman of her
age.

Putting the kettle on, she cursed under her breath. She had gotten a notice from sweet little Asra
about Prew’s horrid attitude and decided to knock the bint down a few pegs. Out off allllllllll her
progeny, Prew has caused the most problems for her family, and Gilda is going to finally put her in
her place, to hell with her son’s begging. He and his wife have used kid hands for far long enough
when it comes to Prew, and Prew’s actions are now being closely watched by some very important
people. Gilda will not have the actions of an overgrown brat hamper her brothers and sisters
livelihoods!

Thus, the kettle. Gilda was inviting some old friends round for a spot of tea and a bit of nibble. By
the end of their catching up, Prew will have ‘difficulties’ living the life she has been accustomed to
and have to look reality straight in the eye. Just because she's Daddy's Little Princess doesn't mean
that life will move to accommodate her frivolous whims.

Setting out some plates, she heard a knock at her door. “Gilly! Open up, yeh old harlot! I ent
standin’ oot ‘ere alle dey!”

“Oy! Keep yer knickers on! No one wants to see the opossum you call a cunt!” A loud chorus of
laughter rang thru the door.

Grumbling as she walked to her front door, Gilda threw it open with a grin. On her stoop was a
gaggle of old women with a few old men. Each had a face just as lined and wrinkled as hers. She
won't tell anyone, but her heart warmed, seeing the friends she's had at her side for nearly her whole
life.

“Alright, you old fucks! Let's have a party!” From the look on her face and the tone of her voice,
the word ‘party’ has a vastly different meaning than what one would think. From the answering
looks on her friends faces, they knew exactly which type she means, and are eagerly anticipating it.

***

Julian and Serafina were having a stare-off, and Tony wishes there was a way to record it. Now,
don't get him wrong, he loves his wife dearly. She blessed him with three, beautiful children, all of
whom went on to have their own. They have been together longer than many people have been alive
and have been there for each other's highs and lows. Antonius had been a very much wanted man,
with literally hundreds of offers for marriage (little Tiberius coming a close second in terms of
numbers), and he had never been prouder than when he brought Serafina home, announced his
intention to marry her (and only her), and fuck anyone who says otherwise.

That being said, it's always funny to see her take someone on just to get steamrolled. Serafina is
not only a very powerful sorceress in her own right, but also very capable with any sort of pole arm. Her reputation as a shorty with a hot ass is only rivaled by her battle prowess, and her frustration with Julian being an unrepentant hussy in regards to Ty is vexing her supremely.

“I don't know what's worse,” Tony's enchanting wife growled. “The fact that you stink of sex, are shirtless and barring your love marks so, or,” her voice raised, “that you wore Rus out so much, that he can't even get up to make my favorite banana pancakes!” At her incredulous shout, Julian started snickering, face cupped in a hand with its elbow resting on the table he was sat at. “Don't you fuckin’ laugh at me, you floppy-haired ginge! I was looking forward to those!”

For his credit, Julian just grinned at her wolfishly. “Oh, really? Why, it's my understanding that you had quite the fill of banana last night!”

Serafina rounded on Tony, finger pointed. “What did you do? Y’aint gonna get outta this one, bud. What salacious things have you planted in this ner'do'well's head?” She ignored the mock-outraged shout of ‘a ner'do'well!? Me? I object!’ coming from Julian's direction.

Tony just leaned back with a crooked grin. “Why don't you come over here and find out?”

Serafina snorted. “Last time you said that, I got knocked up. I ain't falling for that one again.” Hearing a snort from Julian, she spun back around. “And you! You have no shame! But, in all seriousness, what did you do to Rus? He's normally up by now, causing untold amounts of mayhem.”

Julian slumped a bit more on his elbow, cocking out his hip as he lounged before giving it a hearty slap. “Hi, my names Julian, and this,” he gripped the meat of a clothed rear, “is Valerian!”

Tony barked out a laugh. Serafina just raised a steely brow. “Mhmmm. And just why is your ass named ‘Valerian’?”

“Because it put Ty to sleep!”

“You have absolutely no shame, do you?”

With a flip of his hair, Julian put on the airs of a Nobel kept woman. “Shame? Who is that, I don't know her.”

All Serafina could do was toss her hands in the air and stomp off muttering. Tony got up to follow her with a chuckle, clapping Julian on the shoulder as he passed. “You fit right in. Keep Rus on his toes, yeah?”

Julian tossed out a flirty wink. “Can't make any promises!” He heard Tony snort as he got up to grab some additional breakfast. He may be able to con Aria out of some whipped cream. All this talk of bananas is making him hungry.

***

A windswept Asra marched into Dead Man's Respite, a concerned Faust flicking her tongue about. His cheeks and nose were rosy from sunlight, and the start of a sunburn was blooming along his shoulders. Walking up to the bar, Don the Barman had something cool to drink before Asra sat down. Moments later, a saucer of clear water was placed for Faust. She slithered down a toned forearm before lapping up her drink.

~Love a water! Hot!~
From a corner table where she had been perched, Lucille wandered over. Lightly clad due to a sudden heat wave boiling Vesuvia, many pairs of eyes followed her sheer silhouette as she sat next to Asra. “So, any progress?” She rest her chin over her laced fingers, elbows propped on the table. A clatter could be heard as something behind the bar was dropped.

“Not much,” Asra sighed. “Hal and Lyra had impeccable records, and it turns out my house in Nopal actually belonged to Sorcha. I spent nearly a day going over it with a fine-toothed comb, but nothing turned up.” So much time, wasted.

Lucille sat back up, stretching. As she did so, a choked off gasp could be heard. Asra can't really blame the maker of that sound, Lucille has a beautiful body, and the sheer dress she was wearing was putting it on full display. Everything from the outline of her curves to the shadow of her nipples and neather's could be seen.

Tubor better not find out. He'll burn the pub down in his efforts to rid it of ‘that strumpet's taint’, and to be frank, Don may die of a broken heart if that happens.

A pair of fingers snapped in Asra's face, startling him. “Hey, Asra. Eye's up here.”

He blushed. “Sorry. It's just been quite the last few days…”

She snorted. “Is that what they're calling it now? Just admit it, you're tired and horny and want a bit of sugar before bed.”

“Well, I wouldn't say noooo…”

“Pfft. C'mere, and let me show you the way to heaven,” she grabbed his hand, pulling him behind her as she led the way out of the pub. A disappointed cry rang out behind them before the door closed. “I've got a new belladonna mix, and need someone to help me... test it.”

***

Mazel and Tov were waiting outside of the wagon when Julian returned, little Indigo clinging to a furry back. His little wings, peaking out between slits in his loose shirt and full of little more than pin fluff, kept on moving and stretching at random. It reminded Julian very much of the motions baby birds make to exercise their wings in the weeks leading up to their first flying lessons.

“Ju! Juju! Jujujujujuju!” Chubby fingers reached out, a pout on pale pink lips as gold eyes squinted. Indigo listed to the side, Tov catching him with her large head.

“Well now, someone's happy to see me! Hello!” Swinging the baby onto his hip, Julian heard the crinkle of paper. Pinned to the back of Indigo's nappy was a note from Phaedra, asking if he and Ty could watch the boy for a few hours. Turns out, some of her youngsters were being little terrors, and she was already at her wits end.

“As though she has to ask. Looks like you get to spend the day with us, hmmm?” A dark head resting on his chest was his answer.

Ducking into the wagon, Julian was happy to see Ty awake. The man was lounging about the bed, hair pulled over a shoulder as he tended to it with a wide-toothed comb. Propped up on pillows with the sun shining thru the windows, the lighting threw Ty's y-incision and acid burn from the Worm into stark relief. Thankfully, they were softened by warm skin and firm muscle.

Looking up, Ty gave Julian a sleepy smile. He set the comb to the side, the motion disturbing the fresh bedding he had placed. As the sheets moved, Julian could see mottled bruising slashing over
Ty's ribs, its shape revealing that he had been smacked hard by the flat of a sword yesterday. “Mornin’, Sweetheart.”

Julian kneeled to give Ty a ‘Good Morning’ kiss, just to have a little hand dart between their lips. “No!”

“Yes.”

A little huff. “No!”

“Listen here, little man. If Julian wants to give me a kiss, he can. You're not his boss.”

“Mine!” Indigo twisted in Julian's arms, landing a sloppy kiss to a faintly stubbled chin. He gave another one for good measure, stubbornly eyeing Ty as he did so.

Ty sighed, opening his arms. “'Kay, give 'em here.”

Julian blinked, unsure. “Um, are you positive that you want that? He, ah, wasn't that happy with you yesterday.” Little Indigo's fit had sent the camp a titter.

“E-yup. This is actually pretty normal behavior for a cherub. He's kinda adopted you as his Papa, and cherubs get possessive of their parents. Especially around other Incubi and those with strong Incubus heritage.” Ty sighed as Julian passed a fussy baby over, Indigo already ramping up for a fit. “He needs to learn not to be so territorial. At least, not to be so until he can back it up.”

“Ah.” Julian watched carefully as Ty lounged, a fist propping up his chin. Indigo was sat on Ty's stomach, one strong hand along the baby's back for support. Little hands kept fistig themselves as Indigo glared unceasingly at Ty, wings still fluttering and stretching. “So. How do you, like, teach that?” Back home, there was a lot of communal child rearing, starting at an early age. Most kids didn't go thru a ‘possessive’ phase, or at least, it was very short. Between the book and what Ty's told him, Julian imagines it would be very different for a cherub.

“I'll pretty much just be present. And not leave, no matter how loud he hollers. Usually, if someone is encroaching on an Incubus's territory that he don't want, he'll get loud and vulgar before dealing with the issue.” Right on cue, Indigo started growling. It would actually be intimidating if it weren't for the fact that it was no more threatening than a kittens. “There we go. I was wondering when that would pop out. You really don't like me, huh?”

Julian thinks it's kind of cute, how Indigo was trying to puff up and scare off Ty. It's too bad that Ty eats more for breakfast than what Indigo weighs. “Won't that make things worse?”

“Nah, not really. Right now, cherubs can't really tell the difference between a threat and someone they don't like. An adult knows when someone is just passing thru and when they're a potential squatter or rival. Currently, Indigo just see's a rival male trying to take 'his' people's attention.” Another tiny growl was followed by a swat. “Woah now! Indigo, no,” Ty gently grasped a flailing fist, “we do not do that!” Ty got a raspberry for his trouble. He sighed, “looks like I'll have my work cut out for me.”

***

The caravan started moving soon after. Julian joined Ty on the bed for a cuddle, with Mazel and Tov at the foot taking turns playing with Indigo. Currently, one of the girls would lick the cherub's chubby cheeks and then turn away as he tried to follow, giving the other time to do the same. As a result, Indigo was constantly giggling.
In the meantime, Julian had curled around Ty. One hand was absentmindedly tracing patterns over Ty's ribs, light enough that the other wouldn't be sore. Julian was debating on transferring the injury to himself to heal, but as he came to a decision, Ty laced a set of his fingers with Julian's.

They laid like that for the next hour before Ty decided it was time to dress and do a bit of spinning. As he sat at the foot of the bed next to a furry and feathery pile, he pulled out a clean set of trousers. As he started putting them on, he felt little fingers tug on his hair. Right next to him, Indigo stared in rapture at the opal streak going thru Ty's obsidian locks.

“It's pretty, huh.”

“Itty…” a few more gentle tugs as Indigo pet the strands. He let out the occasional coo. When Ty turned back to his dressing, Indigo let out a cry of delight. A shaft of sunlight had hit the pale strands, setting off the rainbows caught in Ty's locks.

The little one was entranced. He just held on to the hair, giving a little wave to make the rainbows move and shift. He was quiet until Ty went to put on a shirt.

Then all hell broke loose.

Indigo did not like Ty taking back his hair so he could put on his shirt. He didn't even get the collar over his head before Indigo was screaming in anger. Fat tears rolled over his red cheeks and his arms waved about as he squalled. Even his wings, as little as they were, were doing their best to puff up. Julian was concerned that Indigo would hurt himself with his fit when Ty used two fingers to push shut a spittle-covered jaw.

“Quiet.”

Astonishingly, Indigo did as told. He wibbled a bit before sniffing. “Want.”

“No.”

“But. But want!”

“I said, no.”

Julian thought the little one would kick-off again, but all Indigo did was huff and cross his little arms best he could. Julian let out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

Ty continued dressing, pulling on his socks before leaning back across the bed. He reached for the shelves above the bed's head, rolling over onto his stomach as he stretched. Moments later, little hands padded up his legs and backside, closely followed by little knees. Hearing Julian snort, Ty didn't have to look to know Indigo had crawled up and sat himself at the small of Ty's back.

“Yeah, naw. No dominance displays from you. I ain't ya Daddy.” A gentle twist of his hips sent the menace sprawling back onto the bedding with a chirp. Perching his glasses on his nose, Ty scooped up and plonked onto the floor a disheveled cherub.

Sitting in his spinning corner, Ty picked up where he left off yesterday. Not even five minutes later and a fuzzy head was peaking into the wool bag. Ty kept an eye out, not wanting to chase off an occupied baby but at the same time he doesn't want to spend hours re-carding superfine wool.

Lucky for Ty, Indigo went back to playing with the girls. As Mazel and Tov entertained a troublesome baby, Ty spun as Julian worked thru the final chapters of *The Two Towers*. Some time later, Ty was finishing his third drop spindle and Indigo had curled up between the dogs for a nap.
when he noticed Julian close the book. Before Julian could even ask, he saw the next book at the end of the breakfast nook. Bouncing with excitement, he breathed out a happy ‘Thanks!’ before cracking open *Return of the King*, wiggling into a comfortable position, and his eye started racing across the pages.

This is nice. Ty could get used to something like this.

***

Trying to get his anger under control, Germanius stalked down the hallway on his way to Lucio’s Wing. He had just tried to get another meeting with Nadia, to only be rebuffed by her Chamberlain. While frustrating, it's understandable. After yesterday, she may need more time to herself.

No, what has Germanius *pissed* is that she now wants all of their communication to take place via letters thru the Chamberlain.

Really!? Facetious bratling! She needs to be retaught a few things in proper and professional conduct between Nobel persons and the duties that being a Countess entails! Just because you don't *like* something doesn't mean you can sidestep responsibility. The amount of times he's wanted to punch someone in the face for their audacity is innumerable. But that doesn't mean he just turns his nose up at them and tell them to piss off. He's the Warlord of Serenissima! He is ultimately responsible for the safety and well-being of nearly three *million* souls and he will be DAMNED if he neglects his duties!

“LUCIO! GET YER FURRY ASS OVER HERE!” The insufferable Count was married to the aggravating Countess for about six years. *Surely* he knows how to get thru to her.

~What UNGODLY bellowing is this!? Cease this madness before stepping into my chambers, you uncouth swine!~

“Can it, mutton chop! I need to ask you some questions, and it'll be time sensitive, so no theatrics!”

Materializing before Germanius, the goatly form of Lucio appeared. Glaring with his muzzle curled, the horned apparition would be intimidating if it weren't for one thing:

“And stand up straight! Goodness, did no one teach you the importance of good posture!? You were proud of your tits, yes? Then stick'em out!” Germanius thumped his chest a few times in emphasis.

~And I ask, again: what are you, my father? I will walk and talk as I please, and no peasant will dictate propriety to me!~

“Ugh. And I thought Gothicus was bad enough. Anyway, back to the matter at hand,” Germanius waved off their argument, “how the hell do I deal with your wife? Currently, I'm thinking that you offed yourself to get away from her and that Devorak just stumbled upon you…”

~While I certainly didn’t ‘off myself’,~ Lucio began with a sneer, ~that IS what happened. Mother above, do you know nothing?~

“Can you just tell-, wait what?” Germanius *must* have misheard Lucio.

~Have you lost your ability to hear, old man? I said, that that is precisely what happened. Che, and to think I had ever feared you…~ Lucio let out a loud *bleat!* as his beard was pulled, his face being wrenched closer to a *furious* Germanius.
“Do you mean to tell me, that a man, who by all rights is innocent, will be hung for your murder if captured, and you have said or done NOTHING!?” Dark Mother Ephemera, please forgive this old fool. If Germanius hadn't made such an off the cuff remark, Julian could have been caught and hung for a crime he didn't commit! His pussyfooting around and trying to be respectful to a man who burned to death would have cost an innocent man his life!

Lucio pulled the hair of his chinny chin chin back with a snort and shake. ~And why should I care? What is a man, besides a tool? If Julian had been caught and hung it still would not change the fact that I, too, am dead.~

~Because, you fool, an innocent person should not have to pay for another's crimes! Julian's death would bring pain to his family and friends and rid the world of a supremely intelligent mind!~

~So what? I still died, in pain and agony!~

~The fact that Julian hadn't been able to cure you still has no bearing on justifying his execution for a crime he didn't commit! Stop thinking about yourself for a damned minute and look at what the consequences of your inaction could have rendered!~

~I will do as I wish, and no words from anyone can stop me! I am the Count, and my life or lack of will be lived as I see fit!~

And with that, Lucio's form exploded into mist with a scream of anger. The breeze caused by this pushed Germanius onto his ass with a *thump!**, leaving him dazed. After shaking himself, he pushed back onto his feet with a snort. “You and Nadia deserve each other,” he growled to the empty hall. With a final snort, this one full of derision, he turned and left, a heavy gaze boring into his back the entire time.

***

Turning down a side road, the caravan set-up shop outside the little unnamed hamlet that was their first stop. Caravaner's darted to and fro, with the wagons directing themselves into lines and groups for reasons that eluded Julian.

While this was going on, Indigo had been perched on broad shoulders, his little fingers knotted into deep red locks. Their wagon was actually parked next to Phaedra's, and her other little ones were outside their door, having fun with Mazel and Tov as Ty got a few things together.

Finishing up with his boots, Ty stood up straight, fists on his hips as he looked for something. Grabbing a large scarf, he turned his back to Julian. “Hey, babe? Can you help me wrap-up grumpy pants? I'll be heading over to one of the textile wagons to help them with a few things, and I figured I'll take the little one with me.”

Working quickly, both men soon had a fussy cherub wrapped up in a sling on Ty's back. While he grumbled at first, Indigo soon settled down, a cheek squished into the strong muscle of the back he was tied to.

“So, uh. What will you be doing?” Lunch wouldn't be for another hour yet, and Julian was feeling a bit cooped up. He wouldn't mind helping either Ty or someone else out until then.

“Hmmm. Ya know, you could probably help me out. Some of Phaedra's kids could too, I'll need to ask her.” Putting a few things into a small shoulder bag, Ty tugged Julian out behind him. Phaedra was already outside hers, diffusing a scuffle between two of her youngsters. “Ey, Phaedra? Want to lend me a few of your kids? We can use smart fingers at the dressing cart, and I think the kids would
like to earn a few coins.”

“Oh, I couldn’t ask that of you! You and Julian have already done so much for me!”

Julian’s heart broke a little, seeing the look on her face. Who in their right mind leaves a woman on her own with six kids!? Including a cherub! He wants to meet her husband, he knows she has one! She is still sporting a ring, and he just wants to talk…

“Naw, it’s all good. Kids can get a bit of spending money, you can relax for a few, and the dressers can get more done. So, whaddaya say, kids?” Ty squatted, “would you like to help a few big people do a job, and get some money? You could buy your Mama a nice present.”

With a resounding ‘yes!’, Ty lead the group away, not missing the relieved look Phaedra had. He leaned to the side, whispering to Julian, “until she gets to where she’s going, we’re her husband’s now.” He hopes that whoever the man in her life was was dead. That is the only acceptable reason for her to be by herself. If he's not, well, Ty can fix that.

“Agreed.”

Turning up at their destination, Julian was shocked to discover that the dressing cart has nothing to do with clothing. He saw person after person come out with a variety of knitted, crocheted, or woven items. Outside the cart were a few large tubs of water, some sort of solution mixed in. Everything was being sorted by color before being dumped in. Large wooden tables, screens, and pegged frames were being set up as well.

“So...what's all this, then?” A chorus of ‘yes's’ and other questions joined Julian’s.

“This, m’dears, is a dressing station. Everything that is woven or otherwise turned into a fabric item needs to be washed and pinned out. This makes it look nice so people want to buy it or so it can be used.” Walking over to a pegged frame, Ty tapped it. “This will let us block lace shawls. A few people in the hamlet make them, and our caravan pays them for their work. Then, we wash and put them on these so they look nice. Afterwards, we sell them elsewhere.” Ty squatted again, looking at the kids. “What I need from you guys is important. Some of you will help the nice ladies over there,” he pointed to the washing station, “put everything into the right piles while the rest of you,” he gestured to the frames, “will help put the clean ones on one of these frames. Do you think you can do that?”

After sorting out which kid would help with what, Ty walked into the hamlet, Julian with him. Mazel and Tov stayed with the dressers and the kids, eyes alert and bushy tails wagging as they kept watch. Once in the hamlet proper, it was only the matter of a few quick stops to pick-up finished projects. By the time they got back, more vats had been set up and several things were laid out to dry.

Seeing the position of the sun, Ty figured lunch would begin shortly. Helping the youngsters sort and place the things he and Julian brought back, he sent them all scampering after slipping them a few copper's. He knows that only the elder ones will be back to help after lunch, but hopefully the younger ones will be too tuckered out to bother Phaedra too much.

Passing over Indigo, Ty left Julian with a kiss before heading over to his cooking station. Mentally going over what they had, he thinks he'll float by his Matron a few things they could do with their rice stores. They also still have a lot of beef, as well. Stew over rice? And a few desserts as a pick me up?

***
Walking over to the cooking station, Julian grabbed a wide, shallow bowl before getting in line. He fairly danced in place as it moved, getting glances from others.

Sorry, not sorry. It's not his fault he's so damn excited. Ty is an amazing cook, and it's been far too long since he got a taste! Yes, he knows it's only been a day and a half, but that is still far too long!

“Well now, someone is excited,” Phaedra laughed as she came up. She took a squirming Indigo back, slipping him into a sling. It was only a few moments later that he was happily latched onto a breast and suckling, but not before squeaking out in discomfort when one of his delicate wings got pinned awkwardly. “It's like you've never eaten food before.”

“That, my good woman, is because Ty is an amazing cook! Nay, he is a chef! He pours love into his motions, tenderly season's choice bits, and cooks into sweet submission the hardest, gameist meats! He can turn the poorest quality ingredients into a feast fit for a king!”

The line was moving at a steady pace. Soon, Julian was only a few feet from where Ty was serving up delicious meat, a savory dark gravy clinging lovingly to beef and vegetables alike. “Sounds like you came for the food, and stayed for the food.”

“Actually, m'dear,” Julian said archly, holding out his bowl for his serving of rice, “I came for the dick, and stayed for the food!” Both Phaedra and a serving girl laughed hard.

“More like ‘came ON this dick’”, Ty said Soto voice, sliding a thick slab of roasted beef onto the rice.

“TY!”

***

As Julian went back for dessert, he saw firsthand what it truly meant to be “Ostracized”.

Dropping off his used bowl, he grabbed a clean one as he poked about the desserts. There were a few to choose from, and he was really eyeing a pudding one. Rice based, he could make out sliced peaches and golden raisins in a thick cream and it looked like it had a dusting of cinnamon or nutmeg (possibly both).

The line hadn't moved for some time, and he could hear grumbling up ahead. Impatient, he ducked to the side, wondering just what the holdup was.

A tall (but still shorter than Ty) man had stepped a foot back from in front of Ty, sneering. Julian would suppose he would be handsome if not for the look of pure hate he was giving Ty. The man had classical Umbrian coloring, with long, straight dark hair. He was dressed in very well-made clothing, putting Julian to mind of a wealthy Nobel.

“You. I don't want to be served by you. Get me someone else, and do it quick.”

Ty just folded his arms, a dark eyebrow going high. “And if I don't?”

“Then I will teach you some manners, filth. I am your superior, and you will do as told. You do not want to see the consequences for refusing.”

Julian changed his mind: this guy is fucking ugly.

Smirking, Ty stayed put. His face clearly screamed ‘make me’.
Mr. Stick-up-his-ass growled. “Why are you still standing there!? Listen here, you second-class citizen! All you ostracized animals are good for is serving your masters! Now, go and-” he stumbled, hand going up to his jaw. In shock, he looked for who punched him.

Julian panted, shaking the fist he just used to deck the asshole ripping into Ty. “You wanna say that again, cyka? I've got two fists, and I'm not afraid to use them!”

“He, he hit me! Did you see that? This mongrel put his hands on me! I'll have your head for that! Do you not know who I am!?!” The man's voice had gained a hysterical tone to it. “My mother's the current Warlady of Beryl's Pass!”

“Whoop-de-fucking-do. You were just hurling insults at the previous High Priestess of Hedonism's son. Not only that, but I just don't like asshole's on principal.”

“Sweetheart, calm down-”

“So? Just because his whore mother is dead doesn't- OOWWWW! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU!? GUARDS!”

“THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR INSULTING MY-, TY! PUT ME DOWN!” Julian flailed. At the second swing of Julian's fists, several bystanders finally took action and came between the two brawling men. Ty himself had actually leapt over the table he was manning, hooking his arms around Julian's waist before hauling a cursing doctor away.

Walking several paces away, Ty dumped a wriggling Julian down on a bench. The moment his arms left the other, Julian had jumped back onto his feet, trying to bypass Ty. “THERE'S MORE WHERE THAT CAME FROM, YOU ONE-EYED FERRET! YOU, YOU MANGE-COVERED, BOG-SCENTED WEASEL! I'LL HIT YOU SO HARD, YOUR CHILDREN WILL FEEL IT!” Falling back with a squawk, Julian tensed when Ty sat on him, straddling his lap. “Ty! You let me up this instant-”

“Julian, just breath and-”

“Don't you ‘Julian’ me! I will not sit there and let this, this boor treat you in such a disgusting manner! And those things he said about your MOTHER!? How dare-” the touch of fingers to his lips startled Julian into silence.

Ty was looking down at him, a soft look on his face that made Julian blush and squirm in confusion. “I'm Ostracized, Sweetheart. It...it's not fun. I knew it was a possibility that, coming to this caravan, someone would not like it.”

Julian ducked his face, blush intensifying. “Still, that doesn't make it right.”

“He's a soft city boy,” Serafina called out, pushing thru the gathered crowd. Coming to their side, she huffed. “City Umbra are notorious for being soft, spoilt babies. They wouldn't know a hard day's work if it smacked them in the face.” She picked up one of Julian's hands, inspecting the knuckles for damage. Behind her, Antonius could be heard dressing down the asshole who started it all. “That being said, all commer's are notified that Ostracized can be present, and they are to mind their manners.” Satisfied she only saw red skin, she released Julian with a nod. “So, what can I do to make it up to you?”

“Have Tony rip that guy's ass so wide open, every time he farts he dries his hair.”

Serafina barked a laugh as Ty moaned, a chastising ‘Julian…’ falling from his lips. “I'll be sure to
pass that on. I'll leave you two lovebirds alone.” After giving a pointed look to their ‘cozy’ position, she joined her husband.

***

Deciding to look for clues elsewhere, Cordelia figured that giving Rus’s book on summoning a full read was worth a shot. Written a few years before his accident, Rus let the humor he was rarely able to indulge in then shine thru, both in the title and the contents the book contained. Silly title aside, the book was well written. So much so that it was a required text for many magical universities that teach the subject.

Cordelia is ashamed to admit, but he has never read the book. Occasionally he would look for something covered in a section, but he has never set aside time, sat down, and read the book cover to cover.

And holy mother, was he missing out! Rus is fucking FUNNY! The allegories he uses, his play's on words, hell, even the encyclopedia of the more common deities is brilliantly worded and attention getting. When he was studying at the Academy of Magecraft in Epicuria, Cordelia would have done so much better in his Demonology course if he had something like this.

Reading each chapter, though, was like a punch to his chest. Rus had lived a very demanding life before his accident. While not cruel, he had been cold, closed off. Cordelia only realized he was so shut off when she saw his grand-nephew after he woke and saw how different he was. Rus's face had been so open and free. He had been babbling questions a mile a minute, trying to relearn who he and his family was, putting names and faces to facts that he knew but, at the same time, didn't. A few months later, he had been smiling and laughing in ways he hadn't since he was a teenager. Ionith had cried when she had returned from her last visit, confusing both Cordelia and Germanius with her absolute joy that Rus had no memory of many things at all.

Cordelia felt hollow inside, and for the first time ever, he's agreeing with Ionith. And that…

...that's fucking sad.

***

Manning her counter, Gilda was happy to report that tonight would be another busy one. Enough so that the plan she and her friends had hatched would be put into motion much sooner than expected.

The plan was simple enough: lament to her patrons the fact that her darling Prew did not have sense enough to leave little Asra and Ty alone. Those poor boys work so hard for Vesuvia, and Prew is being a brat for not respecting their request to be left alone.

If this doesn't work, Gilda has a final, more permanent, solution.

“Ah, Gilda! Another fine evening, yes!”

Bingo.

“Aye, that it is, Lady Schroll. The usual?” Gilda had already started making a cup of Drakarian Blue tea, a favorite of Schroll's. “Haven't seen ya for a while. The Mr. still alive?”

“Stop trying to get m'lady to put you in her husband's Will! We know that ain't happening!”

“Shut it, Bern,” Gilda shouted as Lady Schroll tittered behind a perfumed hand. “Ignore him,
“ma'am, he's just jealous you came to me first!”

“Worry not, Bern. I'll be by for some of your bread before I retire.”

“I'll throw in a loaf of my son's pumpkin bread if you come over now.”

“Oy!”

“What, and leave Gilda bereft? I think not.” Sipping her tea, the young Lady Schroll let out a sigh. Looking back at Gilda, she frowned, not liking the tired look on the elderly woman's face. “Gilda? Are you well?”

“Ach, don't worry yourself over little old me,” Gilda waved Schroll off with a negligible flap of the hand. “Just some of the youngsters, again.”

“Even so,” Schroll persisted, “it may help for you to speak of it.”

“Ah, I don't want to trouble you. You have enough on your plate as it is.”

“Gilda, c'mon! The Lady is an excellent listener! Besides, we all know you want to spill it!”

“Shut it, Bern!” Gilda got a loud raspberry for her comment, pulling a quiet laugh from Schroll.

“Okay fiiiiine. So, I'm sure m'lady knows of Asra and Ty, yeah?”

“But of course! Kind men, they are. Especially Tiberius. If he hadn't brewed that medicine for my daughter, I don't know where I would be.”

Gilda sighed. “Good, strapping young men, I say! Always willing to help with good heads on their shoulders. They've sent many a heart a blaze!”

“And loin a quiverin’—”

“Bern! As I was saying,” Gilda added a glare for good measure, “they have many an admirer. My granddaughter amongst them.”

Lady Schroll wrinkled her dainty nose. “Ah, yes. Prew.” She took another sip of her tea. “With her...attitude, I forget that the two of you are related.”

“Most people do,” Gilda said lowly. “As you may know, Prew has been hot for Ty for quite some time.”

“Embarrassingly so...”

“Quite. In fact, the other day, she accosted little Asra as he was on his way out the city! Demanding to know where Ty is and to have a letter passed on to him!”

Schroll gasped. “The audacity! Does Ty not have a new paramour? One of whom he has great affection for?”

“Indeed he does! The whole city knows, what with the way they carry on! And better yet, Prew is demanding that Ty dump his Sweetie and take her!”

“How low!” Lady Schroll, and many of the other local nobles, have long made their dislike for Prew known. Everything from her pretentious attitude to her mock-demure carriage causes their teeth to grind. Prew has made it no secret that she wishes to join their august ranks, but is unwilling to put
Hannah. Her strategy to ‘sleep her way’ to a title has assured she would never get one. She can stay down with the upper-middle class, thank-you.

“I KNOW! Thing is, try as I might, I haven’t been able to get her to leave the poor boy alone! She don’t listen to her own Da, let alone her Nan.” Gilda let out a growl of frustration, setting down her teapot more harshly than necessary.

“Now now, Gilda,” Schroll pat a wrinkled hand, “I’m sure things will change. After all, Prew’s number has been up for a while now. I’m sure things will start to turn up for you.”

After another hour or so of chatting and a few more cups of tea, Lady Schroll left. Armed with a tin of her favorite, some bread, and a few new blends to sample as a ‘thank-you for listening’ from Gilda, she scurried off for her bi-weekly dinner party.

“You,” Bern began, “are devious.”

“Aye.”

“You planned that, didn’t you?”

“Well, not on her being their, but yeah.” Having Lady Schroll show up was a boon for Gilda. Having one of the most influential socialites show up for tea and a chat just made Gilda’s job much easier. By the next morning, Prew is going to find that she won’t be as welcome in most places as she used to be.

“...I can’t wait to see the fallout.”

A raspy chuckle signaled Gilda’s agreement. Let the games begin.
Imagine Ty's full armor being similar to that of Geralt from the Witcher (mmmm, Geralt...)

The caravan got an early start after a late night. More items had been bought and sold, with more people turning up at the dressing carts to finish washing everything before it got too dark. As it stands, baskets of warm breakfast pastries had appeared in everyone's breakfast nook. Taking time for a proper breakfast would have put the caravan too far behind schedule.

Julian had been right with the kids, learning the differences between different crafts, their materials, and how to properly wash and care for them. A few things he knew from growing up in Nevivon, like how to care for his wool sweaters in winter and that no, you can't just use a scrubbing board for them what are you, crazy!?

Some of the final products were beautiful, and he was sorely tempted to buy a few things to send back to Pasha. He knows that she wouldn't be able to wear a fine lace shawl to work but damn it, his sister deserves to have nice things!

(A wall hanging being laid out took his breath away. He knows which wall Mama would hang it on, if he got it for her. But, he hasn't been home in soooo long. Would she even want anything from him?)

Ty was currently snoring away next to him, face buried in the pillows. One of the horses had gotten spooked last night, kicking out and destroying a wagon wheel. Ty and a few others nearby had rushed to shore the wagon up so it wouldn't tip after the sudden break, and it took a few hours to change it out. The horse had kicked so hard that the axle had bent. While a few people had propped the wagon up (and dear mother above but some of the caravan women are fucking stacked! Julian's heart had skipped a beat), Ty and another man had to rig a system of leather harnesses to pull the twisted metal off.

Julian moaned, covering his face with his hands as he went brick red. Ty and Hux, the other man, had to strip off their shirts at some point, they had gotten too sweaty. And the harness system? Gods, Ty looked delicious, and the way his muscles had bulged as he pulled? Hnnng…

There was no reason for those two to strap themselves into all that leather like they were war horses! How the dark, thick material had criss-crossed thick pectorals, hugged broad shoulders, wrapped around a strong sternum and down a defined back, just to be anchored to gorgeous thighs…

Julian bit his lip, peeking at a still sleeping Ty. When the other had came back after all of that, he was exhausted. Julian didn't want to bother him to take care of his hormone-ridden ass, but that sweat, and those marks left by the leather…

His hand slowly ghosted down his body, long fingers loosely wrapping around a half-hard erection. His breath hitched at the feeling, hand slowly pumping a few times. Ohhhh, if Ty woke up
and caught him…

He had to stifle a gasp. What if Ty did catch him? What if those dark eyes fluttered open, blinking lazily a few times before focusing on the dirty, filthy man next to him, touching himself as the cause of his lustful desires had slept?

He bit his thumb, his other hand moving up and down faster as Ty snorted, shifting a bit before dropping back off to sleep. Hearing the snoring dissipate but the deep and even breathing continue, Julian's hand grasped tighter, his motions quickening as beads of cum were caught and lubricated his fisted shaft. He could easily imagine the things Ty would say if he woke to this, the chastising and shameful things…

“Hmmmm, look at you. So naughty!” Oh, how his voice would rumble, that sleepy purr that would sound and always made Julian ‘perk up’ in the mornings. “I wonder. Is this a daily thing for you? Dirty boy.” Oh yes. Yes, Julian is a dirty, nasty, filthy boy. “Heh, I bet you are. Just look at how your touching yourself. How long have you been doing this?” Oh ho ho, wouldn't you like to know! Wanna help a guy out? “That can be arranged.” And with that, Fantasy Tiberius tongued the shell of a delicate ear.

Julian squeaked, eyes flying open in shocked realization. Oh no. Oh no no no no! That was Ty! Ty was awake! Ty had been talking to him this entire time! This wasn't Julian getting lost in the soup of sexual desire pumping thru his veins! Oh fuc-!

“Keep going, Sweetheart. I wanna see you spunk all over yourself. Make it nice and juicy…”

“Oh fuck Ty…”

“C’mon, babe. Show me what makes you feel good. You like gripping yourself tight?”

“Yes…” oh, Julian sounded pathetic.

“You like touching yourself? Where do you like being touched?”

“My, my thigh. Please, touch me!”

One of Ty's large hands slid down a sweat-covered torso, coming to rest high up on a slick inner thigh. Long fingers gripped firmly but gently the flesh under it while a thumb rubbed the sensitive ‘v’ created where leg and hip joined. “Do you want me to touch you...here?”

After licking his dry lips, Julian nodded like his life depended on it. “AH! Yes! Please! Har-,” his voice broke, embarrassed to voice the desire for Ty to grip him tight and leave bruises.

“What was that? Harder?”

“Yes…”

“I’ll do you one better, naughty boy.” As his hand dug into firm leg muscle, Ty buried his teeth in what was quickly becoming his favorite spot.

“YES! AHHHHHhhhh…” Julian's head dug into his pillows, eyes rolling as his jaw dropped in his gasp. His fist pushed down to the base of his shaft, thick jets of cum spurting from a red head. As fingers dug deep into his thigh and teeth into his neck, Julian jerked and shook, letting out a few choked shouts. His heels dug into the bed as he writhed and his hips undulated, and a part of him wished that Ty had mounted him before this.
He slowly came down from his orgasmic high, shuddering and breathing hard. “Fuck…” that had been intense. He's never cum so hard solo before. He could feel a wet tongue dancing along his fingers, licking him clean as the cum on his chest and belly started to cool. “Oh shit,” he sat up hard, “you, um, you've not, that is, I, um-”

“If you want to take care of me, it'll be on your hands and knees-” before Ty could finish, Julian had thrown himself forward.

On his knees and forearms, a furiously blushing Julian looked back over his raised rump. He was biting his lip and looked torn.

“Guess that answers that.” Pulling out their oil, Ty teased a slick thumb over a pink entrance. Rubbing back and forth a few times, he slowly pushed in. He hummed in satisfaction at how quickly and easily he went. “How do you want it? Nice and slow or hard and fast?”

“Hard. Fast. Just, please just, just give me-”

“A nice, thick nut?” Julian moaned loudly, causing Ty to smirk. “Yeah, I can do that. I'll give you the hottest, thickest one you'll ever get.” Slicking up his cock, he nuzzled it against creamy cheeks as he started working his fingers inside a hot hole. Julian had the audacity to try and push back, Ty slapping one cheek in punishment. A few more bucks later, and Ty had had enough.

Looking around, Ty spotted a coil of cord. Pulling it over, he yanked Julian's arms behind him, causing the man to moan at the rough treatment. With quick work and quicker fingers, Ty soon had Julian's arms tied behind his back in a variation of the cross-chest box tie.

“Yes. Yes, yesyesyesyessssssssss…” oh, when they have time Julian is going to have to ask Ty everything he knows about rope bondage. He has to know more than this! Julian's toes are curling at the possibility of getting tied up in a full harness and getting absolutely ravaged.

Ty hadn't even gotten a full two fingers deep before his Sweetheart started begging him so prettily to get stuffed. “Please…, fuck me. Make me feel good…”

“No matter how nice you beg, I'm not drilling you into the bed without preparing you properly.”

No matter what anyone else says about him, Ty is not some sexual animal. He's going to do Julian, and he's gonna do him good.

Frustrated, Julian mouthed the bedding with a growl. “But Tyyyyyy. It'll feel sooooo good to me. Please! Hurt me!”

Julian swears that he heard the moment Ty's sanity snapped. With a deep growl, Ty pulled his fingers out, set the oil aside, and slid home. Julian shouted, gasping in relieved joy as he bucked back onto the thick dick stuffing him full. His legs shook as sweet, delicious pressure just a hair's breadth away from genuine pain shot up his spine. Ty didn't even let him adjust before pounding away, one hand curled around Julian's bound forearms and the other braced on a bony hip.

At each meeting of hot flesh, Julian let out needy grunts and hissed ‘yes's’. The sounds of skin on skin clapped around the wagon, with curses and moans following.

Ty was closer to the end than he thought. Waking up to his sweet Julian touching himself, thinking of Ty as he found his pleasure was sooo... delicious. He hopes this is the first time Julian had done that, otherwise Ty would have to shame himself for not taking care of his dirty, dirty boy.

He grunted, cock twitching inside the hot, tight heat it was buried in, Julian moaning at the
sensation. Moving his hand from a now-bruised hip to fist tangled locks, Ty started grinding between shallow but quick thrusts. “C’mon. C’mon beautiful,” he grunted out between clenched teeth. “I’m not filling you with my spunk before you go off.”

Julian mewled, the side of his face buried firmly into the bedding from the fist in his hair. “Bu-u-u-u-ut I wa-a-a-ant it-t-t... oh SHIT!” His orgasm hit hard, pulling a shout from deep inside his chest. Absently, he could hear Ty cum with a curse, praising him for being ‘such a good, nasty piece of ass’.

Ty sat back with a huff, lungs working overtime to bring oxygen to his starved body. He took a moment to admire the bruises and bite marks he left on pale skin, along with a pinked ass. He was debating pulling out and mucking up the bedding more. Shrugging internally, he did. They have one more set before they’ll have to head to the laundry. Besides, Julian already came all over this set. Twice.

Grabbing a corner of the sheet, he cleaned-up a quaking Julian as best he could. Flinging aside the soiled fabric, Ty took a few moments to gather a rag and one of their water skeins. He took his time running the damp cloth over a blissed doctor, dropping the odd kiss on random spots. When satisfied, he tidied himself up, tossing the rag into the laundry.

Julian was still tied up, humming in contentment. He made a small, disappointed sound when Ty went to release him. “Please. Don’t. I...I like this.” An embarrassed flush bloomed on his face.

All Ty could do was chuckle. “Just let me know when you want out.” He curled around a content redhead, wrapping it around a svelte waist.

“So. How often do you put on a show?”

Julian groaned. He shoved his face into his pillow, huffing at the chuckle Ty gave. “Noooooo…”


“...not often. Um, that was. That was a first.”

“Oh thank Hedonism.” At Julian's questioning hum, he elaborated: “Hedonistic worship demands enthusiastic sexual congress between partners. If you ever, EVER need satisfaction, day or night, get me. I don't care if I'm asleep in the dead of night. Wake me up. Imma take care of you.”

Julian felt apprehensive. He's had previous partners say something similar, just to not keep their word. They would express disgruntlement at having ‘to deal’ with him after a hard day. One even bitched as they pulled him off, leaving Julian to feel like he was somehow broken.


“I don't kno-”

“Julian,” Ty sighed out, spooning closer to a apprehensive doctor. “I figured out pretty early on that you haven't been treated the best. Whatever you say won't be new. Now, what's up.”

“I've had previous partners complain that I'm too needy.” There. Julian said it.

“That's it?”

“...what?”
“That's it? What you just said. That's what they chose to bitch about?” Ty's ready to smack a hoe.

Julian's head whipped back around, brows pulled down. “Is that all your going to say? Ty, this is a ser-”

“Naw it ain't. They were a bunch of kids who had a piece of gold and didn't know what to do with it.” Pffft. Them people were stupid. Dumping a sweet, kind, caring, and funny man who was drop-dead gorgeous all because they couldn't keep up. They had to talk down to him to make themselves feel better. Fuckers. “I mean what I said: you want some dick? Smack my ass, roll me over, and slide onto the saddle. Make sure to hold on tight, 'cause I'll be bucking.”

“Tyyyyyyyy...” Julian moaned in embarrassment.

“Careful with that sound babe...”

“Ty, no.” He could feel Ty grow against his backside.

“Ty yes!”

***

Asra has a break! Finally, some progress! He's so happy, he could jump for joy! Now, they just need to figure out a way to get her here without, um, causing some unneeded chaos.

Tubor, Lucille, and himself had discounted the last-living descendant of Aoife. He's currently unavailable, and he hadn't been at the top of the list anyway because he was the son of the youngest daughter of a youngest daughter. The Pict's are matriarchal and matrilineal. If there was anything to be inherited, it was gone before he was even a dirty thought.

But his mother may have something. He may not have or know anything, but she might. She may have a way to get into that house without him being knocked on his ass. Asra had tried to magic his way into the house after he came back from Nopal, just to get rebuffed. In addition to the cult having a few Master Wardsmith's in their ranks, there were some old protections clinging to the house. He actually spent a few hours probing the net of magic draped over the home, confused as all fuck at what he had seen.

There had been several layers of protections over the house. He could almost see a history of the house just looking at them. He can conclude with almost 100% certainty that the oldest layer was anchored around the time Aoife lived there. The magic was too old, too alien to be done by anyone living in Vesuvia at the time. If Ty was here, Asra would be trying to piggyback on his own senses, but that's not possible. And Lucille, while they have similar flavors of magic, just doesn't have the power or finesse for him to do the same with her. Trying to do so with Tubor will produce, explosive, results.

He shudders every time he remembers that. Not only did he need a cleansing bath, but the cost to repair the room at the local Circle guildhall still makes his heart stop. Ty didn't let him live that one down for months.

As it is, they want to keep the house standing. He theorizes that there is three ways they could get in: unravel the original layer of protections, causing the rest to fall away, have a living descendant Grant them entry, or brute force their way in.

Trying the first will take a lot of time and energy that they just don't have. Asra doesn't really have the know-how, and he doubts that anyone else in Vesuvia does, as well. The second is the most preferable option, hence why he had been trying to track down Aoife's descendants. Just having one
present would solve half their issues. Thing is, there are only three viable candidates that have been found. The male is currently unreachable, and the oldest female is currently on her deathbed. The third one would cause a lot of trouble, politically speaking. Asra wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he caused her or her son's death. That would be a fine ‘Thank-you’ for helping to take down a dangerous cult. ‘Hey, thanks for helping Vesuvia take down one of the most dangerous cults that has ever existed. Now, due to crimes committed against Vesuvia, you're to be hung!”

Yeah, no thanks.

And going the brute force rout will just spell out trouble. Going in swords drawn will just cause the group to go deeper underground. A few unwise rulers found that out the hard way. Nopal used to be part of a territory that Vesuvia absorbed after it fell to the Cult of Worms centuries ago. Nadia knows her history and refuses to take chances. So, slow it is.

Now, how to bring this clusterfuck up to Nadia…

***

“So. This is Vesuvia.”

“Yep.”

“It's got a nice wall. Just look at that wall. It's beautiful!”

“Mhm.”

“Why, I could just sit out here all day. What a grand example of engineering!”

“We're going in, Gothicus.”

“*huff* Fiiiiinnnnee…”

Papers presented, Theodosia and her brother left the docks. Shiphands, dock workers, and passengers scurried about. The sun, while still high in the sky, was soon going to start it's decent.

The two had left Serenissima the day after they received their father's letter. Strong headwinds had slowed their ship, but they still made good time. If they can get out of this throng of people, Valora should be waiting for them at the main dock entrance.

“What the hell does Rus see in this shithole, anyway?” Gothicus mugged a face at a woman who shot him a distasteful look for his language. Flipping his hair back, he followed his sister. “I mean, just look at it! Boring colors. Boring shapes. Boring people. And that palace!? One word: tacky.”

“Bruh. Like, seriously? Chill. We have shit to do and I won't let you muck things up for Papa.”

“‘Muck’? ‘Muck’!? When have I EVER mucked things up? For Pa or anyone!??”

Spinning on the ball of her foot, Theodosia pinned her twin with a look. “Oh, I don't know. Maybe that time we went to that wedding? The one for Princess Ghiradel? The one where you seduced said Princess, then her mother the Queen, somehow broke the peace treaty between Houses Leticia and Martin, stole the sacramental wine, and dangled from the chandelier in naught but your socks while the final vows were being exchanged!”

“Don't forget the moose.”
“The moose? The MOOSE!?” She shot her brother a look of incredulity. “Out of everything that happened at that disaster of a wedding, you chose to get hung up on the moose,” Theodosia facepalmed. “How did we stop them from declaring an all-out war on us, again?”

“Oh! I fucked the King!”

That was news to Theo. She had no idea that that happened. “How did you convince Papa to agree to let you do that?”

“Well, he didn’t.” Gothicus started walking again, forcing Theo to jog a few steps to keep up.

“Didn't what?”

“Agree.”

“Why didn't he agree? You still did it, right?”

“Well, yeah, I did. But I did it anyways after Pa said ‘no’.”

“And he said no because…?”

“Well, me starting off my idea for reparations with ‘I fucked my way into this, I'll fuck my way out!’ probably didn't help.”

“...were you dropped on your head as a baby?”

“Wow, Theo. Wow. Really gets me here. In the heart. Great way to show your brother some love.”

“Ma should have swallowed you.”

“If she did, you wouldn't be here too, dummy.”

“Or let us run down her leg. The world would be a better place.”

“Pfft. You wouldn't know what to do without me.”

***

The caravan pushed on thru lunch, not stopping at their usual time. If they had done so, they caravan would have had to stop naught but an hour later.

The further and further the caravan got from Shepherd's Stop, the more greenery there was. Aside from a few small copse of trees, most of the path from Vesuvia to Shepherd's had been wide expanses of fields. Now, lush and fragrant grasses dotted the sections between tree trunks, with everything in full bloom.

Sitting on the back steps of the wagon, door open, Julian breathed in deeply. While the scents outside were vastly different, he was still filled with the same feelings of both excitement and contentment he felt out on the high seas. Having a steady place called home was a wonderful thing, but the feelings he gets from traveling, seeing and experiencing new things?

That was a whole different animal.

Maybe, after all this is over? Maybe he can convince Ty to go on further adventures.
Legs restless, Julian turned back to a spinning Ty. Not wanting to interrupt the man while he was ‘plying’, he hesitated.

“What's up, Sweetheart?”

Julian got a case of the warm fuzzies. Ty's wasted on him. “I'm just going to trot on over to Phaedra's. See how she and the squeaker's are doing.”

Receiving a distracted ‘kay’, Julian hopped off and started ambling down the line. As he passed moving wagons, he started kicking random stones on the roadside. Coming up to her cart, he swung himself onto the back steps and rapped the door with his knuckles. Moment's later, a grubby face peaked up at him before lighting up. “Jul'e'an!”

“Hey there! How's your Mama?” Pandemonium could be heard in the background. Children screeching and fighting, with Phaedra's voice carrying over it all.

The little boy frowned. “Indi's bein’ a butt. He won't feed, and Mama's tired!”

“Well then, why don't you ask her if I can come in? I'll try to help her out.”

“MAMA!” Julian jumped, forgetting just how loud a child's lungs can get. “JUL'EAN'S HERE! CAN I LET'EM IN!?”

“Oh, please!”

“Mama said yes,” and the boy swung the door wide open, almost smacking Julian in the face before dashing back inside.

Closing the door behind him, Julian could see why Phaedra looked tired: Indigo was buzzing about, going from window to window by the beds, growling the whole time. His little wings flexed and fluttered, hands balled up into fists. A few of his siblings tried to pick him up, just to get screeched at. The next youngest was crying as a result, with her older brother trying to comfort her as Phaedra tried her hardest to corral Indigo. Meanwhile, the other kids were bouncing around, causing a special type of chaos that only the young could.

“Looks like I showed up just in time!” And with that, Julian plucked up a pissy Indigo. After a few moments of angry chirping and hissing, the cherub calmed.

Minutes after Indigo settled, the crying little girl did as well, tear-stained face finally relaxing as she dropped into a nap. Phaedra sighed as she sat down on a bench, rocking her daughter. “Thank you so much!”

“Happy to help, although I must admit, um, just, ah, why are you going alone?” A woman with six children by herself? That spells disaster!

Seeing her face fall, Julian panicked. “Oh no! I'm sorry! You don't have to answer! I just-!”

“No. Your fine. Just, just brought up bad memories.” Sighing, Phaedra got up to put her little girl down. On her way back over, she plucked a waving toy sword from one hand and swatted another child's behind that was ripping apart a chest of drawers. She sat back down with a grunt, clearly exhausted. “My husband...thought he deserved better. Decided it was not worth his time...left.”

She scrubbed her hands over her worn face, huffing as she leaned back. “The asshole chased me for years, and after Ma and Da married me off to him, we had our first. Then a year later, I got pregnant again. And again. I told him after the third one that he was going to have to do something,
we can't afford to keep having kids. Derm just scoffed, ‘A man is entitled to his wife's body! I will take what I see fit.’ So, more kids.”

“Oh hells no.” Julian was livid.

She just nodded. “Umhm. I didn't want to marry him in the first place. All Da could see was the dowry. Then, Derm started straying. Kept saying that I was no longer ‘appealing’ and the like. Called me a failed wife because I had gotten fat and kept getting knocked up.”

Bouncing a cooing cherub on his knee, Julian growled. “He does know that it takes two to, ah, ‘tango’?”

“Pfft. He doesn't care. After a few years of him going about and sowing his oats and me getting shamed for not keeping him in check, I met someone.” She smiled, face warming, “he was so handsome! Tall like Derm, but not mean. He treated me so politely! Wonderful manners, always had a neat appearance!” Taking back a calmed Indigo, she continued. “A few months after he moved into town, he asked me out for the night. I know I shouldn't have gone, but I was so lonely! Derm was a piece of shit and my town was horrid.” Her face became both sad and wistful. “Is it...is it wrong that I just wanted a single night, where I was treated like a person?”

Julian knows where this is going. “No, it is perfectly natural. You had shed literal blood, sweat, and tears for a man that wasn't worth it.”

Phaedra's face had fallen again. “So, we went out to the pub. Had dinner, a bit of dancing, some drinks. Next thing I knew, we were back at his place, testing out his bed springs. Everyone in town the next day knew what happened. Got called horrible things. Faria got ran out, a mob descending on his home,” she sobbed. “He, um,” she choked. “He was found the next day.”

“Oh, no. Honey no…” Julian wrapped his arms around her shoulders in a loose hug.

Wiping her tears, she sniffed. “Derm told me that if there's a child, I had better hope that it looks like him.”

“And he didn't.”

Phaedra barked out a bitter laugh. “No. Not by a long shot.” She didn't elaborate on what happened next, Julian knew. Most towns will tolerate an unfaithful husband, but a wife? Unacceptable.

Collecting herself, she continued. “My older sister had run off a few years before. Got herself a good man. I sent her a letter. Had to do so in secret, otherwise I'd be worse off than before. By the time I got her reply, Derm had washed his hands of me. Had a new wife and everything. I had to work hard to save what little money was left after taking care of the bills and kids to get a wagon going out this way. Antonius and Serafina are lifesavers. Gave me my money back after they found out why I was going so far.”

Looking about the wagon, Julian could see that most of the younger children had drifted off for their naps. Getting up, he started picking up and putting lolling bodies onto beds. Phaedra had started neating up the mess they had made. With two capable adults working, it was only the matter of minutes to return things to a semblance of order.

Taking back Indigo, Julian left Phaedra to rest. He made quicktime getting back to his wagon, Indigo alternating between happy, warbling coo's and hisses. Getting inside, he could see Ty putting a few foodstuffs together, the girls munching away at scraps on their plates.
“Darling, is there anyway to soothe the chicky? His bouncing between happy and mad is driving poor Phaedra up the wall.”

Looking up, Ty's brow furrowed as he thought. With a hum, he finished their sandwiches before sliding a plate Julian's way. Pulling one of their bags from under the bed, he dug around before pulling something out. Walking back over, he held out a feather that Julian recognizes.

Indigo was NOT having it. He did not like that feather. His wee wings snapped out, shaking. The fine movements produced a faint rustling sound, like cloth rubbing against itself. His hair stood up and he let out a long, continuous hiss, just this edge shy of being an actual shriek. Julian winced as he felt sharp nail's dig into his forearms.

“WELL, THAT'S A NO,” Ty had to shout to be heard over the noise. Poor Mazel and Tov were whining, trying to get under the bed as they covered their ears. Putting the feather behind his back, Indigo cut off abruptly. Ty pulling it back out set the cherub off again. Going back and forth a few times, Ty nodded to himself. “That, actually explains quite a bit.”

“Please don't do that again,” Julian begged. He stood ramrod straight, arms covered in red marks from sharp baby claws. His hair was disheveled and his visible eye was wide. He looked like someone who had received a terrible shock, and it isn’t far off the mark.

“Sorry, Sweetheart, but it was a valuable experiment. Poor thing's nearly feral. Phaedra will need a fully-actualized Incubus to help her out, and fast.”

Plopping a now-quiet Indigo onto their fresh bed, Julian picked up his plate with a quiet ‘thank-you’, biting into the thick bread with gusto. “So,” he said between bites, “wha’ does tha’ mean for Phe'dra?”

“Do we know where she's going? I could ask Abraxas if he knows anyone who can help.”

Sipping some water, Julian hummed. “She's staying with her sister and her husband.”

Ty had quickly polished off his own sandwich, debating making anything else before deciding against it. “Hmmm. I best wait for us to get there. Don't want them to open the door for milk just to get a faceful of cock and feathers.”

“Will knowing Indigo's father's name help? Phaedra told me it was Faria.”

Ty whistled. “Wow. Wasn't expecting that!”

“Hmm?”

“That's not an Incubus name. That's a Succubus name. And Phaedra's Ma is lyin’ about who her daddy is.”

“I'm lost. Wait!” Seeing Ty open his mouth to explain, he scrambled for a notebook and pen. Flipping madly to an empty page, he sat in rapt attention.

Ty just smiled at the sight Julian made. “So,” he began, “a Succubus is the non-presenting child of an Incubus. Gender doesn't matter. Boy or girl, if there are no wings or horn nubbins, but the dad is an Incubus, the child's a succubus. End of story.”

“So,” Julian scribbled down a few things. “How does it work out? Like, if I were to draw out a Punnet Square?”
Ty gestured to the notebook. Getting it passed over, he created a grid. After a minute or two, he passed it back over to Julian before starting to point to things with the tip of the feathered pen. “So, offspring. A Incubus x Human pairing will create either a cherub or a succubus. A Human x Succubus pairing will create what we call a Muse. Incubus x Succubus has an equal chance to create a cherub, succubus, or muse. And a Succubus x Succubus pairing will ALWAYS create a cherub.” There’s more ways these pairings can go, but Ty doesn’t want to burden Julian with so much info so quickly.

“...that last one doesn’t make sense.” And it doesn’t. Succubus x Succubus should be either a ‘Muse’ (whatever that is) or another Succubus.

“Incubus genetics don’t make a lick of sense. And this only applies to humans interbreeding with Incubi. Toss in things like nymph's and shit just goes ape.” Thank the gods that nymph’s spend most of their time as tree's or animal's. Incubi like to forcibly grab Life by the horn’s and fuck it every which way hard. Both beings are troublesome on their own. Throwing them together just to see what happens causes nothing but insanity.

Ty doesn't want to see a repeat of the Antikitherain Time Break anytime soon. Tatiana the Brash wanting to fuck a god and it's ensuing shenanigans isn't worth the clean up. Her Sire Stratius still hasn't lived that down.

Wanting to know the story behind the look Ty was currently sporting, Julian ignored that for right now. “And a Muse?”

“Someone who has Incubus ancestry. They don’t have much magic aside from a minor Charming ability, but are hot pieces of ass. You familiar with the Trajan War?”

“Wait. Helena was a Muse!?”

“Ey-yup.”

“So wait...you said Phaedra's Ma had to be lying about the father? Why do you figure that?”

“Because of what Indigo is. Phaedra, while a lovely woman, just doesn't feel like a normal human. And an Incubus father wouldn't let his family wander unprotected or sell them to a husband. They get called possessive fucks, but they take care of their families. Phaedra's Ma had to have bounced on some other man's dick to get a succubus child.” She's also pretty damn fertile. Incubi have large families, with multiple wives, and therefore multiple children. This carries over to any succubus offspring.

By this point, Julian had already filled several pages of his notebook with his scrawls. Mind going at lightspeed, he had already added notations to get more information about this and that, drawn arrows to denote similar families of information, and had already made a simpler version of Ty’s square. Leaning back, he tapped his lower lip with his pen, eyebrows drawn as he thought. Hearing some rustling, he turned to see Indigo had crawled over, face screwed up and eyes locked onto Ty.

“Don't even think of it, little bit.”

Grunting at the admonishment, Indigo sat on his butt, eyes still glued to Ty. He kept twisting and bobbing his head, like an owl trying to focus on his quarry.

“What is he-”
“Sizing me up. Birdbrain's trying to decide if he could take me on. Incubi are predators, and cherubs about this age start developing superior eyesight. Looks like he's still trying to figure it out. They also go thru bouts of unadulterated stupidity. Not too often, and nowhere near the frequency that they'll get to when teenagers, but, eh, it happens.”

After a few more minutes, Julian jotting down his observations the entire time, Indigo seemed to come to a decision. He heaved himself onto unsteady feet, stood as tall as he could, and started snapping his little wings open as wide as he could. After a short pause, he'd close them before unfurling them again. Each time he did, a slight breeze was felt, along with a faint *snap!*.

“And this is…?”

“A territorial display. Kind of like what you would see happen between two pheasants. Which gives me info on what type of Incubus Faria's Sire or Grandsire would have been.” The display was similar to that of one of the Great Pheasant breeds. Depending on the type, little Indigo will be sporting some nice plumage when he gets older.

They were interrupted by the wagon coming to a stop. Poking his head out the door, Ty could see that they had stopped by an offshoot road. Looking down the tree lined path, he could make out what looks like a farm. Nose tickling, he took a deep breath before letting it out with a surprised cough.

Well shit. Looks like Phaedra's stop is an Incubi homestead. Fuck.

“What is it? A bandit issue? Wagon wheel?”

“Nope,” Ty added a loud *pop!* to the last syllable. “Looks like Indigo will get his help after all.” Would have been nice to have some warning. Ty'll need to scramble for a gift to present and scrub himself up, and do it quick. Wouldn't do to get his teeth fed to him because he pissed off a cantankerous old bird.

Ducking back in, he poured water into a basin, grabbing a washcloth and a bar of mild soap. “We'll need to scrub up. Face, pits, and groin. Need to look as nice and presentable as possible and shit! We need a gift! Fuck!”

“Ty?”

Ty turned, seeing the worried look on Julian's face. “Sorry, Sweetheart. Just, uh, did Phaedra tell you we were stopping at an Incubi's place?” Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes…

“No.” Fuck! “Why?”

“Cause I got a whiff of fully actualized, get's the job done, ‘come and get summa this’, grown Incubus dick.”

“Ty!” Julian wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Was that description really necessary!?”

“Uh, yeah? Trust me, just from his scent, this guy's been around for a loooong time. May predate this Era.”

“Annnnnnd?”

“He's probably watching us right now. And can smell the amount of sex we've had. And, let's be frank, is trying to think of as many different ways to peel you away from my side and get you into the small harem he's got going on.” Featherhead better not. He might die, but Ty'll punch the fucker
right in the beak if he tries anything.

***

It was a dressed-to-kill Tiberius and a more subdued Julian who were escorting Phaedra's cart down the lane. Ty had broken out additional weapon's and over-armor to go with his basic Citadelian loadout. Chain mail panels had been belted on at strategic sites, with leather and mail pauldrons sat over his shoulders. He had passed over to Julian a thin mail shirt to go between his undershirt and leather chest piece, as well.

Indigo was currently screeching up a storm. He had been passed back to Phaedra, and his caterwauling could be faintly heard even thru the sturdy wood of the wagon. Mazel and Tov were a few yards ahead, looking back occasionally as they went.

As they got closer, Julian took in the sights. Something about the atmosphere made him feel lethargic yet energized at the same time. Everything looked brighter, more lively: the sunlight streaming thru the branches over their heads, the tall grasses on the sides of the road, even the bits of sky he could see looked bluer. It was almost like everything was in hyperfocus and oversaturated in color.

Must be related to that whole Force of Nature thing Incubi have going on.

Coming onto the farm proper, a large house could be seen. Long and sprawling, it was two stories high and painted a soft white with grey brick accents. Stretching out in front of it were rows and rows of crops, many already looking ripe for the picking despite the fact that it was a few months too early and holy shit that pumpkin's huge!

Trundling along between plots, dozens of people of various ages and sex's could be seen tending to the soil. Young children darted about, playing some sort of game as their elder siblings gathered baskets and took them to open-air shed's for processing. The air was thick with the scents of fresh turned earth and of sweet things.

A large shadow flashed overhead. Julian's head darted up to try and track it, one hand going to the pistol Ty gifted him. All he could make out was that it was large and winged. A roc?

It drifted down behind the farmhouse, a plume of dust and hay getting kicked up. The ground shook faintly, like something large and heavy landed. This had to be a roc! Why was nobody panicking!?

"It's fine, babe. Just the Incubus."

That was the Incubus!? Holy shit he was HUGE! Standing, he would tower a full sternum and up over anyone here, at least!

...how does the sex work? If he's the same build as a person, just scaled up, then that would go the same for his, uh, bits.

Oh no. Oh no! Those poor women. Those poor, poor women-

"I'll tell you more later. For now, look lively."

Coming out of the house was a woman, about average height. As she got closer, Julian could see that she was entering her twilight years. Her greying hair was pulled back in a sensible bun and she had a well-stained apron over her simple dress. Other people started to gather, setting aside tools and baskets. A curious child scuttled close, hand out to pet Tov. He got a happy lick for his troubles.
“Noon, gentleman. What ya here for?”

Ty stepped forward, holding out a sheet of paper. “My partner and I are just here to escort a newcomer and to return her wagon. Shouldn't be more than an hour of your time, ma'am.”

She had taken the paper, eyes flying as she took in the information. She broke out into a smile as she got to the end, “ah, little Phaedra and her brood! We've been expecting her. EH, SOMEONE GET SCYLLA! TELL'ER HER SIS IS HERE!”

“I heard, I heard! Well, let's get her settled.” A young brunette woman, looking very similar to Phaedra, if only a few years older, came trotting up from a shed. “Where is she?”

Walking to the backend of the wagon, Ty knocked. Opening the door, Phaedra peeked out shyly. Little Indigo was still putting up a mighty fuss, causing a few gasps to sound. “Um, Scyllie?”

Scylla darted up the steps, smushing her sister in a hug. Soon, both were clinging to each other, a few tearful words being exchanged. Eventually, Scylla coaxed her sister down and out, the remaining kids staying close to their mother's skirts.

Before being surrounded by the other's, Julian took Indigo from Phaedra. Bouncing the hissing bundle of feathers in his arms, he watched as questions and answers flew like lighting from each adult. Feeling a tug at his leg, Julian looked down just to jump in surprise.

Not looking a day over twelve, a boy with both wings and horns stood at his side. He shared coloring with Indigo, but his facial structure was slightly off? The face was a bit too sharp, the eyes a bit to large. If you transformed a bird into a human, Julian imagines it would look something like this.

It was oddly compelling…

“Ey”, Ty snapped his fingers in front of Julian's face.

With a jerk, Julian blinked hard. “Wha?”

“You okay?”

“Um, yeah. Yes, yes I am.” What was that all about? He felt dazed.

“Someone,” Ty pointedly glared at a now-bashful boychild, “is a bit of a Mesmer. And needs to watch what he's doing.”

The boy ducked his face, allowing Julian to see that the small horn's starting to curl up from the hairline were covered in a thin layer of velvet, similar to a buck's. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Ummmmm. I bet you are,” Ty drawled. “And you're old enough to not do that. So, why'd you try it?”

The boy started playing with his fingers, rocking back and forth on his toes. “Um. Your friend? He's pretty…”

“And that still don't make it okay. Where's your Ma?” Ty was gonna sic her on him. Nobody needs a baby Incubi on a power trip.

That remark got Ty a glare. “Your not the boss of me! 'M not telling!” He crossed his arms, wings arching in aggression.

“Imma tell your Daddy.”
As Phaedra and Scylla got reacquainted, the homestead Matron, Alana, directed Ty and Julian to steer the wagon over to the far side of the farm. Various houses had been erected, providing homes to the farm hands and their families. Some were larger or smaller depending on the needs of the group, but the one set aside for Phaedra was the largest.

Once in front of it, a group of hands appeared. In short order, they had Phaedra's things unloaded and neatly stacked in the home's family room. As the hands walked off, one of the men said that if Phaedra needed help getting things moved to just yell.

Julian looked about more, trying to commit to memory as many details about an Incubus homestead as possible. Ty had mentioned that Incubi can have many wives, so it's not too far fetched to assume that many of the people here are related to the Incubus in some way.

Which is kind of odd. Many of the women present were kind of...plain. Not that all relationships are built on looks, and no one is ugly! Just, um…

Well, Julian just thought that there would be a hell of a lot more total knockouts. House Principia has a lot of Incubus heritage, and he hasn't met one that's short of stunning, yet. And Phaedra and her sister Scylla are pretty enough, but in a ‘girl next door’ kind of way.

Maybe he's just not seeing it? After all, Julian has been surrounded by Umbra constantly for about the last week. And no one can hold a candle to Ty. Is it his own bias?

“You're looking confused, babe. What's up?”

“I don't get it.”

“Hmm?” Ty looked in the direction Julian was, trying to see what he sees. “Ah, I get it. The Plain Janes.”

“Exactly!” Julian gestured to the fields with a broad sweep of his arm. “I'm not trying to be difficult, or mean spirited, but why would an Incubus settle for someone that I wouldn't spare a glance at?” From what little Julian knew before this whole trip (peeking thru Germanius's books), having a Incubus spouse is prestigious. And what he has read led him to believe that beauty is quite the qualifier to get an Incubi’s attention.

“Compatibility.”

“How so?”

“This guy's older. Fully mature. And from the size of this farm, he's probably got nearly a dozen husbands and wives. When younger, Incubi are very much like humans: get dirty with someone pretty. When it comes time to build a family, they look for a good partner: dependable, hardworking, a nice personality, and sexual flow. Just know that behind every plain face is a strong, sturdy freak in the sheets.”

“Surely there must be more than that. It sounds more like a business arrangement than love.”

Ty let out a slight chuckle, dropping a kiss to a cool cheek. “Sap. But, despite my description, all of the spouses and children are well-looked after. After all, a night of lust is for only a night: trust and companionship last forever.” And worth their weight in gold. Looks and figures fade, faster for
women who birth. Ty would take someone who's there for him and makes him laugh over a hot piece of tail any day.

And with Julian, he may get to have both.

***

It was shortly before Ty and Julian were to leave that the Incubus made an actual appearance. The only reason the two stayed so long was because Scylla wanted to see them fed, a way to say ‘Thank you’ for helping out her sister.

Julian and Ty agreed that she makes wonderful stuffed bread. And her veggie soup was to die for.

The two were on the porch, speaking with Matron Alana (First Wife of the Home) when some of the youngsters playing out front started shrieking with laughter. A whole herd of them shot off to the side of the house, begging for hugs and to be picked up. Both men could hear a rumbly chuckle before more shrieking.

Coming around the house was a very tall gentleman. Seven foot easily, if not more so, and no where near the size of the creature Julian saw earlier. He was broad shouldered with a tapered waist, long legs propelling him faster than the ambling strut he had would belay. He was dressed in dark clothing that didn't look out of place for a farm.

When Julian got a glimpse of his face, he went cross-eyed and his brain decided to stop working. Even giving himself a shake and looking again didn't help. His eyes were saying one thing, his brain another, and his gut something completely different.

Such sensations were making him nauseous.

Taking a few moments to recenter himself, Julian tried a third time to focus. He succeeded.

The Incubus...didn't look like much. He was very, um, homely. Julian is sure that some would find him somewhat attractive…

He was fucking ugly. Julian can't lie to himself anymore. The Incubus was balder than an egg, had very bushy eyebrows, protuberant, hooded eyes, and weird folds of skin under his eyes and over his nose, a nose that looked more like a beak than anything. If it wasn't for the warm smile he was shooting the children hanging off his shoulders and arms, Julian would have thought he was a Baba Yaga.

Scylla walked up, standing on her toes, face upturned for a kiss. The Incubus put down the kids he was carrying, brought up his hands and-

...oh.

Julian can now see what the others do. Mr. Incubus was cradling Scylla's face like it was the most delicate, treasured thing in existence as he gave her a soft kiss.

As Julian watched the Incubus greet his family, he didn't notice the look Ty was giving him.
Naw, Julian isn't shallow. Just his own personal experience with how other's have treated him with a combo of how he views Ty (that is to say, a visual feast).
Of Sword Fights and Skullduggery

Chapter Summary

Drama, duels, and death.

Chapter Notes

Warning for mentions of blood, stabbing, and mild gore. For additional trigger warnings, please read the note posted at the bottom before reading the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Incubus stared at Julian.

Julian stared back, a slightly confused look on his face. How did this guy go from huge and feathered to slightly less huge and plucked?

The Incubus's head cocked to the side, very much like the birds they emulate. The folds of skin over his nose and under his eyes looked a lot like the caruncle that many vulture's have. Julian jumped as the Incubus *cooed* at him.

The only reason he stopped is because Scylla elbowed his side with an admonished *'Hieronymus!'*. He immediately turned to nuzzle his wife before he noticed that she had the ear of the Mesmer twisted between her fingers.

"*Your* son tried to bewitch Mr. Julian without his permission! Give him a talking to!"

Hieronymus cast a disappointed glare at his child, who had the audacity to look shamed. "Come along then, Scipio," he murmured. As the now-named Scipio shuffled towards the house, Hieronymus aimed a swat at the youngsters behind, starting to berate Scipio in their native tongue. Scipio covered his now stinging butt, mouthing back at his Da and getting another swat for his trouble.

Scylla sighed. "Sorry about him. Scipio has always been a very willful child."

"I would say don't worry about it, but we both know that that would be an empty platitude. Ty said that Cherub's can go thru bouts of idiocy. Looks like he's starting one." Now Julian is wondering what else they can get up to at that stage.

"Thank you for your understanding. The next time either of you come out this way, please, feel free to stay a day or two." With a slight curtsy, Scylla walked into the house, no doubt to join her husband in disciplining their son.

"You ready to go, Sweetheart?" Turning, Julian could see Ty standing a few feet away, a miniature version of Phaedra's cart under his arm. He kept shooting suspicious looks at the house and shifting from foot to foot.
“Are you, are you okay?”

Ty snorted. “’m good. Just, let’s just leave before I do something stupid.” It was taking Ty a lot of self-restraint not to go and pick a fight with Hieronymus. It couldn't even be considered a fight anyways, the Incubus would use him as a toothpick.

With a whistle, both men and the dogs started walking back up the lane, a few farewells following them (little Indigo starting to whine, with Phaedra doing her best to comfort him). After a few feet, a loud ‘WAIT!’ caused them to slow up. Sprinting up to them, one of the farm hands wheezed, bending over with his hands on his knees as he caught his breath.

“Are you okay sir?” Julian was slightly worried. The farmhand, while not elderly, was older. Julian didn't want him to keel over.

“I’ll, haaa, I'll be fine. Hooooooooo!” After a few moments he stood, breathing easier than before but not by much. “Young man,” he motioned to Ty, “I believe that you're a member of the Citadel, yes?”

“I am. What is your concern, citizen?”

“Up the road, quite a bit passed us, there's a mine. About once a fortnight a few of them would come down, trading for food.”

“Let me guess; their overdue.”

The man nodded. “By a lot. Every other Friday they come by. A few of the boyo's are sweet on our girls, so them not showing up is strange.”

Julian turned to Ty. “Why wouldn't the Incubus have said anything?”

Ty hummed. “The mine could be outside of his territory. Or he thought it dried up. Scipio being a brat was also a distraction.” Ty addressed the farmhand, “is there anything else I should know? Critters in the area? Bandits?”

“Nothing aside from the usual wildlife. We haven't found more dead animal's than normal, and the bear population is pretty stable.”

“Any earthquakes?” Mines can have trapped gas pockets. An earthquake, even if small, could send a spark. All it takes is one…

“Nope. Nor any unusual travelers. The mine is open pit, as well. Not too big, either. A large vein of copper was found years back, and it was mostly along the surface.”

Ty hummed, fingers drumming on the miniature cart. “I'll see what I can do. I'm currently on another, high-priority assignment, so I may need to send this one in. Will hawks be permitted?”

“Most of our non-magic communication is done via bird. Just, uh, don't use a carrion bird.”

Ty grinned. “Let me guess, Hieronymus?”


A snuffle from one of the dogs sounded. Ty sighed. “Well, I'll see what can be done. If I can't do anything, I'll send word along with whom I'll contact. You may get a message from either Vesuvia or Shepherd's Stop.”
“Thank you so much!”

***

Germanius was sat on the veranda, a chilled bottle of wine in a bucket next to him. It was another unfruitful day of investigations, this time his target being the Palace staff. Aside from the fit's Lucio had been throwing for the last few years, many of the servants couldn't tell him much. Most had started their job's just before or after Lucio's murder, the Palace having had a somewhat high turnover rate due to the Count's persnickety demands.

He needs more people. Cordelia is wrapped up in tracking Julian's step's from the day of the grisly deed and seems to have run into a wall, Valora is somewhat stymied, due to her unusual appearance, and Germanius himself is stuck in a deadlock between Nadia and Lucio.

“DADDY WHERE ARE YOU!? PAY ATTENTION TO ME NO- OWWWWW! WHAT THE FUCK, THEO!?”

“Why did I ever have kids,” he grumbled out a sigh. “It'll be fun, Pallas said. They'll make it all worthwhile, she said. Bah!” Grunting, Warlord Germanius heaved himself from his chair. As he trotted to the doors, he transformed into Exasperated Father Germanius. “Gothicus! Indoor voice, please!”

He needs a drink.

***

Theodosia was not impressed at what she saw. She and Gothicus literally just walked past the front gates with no one stopping them. Same as when they entered the Palace itself.

She wanted to punch something.

Grabbing the arm of a passing maid, she barked. “Where the hell is the Captain of the Palace Guard!? And why isn't he doing his job!? For all you know, I could be an assassin!”

“WHO IS ASKING FOR THE GUARD!?”

Looking up, Theo spotted a being that was definitely not human standing at the top of a staircase. A bit on the short side, they had a broad build that was somewhat hidden by their red clothes. Large yellow eyes were set into a pale face, and she could catch a hint of sharpness to their smile. A horned headdress and steel gauntlets finished the picture.

“I did. Who are you?” Releasing the maid who quickly scurried off, Theo set her shoulders. A tingling running about her spine was a sure sign that this being was not one to be trifled with.

“THEODOSIA RHODEINE PRINCIPIA, HEAD OF THE PRINCIPIAN ARMY OF SERENISSIMA.” She crossed her arms, catching the way Vulgora's eyes flickered from the gladius and whip hanging from Theo's belt to the multitudes of daggers and throwing knives strapped to her thighs and sides. The sleeveless leather jerkin she was wearing was also showing off her muscled and scarred arms to great effect.

“Ah-ha! A fellow warrior! Come, let us sit and talk of our battles! It has been far too long since I met someone who knows war!”
Looks like Theo may be able to get some answers yet.

***

Gothicus wandered the halls, pouting as he kicked at imaginary stones. After getting his ear twisted by his ungrateful Father, he was shoo'd off with a final swat to see what he can sniff out.

Literally. Need something found? He'll sniff it out. Where Theodosia is great at ferreting out bullshit, Gothicus is famed for smelling it a mile away. Together, they make for a formidable team.

That and he has the attention span of a toddler with ADHD. Theo has a handful keeping him on track-

Ohhhh! Fermented grapes and cardamon. With a hint of Manuka honey as a sweetener.

Turning the corner, he nearly ran over the source of the scent. Taking a moment to steady the other with an apology, Gothicus got a good look at his almost victim.

Tacky ombré hair? Check.

Ostentatious robes? Double check.

A major case of Bitch Face (no resting needed)? Triple check.

Looks like Gothicus has run into the infamous Consul Valerius that Da was bitching up a storm about. Gothicus doesn't see what the problem is; Valerius is easy on the eyes and has impeccable taste in wine. Anyone who likes a 485 Mont Rue dry red is good in his book!

What could go wrong?

***

An hour later, Valerius lay in bed, covers pulled up to his chest as he stared at his bed canopy, wondering what the fuck just happened as the man beside him let out a loud snort before sawing away.

***

Getting back to the caravan, Ty and Julian saw little activity. Most of everyone was crowded together, and a few raised voices could be heard. Getting closer, Julian could make out Serafina, Antonius, and that bozo from a few days ago having it out.

Well, it was more like Serafina and bozo going at it and Antonius trying to play peacekeeper. It's not going well.

"THERE HE IS! YOU!" Julian jumped as bozo pushed out of the crowd, finger held out as he marched over. "You! You have besmirched my honor! I challenge you to a duel!" Stopping in front of Julian, he shoved his finger in the red head's face, nearly poking the good eye.

Pushing the finger to the side, Julian shot the other a look of distaste, lips curling. "Sorry, I only duel those who have, ah, a little something called a name?"

Shaking in anger, the other man took a deep breath, fists at his sides. "I, am Octavius! First and Eldest Son of Warlady Bettiny Principia no Undine! And you," he again pointed his finger, "are hereby challenged to an Honor Duel!" A few gasps could be heard as he concluded his proclamation with a smirk.
“I accept, you foul cur! What are the terms?” Finally, a fight! Julian's been itching for one for a while, and regrets he didn't have one last hoopty-do at The Rowdy Raven before he left Vesuvia.

“In one hour, we will meet at the caravan fore. Blades. The first to three bloods or to push their opponent out of the ring wins.”

Julian crossed his arms, putting his weight on one foot. “The stakes,” he asked archly.

“Quite simple, really,” Octavius drawled. “If you win, I'll...apologize,” he sneered, “to that mongrel you decided to take up with. If I win...hmm,” curling a finger under his chin, he smirked. “If I win, your mine!”

“**Bull-fucking shit!”**

Both men and most of the crowd jumped at Ty's holler. The angry man stomped his way between the two, chest bumping Octavius back a few paces. “Y'aint pulling this fuckery, Octashit! Drop it!”

“Why? Are you **afraid** that your, lover, can't handle it?”

“You-!”

“An interesting question, Ty,” Julian came around, staring Ty in the face. “What are you worried about? Think that I can't defend myself? That I'm incapable and weak?”

“No, I-”

“Well, news for you, **darling.** I've done well for myself for quite some time. Comes with being a wanted man.”

“That has nothing to do-”

“Then what? What is it-”

“-can you let me finish? It-”

“You do an awful lot of talking-”

“**That's it!”** Ty grasped Julian's upper arm, dragging him away from the crowd (and a smugly smiling Octavius; Ty knows that he planned this) and behind a cart. He shoved a still bitching Julian against it.

“What are you doing? How dare-” Julian jumped as Ty slammed his palms onto the wood on either side of Julian's head. His eyes were dark and heavy, a glare clinging to his face.

“Will. You. Let. Me. Speak,” he ground out. Julian gave a sharp nod. “Good. I do not doubt that you can defend yourself. My worry is that your not taking this serious. Wait,” he bit out as Julian puffed up. “When he says you'll be ‘his’, he's talking slavery!”

Julian fell back in shock. “Wh, what!” Slavery was outlawed in the Stellaris Empire! It's a crime punishable by death!

He must have blurted that out loud, because Ty nodded. “It is, except for two conditions. One being for those who are serving a prison term, the other related to duels. If the terms include slaving, then it is legally binding. And that's just for the territories under Stellarian rule. The Umbra Nation doesn't recognize their authority, and we have our own rules.”
Oh. Oh dear. “...looks like I jumped the gun, then, huh?” Julian feels terrible now for how he treated Ty. “I'm so, so sorry!”

Ty leaned back, pinching the bridge of his nose with a loud sigh. “Listen, I, just know that, yeah, I worry, but please! Don't ever think it's because I don't trust you.”

Feeling guilty at the listless tone Ty's voice took, Julian slipped under Ty's chin, wrapping the other up in a hug. He buried his nose into a warm neck, breathing in deeply the scent that he's started to associate with trust and safety. He felt marginally better as Ty's arms fell about him.

They stood like that for a minute, gathering their thoughts and emotions. Ty was the first to pull back, sighing. The two men linked arms before strolling back around. Octavius's face fell, seeing how his words had little, if any effect.

“So, filthy swine! A duel,” the crowd tittered at Julian's over-the-top snarl. “What blade do you favor, so that I may know how to sicken you of it?”

“Hmph! If you must know, I have been tutored in the Franc rapier since childhood! Very few have such skills to top me.”

“Then rapier it is!”

***

The caravan was buzzing with excitement. It's not every day that a duel takes place. Bet's were being recorded, with Octavius being favored 5:1. While loathed, the man has been competing for quite some time, being a regular on the dueling circuit.

While Ty was out procuring a blade for Julian, said man was having a wash up. Stripped bare, a basin of hot water and a bar of soap were on the kitchenette counter. He had a towel wrapped around his waist as he lathered a flannel. Mazel and Tov were currently on the bed, one occasionally whining for attention as he cleaned himself.

It was as he was debating a shave (having grown quite a bit of scruff) that the door was shoved open. Julian jumped, spinning to see who it was.

“AHHHHH!” Julian jumped again before panicking, slapping his palms over his nipples with another squawk. Serafina herself let out a startled shriek, setting Julian off again. Soon, it was an endless loop of two people squawking at each other.

“The fuck is this bullshit?” Ty has never been so confused in his life. The poor man stood at the base of his wagons steps, watching as his grandmother and lover squawked at each other like chickens getting chased by a fox. His shoulders drooped, the selection of rapiers in his arms shifting at the motion. “Uh, YaYa?” May the Mother be merciful, neither of them can hear him.

“Hey YaYa!”

With a startled squeak, Serafina tumbled backwards, luckily being caught by her grandson. “Thank you, Ty,” she gasped, breathless from both her impromptu fall and earlier antics. She twisted her head to the side, seeing the crowd of bystanders laughing.

“No problem, just- Julian? Why the hell are you covering your nipples!?”

Said man looked down, just noticing the position he was in. He whipped his arms behind himself. “Uh, she scared me?” His towel took this moment to fall off. It took him a second to notice, his head snapping down when he felt a breeze. A loud whistle shook him into action. Flinging himself
forward, he attempted to scoop up his towel, only to overreach. Trying to correct himself and regain his balance, one leg stuck out behind him as he tried to cover himself with his free hand. Listing to the side, he jerked backwards, just to land flat on his back with a wagon-shaking *THUMP!*.

“Um, Ty? Sweetie?” Serafina whispered. “I'm kind of worried about his duel.” Julian's hand shot up, thumb up as he shouted out a *I'm okay!*

“...so am I.”

***

Face red from his graceless display, Julian examined the rapiers spread out on the bed. While he already had a long reach, he wanted to increase it further, mitigating any advantage Octavius may have. While not unfamiliar with a variety of swords and being quite practiced himself, Julian knows that his opponent will have a distinct experience advantage.

Separating the blades into groups based on their length, he picked up one of the longer ones. Hefting it in his hand, he sat it aside. It felt unbalanced, even while still sheathed. He picked up another one before discarding it as well. In a matter of minutes he had two new piles. Starting over again, he pulled from the ‘balanced’ pile, this time unsheathing them.

This new pile was much smaller than the first, and he quickly found his ideal blade. While not the longest of the bunch, it was well balanced, came to a fine tip, and had no folds in the metal. Outside of commissioning a blade himself, he's found the best choice.

Ty had already laid out some clothes, along with a pair of proper dueling gloves. Reminiscent of his Plague Doctor gloves, they had some decorative tooling on the back of the palm and on the cuff edge. The leather itself was a warm brown, and while the material was thick it was also soft and supple. Overall, quality work.

Shame they don’t quite fit. Damn his long fingers!

Dressing, he smoothed his hair back with a grimace. A thick layer of oil had built up, and within the next day or so his scalp will start to itch. Hopefully they find a good bathing spot: basin baths only go so far.

Securing his eye-patch, Julian gave a whistle as he left the confines of the wagon. Two loud thumps behind him signaled that the girls followed. As he made his way up the caravan line, numerous people wished him luck.

Nice to know that, while they won't bet on him, they still want him to do well.

At the top of the line, a large rug had been laid out. Clearly meant to be their ‘arena’, it was very large, leaving enough room for himself and Octavius to maneuver. A crowd had already gathered, with Antonius acting as the bookie. Judging from the piles of coin in front of him, the betting has been prolific.

Wonder if the odds have changed…

Malak alighting on his shoulder, Julian strut thru the crowd, soon toeing the rug. He had a cheeky smirk on his face, excited for this fight. More often than not, he usually ends up in bouts of fisticuffs than anything with a blade. He is more than eager to draw steel.

Across from him, Octavius (the fop) was sat on a ‘throne’, one ankle resting on his knee as his fans fawned over him. One was filing his nails as another fussed over his hair. He was also dressed
in a professional dueler's doublet and trousers that folded into knee-high boots. Stand him next to Julian in his simple, utilitarian travel gear, and it was no wonder Octavius was favored to win.

Julian will take great glee in destroying their expectations.

Standing on his side of the rug, Julian waited as a groupie brought Octavius his blade. Picking up the frankly gaudy piece of metal, he stood as well, nose so high in the air that Julian wonders how he can see where he's going.

Serafina hopped onto the bookie table, a pole-arm in hand. “Alright! So, this is a duel issued by Octavius Principia to Julian Devorak,” a few gasps hissed out, some not knowing he was that Julian, “with Octavius issuing apology to Tiberius Principia if losing, or gaining Julian as thrall if winner. It is to three bloods, a forfeit, or a discharge. Any objections?” A few mutters sounded, but nothing more. Julian and Octavius locked gazes, the former smirking while the latter sneered. “Good! Duel ends with the aforementioned terms or my say-so, so no fucking around, got it?” The two opponents nodded. “BEGIN!”

Swords drawn, Octavius settled into a sideways crouch, blade to the fore and pointed up, with his free arm arcing behind him for balance. Julian slid into profile as well, blade held to the fore loosely, tip down. His right foot led, while he kept his weight on his left.

With slow and steady steps, the two circled each other, waiting for the other to make a move. The rabble around them were shouting, some encouragement, others insults. Julian could hear many women (and a few men) offering to keep Octavius ‘company’ after the duel, certain he would be the winner.

With a lunge and a flick, Julian pushed forward. Fast enough that Octavius only knew something had happened when he felt a sting on his outer thigh. Looking down, his face contorted at the sight of a tear and beads of scarlet now decorating his person. Serafina's voice rang as her shout of ‘First blood to Julian!’ reverberated over the sudden din of the crowd.

“Ah-ha! Looks like your training was for nothing, then, knave! I'll have you pinioned and stripped in no time! Ty, my darling! Be sure to prepare a feast! Better yet, I'll have you for dessert!”

Sitting on top of a nearby wagon, Malak perched on his knee, Ty just buried his face in his hands. The raucous laughter of the crowd drowned out his groan.

Growling, Octavius leapt, rapier tip colliding with Julian's. What followed was a series of blows and advancement, Octavius driving Julian to the edge of the rug. Wrist movement and flexing, Julian stood his ground as he parried and deflected each strike Octavius made, making it look effortless. Keeping his smile on his face, it just grew into a full grin as Octavius got frustrated.

And Octavius was very frustrated. Normally by now he would have two bloods, but this, this hack, was blocking his every strike! Octavius was the undisputed Dueling Champion of his home city!

Rushing forward with his shoulder, he aimed to shove the other out of the ring. He had to catch himself on his toes, windmilling his arms as Julian ducked and rolled past him. He wasn’t supposed to do that! Catching his balance, he turned just to pull up short, hearing the crowd laugh.

Finishing his roll, Julian was lounging on the ground. Propped up on his elbow, he looked quite comfortable. One would think he was simply relaxing after a long day if not for the fact that he had his sword pointed.
Filled with confidence that the other was arrogant in his certainty, Octavius lunged again, sword tip spinning in arc's. Julian's blade met his blow for blow, gradually speeding up before catching Octavius's blade. With a shove and a twist, Julian flung away Octavius's sword. The other just managed to hang onto it. With a shout of anger, Octavius leapt, fist pulled back to punch that smug smile from that arrogant mug.

Bringing his knees up, Julian caught the others arms and heaved, shoving Octavius up and over. He heard the other land with a thud and gasp, the wind getting knocked out of him. The crowd went wild. As the other choked on his air, Julian hopped to his feet and slashed, rendering another tear, this time thru the doublet. Serafina sounded again.

"I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU, YOU SON OF A WHORE!" How dare this, this cheater, treat him this way! Does he not know who Octavius is!? And how powerful his mother is!? After he has destroyed that pretty boy's face, he'll make him watch as he beats that mongrel as well!

Shrieking in rage, Octavius started slashing wildly, an unhinged snarl on his face. Julian was startled, not expecting the man to get this angry this quickly. The duel hasn't been going on long, and Julian himself hasn't really had to exert himself. He'd actually been feeling a bit bored and very disappointed. Hasn't even broken a sweat!

Now though? He's a bit worried. With how quickly Octavius flew off the handle, Julian needs to end this, and quickly.

...but not before further humiliation. Siobhan Devorak nee Foghladh is many things, but a WHORE is not one of them!

Trying to think, he missed blocking a blow and he winced, the sting of drawn blood welling on his bicep. The crowd hollered, some shouting insults at Julian, not missing his reaction to that remark about his mother. Feeling something nudge his foot, he tried to side-step it, only to catch and stumble. Another sting, another blood-

"HALT! WHO THE FUCK DID THAT! BLOW DISCARDED!" A series of 'boo's!' rang out at Serafina's shout. Looking down, Julian could see a waterskin. Someone threw it, looking to help Octavius win.

"You know," Julian began, "I've thought many things about you, but it never crossed my mind that you needed your fans to cheat!"

"Cheat? Cheat!? You, you fucking, you disgusting rat! If anyone's a cheater, its you! I am Octavius! I need no help! Wait for my Mother to hear about this!" Octavius dashed forward, blade twisted to deliver a striking blow. One powerful enough to send Julian out of the ring-

Only to have Julian sidestep him completely in a twist. As he completed the motion, his blade cut into Octavius's trousers and hip, sending the other spinning. Coming to a stop, Octavius made to lunge again, the crowd going mad making him hesitate. Looking down, he gaped.

He was standing six inches outside of the ring.

Taking a few steps forward, Julian flicked the tip of his sword in a series of brief slashes. Moments later, Octavius's trousers fell to the ground, leaving his nethers bare.

"...no wonder you're so angry." Laughter rang out at Julian's remark. Said man spun, arms spread in victory and he bowed. As the crowd shouted their congratulations, he waved and blew kisses, a few onlookers offering themselves for the night. As he stood from a second bow, he jerked. With a
wet cough, he stumbled, a trickle of blood escaping his mouth. Legs going slack, the blade embedded in his back pulled free.

“HA! YOU MAY HAVE WON THE DUEL, BUT YOU’VE LOST YOUR LIFE,” Octavius crowed. His hand was bloody, clutching the knife he had stabbed that charlatan with. He cackled as Julian collapsed, onlookers rushing to his aid.

Cackling that was cut off as a fist closed around his throat. As his vision went dark, Octavius could hear a roar of anger, and could just make out blazing golden eyes and a snarl.

***

Ty rushed into his cart, a slack Julian in his arms. Setting his precious cargo down on the bed face-first, Ty started ripping off the shirt. He was breathing hard and fast, knowing something was very wrong.

Julian wasn't healing. His contract seal hadn't reacted, and the wound wasn't clotting. Accepting a damp cloth from Antonius, wiping away the blood showed streaks of dark purple leading away from the incision. Ty hissed.

_Poison!_

“Knife,” he barked. Accepting a stiletto, he lengthed the cut, also adding another going crosswise. He could hear Julian starting to struggle to breathe, and he knows that if he were to look at the others face, it would be turning puice and the lips and tongue would be swelling.

_Preatoria Vulgaris_ is the only thing that could possibly be the culprit. The Godslaying Bloom has that name for a reason.

Leaning forward, he sealed his lips over Julian's wound, sucking hard. His mouth filled with blood instantly. Turning, he spat the contaminated liquid to the side before repeating the process. Each stream of blood he expelled colored his lips and chin a brighter scarlett, and the puddle on the floor got larger and larger.

_C'mon healing! You can kick in any time now..._ Ty hopes that whoever Julian made his Bargain with was a kind and merciful being. He doesn't know what he'll do if he loses Julian.

§Dig in.§

Ty jumped. He hadn't heard the Horned One for a long time. *What?*

§The flesh. It's absorbed the... cowardice of Octavius. It must be removed.§

§Dig, In .§

***

Octavius sat on the dueling rug, arms and wrists bound. Three of the caravan guardswomen surrounded him, weapons drawn. He snorted before hawking, a gob of bloody phlegm flying thru the air before landing with a wet *plop!*.

No one wanted to come near him, and he couldn't really blame him. That mongrel did a number on him. His face was full of cuts and heavily swollen, one bruised glued eye shut with ichor. His lip was split in several places and drooping, a thick rope of bloody saliva dripping from it. Between his spread legs were a few of his teeth. His head was also puffed on one side of his crown, the scalp
there having separated when a large hand fisted his hair and yanked him into an oncoming fist. And from how his hand hurt, he suspects something is broken, if not just heavily sprained.

Serafina and Antonius had joined that, that monster in caring for the cheat. He had to have cheated! Had to! There is no way anyone can move that fast! He must have used some trickery!

Seeing heavily booted feet stop in front of him, Octavius looked up. The Head of caravan security stood before him. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and the look she was giving him could strip paint from canvas.

“Well,” he wheezed. “Come to gloat?”

“Octavius Principia, you are hereby charged in the attempted murder of Julian Olexander Devorak.”

He’ll get out of this easily. After all, he's his Mother's only Son.

***

It was a bloody and exhausted Ty that left the wagon hours later. As he walked out, wiping at the tacky, drying blood that decorated his face from the cheeks down, he noticed that Malak had been joined by other ravens and crows on the wagon's rooftop. They all watched him quietly, the occasional *caw!* sounding out.

Malak himself hopped forward, wings hunched. He let out a quiet *wab?*.

“He'll live,” Ty panted. Running his tongue along his teeth, he dug out a piece of meat from between his molars before spitting it out. The pale pink flesh glimmered from inside its bubble of spit.

Seeing the seal blaze to life had filled Ty with such profound relief he had actually started to cry. The bright green light that had washed the wagon with a sensation of healing was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. He desperately wants to know who Julian's Patron is, so that he may offer thanks.

(His stomach rolled, but he stamped down the nausea. He won't be hungry for a while.)

Holding open the wagon door, Malak swooped in. Ty watched as the bird dipped between his grandparents to land on the bed. He awkwardly walked over the covers, stopping when he got to Julian's ribs. He cocked his head, seemingly to examine the new, pink flesh that was granulating in in a wide crescent, going along the back of the ribs and near the spine. After a few moments he walked further up, making himself at home in the hollow between the back of Julian's neck and shoulder. Tov gave him a sniff before returning to her guard duty.

Shutting the door quietly, he left his grandparents to their cleaning. They were the best to remove and decontaminate the blood and rags left behind.

Even now, Preatoria Vulgaris is highly lethal. By all rights, Ty should be dead. It is only thru Hedonism's rage that he's alive.

Scratching the leather over the small of his back (fucking itch!), Ty saw that a few of the hands from Hieronymus's farm were present, wondering why they had lingered. Ty gave them the short version, with everyone collectively disgusted by Octavius's behavior. With assurances that the caravan would be on the move within the hour, they offered their assistance before returning.
Without doubt, they'll inform Hieronymus himself, and he'll get word spread. Lady Bettiny will have to address the issue in a satisfying manner or her position will be untenable. Failure to do so will have a riot on her hands.

Oathbreakers are NOT tolerated.

***

The caravan started moving again, much more subdued. Octavius had been secured in the jail cart and would have a round-the-clock guard. The Öhmlog (the rug for sanctioned duel's) will need to be burned, the taint of deceit and betrayal rendering it unfit for further duels. Word had already spread about what happened, and Octavius's (and therefore his Mother's) reputation was in shambles. Many of the Matron's and Crone's within the caravan know that, despite Serafina's decree that this stay's internal, word will travel hard and fast. Nothing less than a Taboo will stop it.

Bettiny Principia no Undine will find it very hard to conduct business in the future for a long time. Hopefully she steps down and one of her other children slots in.

***

Sitting in his spinning chair, Ty blasted thru the remaining wool. Being in no mental state to leave Julian's side, he's been excused from caravan duties until further notice. Stripping out of his leather armor and passing it over to Antonius for cleaning, it took longer than Ty wanted to scrub the blood caking his face, neck, and hands from his skin.

Don't look down, don't look down...don't think, don't remember, just spin.

Looking at his bobbins, he started to wind his singles onto new ones. The next steps are to ply two singles together, then soak and thwack the new skeins. If he can locate a kick spindle, he should be done in a few days.

A snort from the bed made him shoot up, leaning forward. Was Julian already awake!?

Mazel snorted again, licking her chops. Crawling forward, she nuzzled her nose along the spot where-

-she licked, sniffing more before letting out a low rumble. She started licking Julian with renewed vigor, like a bitch with a young pup. Her motions rocked Julian's slumbering form, disturbing a dozing Malak.

*crawk!* Beak wide open and wings hunched, Malak let out a hiss. Twitching his head side to side, it would be an intimidating sight, if not for Mazel sneezing before laying her head on Julian's back, pushing a displaying Malak aside with her muzzle. The pissed bird could do nothing more that let out a startled *ARRRK!*.

Looking out of one of the wagons windows, Ty knew he wouldn't be able to do anything else. The events of the day have left him feeling frazzled, hollow, and drained. Right now, all he could really handle is cuddling his unconscious lover.

Putting his things away, he stripped down. Shifting the two dogs and one bird, he slid between cool sheets. Laying on his side, looking on as a pale Julian slept, it took Ty a long time before dreams took him.

***
After the caravan had settled for the night and he had been fed, Octavius begged for a piss. While he had a pot to use, the confines of his cell were small. Being able to do no more than sit was taking its toll.

Truthfully, the only reason he was obliged was due to his Mother's standing. Most common criminals wouldn't be let out. As it is, he had a guard on him, and his wrists were bound, leaving just enough slack for him to undo his trousers.

Walking a bit into the treeline, he found a spot. Going to untie his fly, he stopped. Looking over his shoulder, he sneered. “Do you mind!?”

His guard crossed her arms. “And let you wiggle free? I think not, fucker.”

Rolling his eyes, he turned back around and to the side just a bit more. Pulling himself out, the sounds of trickling liquid could soon be heard. He sighed, relieved to actually walk and empty his bladder.

Finished far sooner than he would have liked, he cleaned himself up before tucking away. He took a few moments to neaten his trousers and shirt. Behind him, he could hear the faint beats of bird wings. Most likely the sounds of some raptor, an eagle or hawk, on the hunt for their evening meal. He looked up, hoping to see the silhouette of whichever bird was on the prowl against the moonlit night.

“*HURK!*”

The meaty thunk of talons sinking into flesh muffled any sounds Octavius could have made as he was carried off, breathless and unable to scream. Below him, he could just make out thru tree cover his guard, a hand held up in a jaunty wave. Struggling to breathe thru the pain of long claws spearing thru his torso, he fought to look up.

For the second time that day, large golden eyes met his, but these ones were far larger…

…and far, far angrier.

***

A hearty thump sounded on the wagon roof, the two men inside sleeping thru the commotion. A nearby guard look up, trying to locate the source of the sound. Nothing stood out, aside from the flock of crows and ravens that had taken up residence on top of the injured doctor's wagon. Seeing the flock was undisturbed, he went back to his watch.

***

Inside their (deluxe) wagon, Serafina and Antonius were dressed down, she lazing with a generous glass of wine and he at a desk, writing. Incidents like this need to be documented, in the event they go before a Coven and Court.

Antonius should have been done by now. They already would have been abed, but mister ‘Document, document, document!’ was still scrawling away, and she refused to retire without him. Sleeping without him just isn't right.

“Here, read this.”

Taking the sheaf of paper's from his hands, Serafina started reading. So far, normal reporting for an incident such as this. The brief, the full report, the steps taken to contain, the recommended
punishment…

Coming to what *should* have been the last page, she turned to see what was under it. Maybe he's already drafted the paperwork for Lady Bettiny to sign for reparations-

She burst out laughing, putting her wine aside. Soon, she was a giggling, snorting mess, sinking down in her chair, nearly falling out of it. It took her several long minutes to get a hold of herself.

“Well? Whadda ya think?”

“Oh, Tony, you're perfect,” she giggled. “Just, how are you gonna get them to sign it?”

“I doubt either of them will notice anything. Just stick it in the middle of the stack, and point out where we need signatures. Simple.”

“I KNEW there was a reason I married you.”

Setting the papers aside, Serafina pulled her husband towards their bed, a knowing look on her face. Shutting the cabin door splitting their bedroom from the rest, the slight breeze caused some of the papers to ruffle and scatter. Drifting to the floor, mixed in with reports, was a pre-filled marriage certificate.

***

The magic shop was quiet. Darkness had descended like a cloak upon Vesuvia, with many shutting themselves up in warm and cozy houses. In contrast to the hot days, the nights were cool, chilly even. It was not uncommon to wake to streaks of hoarfrost dancing over window frames, just to disappear at the first rays of sunlight.

Pulling a heavy shawl around his shoulders, Asra drifted around his shop. Faust was tucked into the thick folds, recognizing Ty's handiwork and knowing it would be very warm. Little snores floated from her snout.

He was tidying up, having many visitors to the shop earlier. Other notable magical's and fighters from around the empire had come to offer their aid, along with some from far outside it. As it is, Asra is feeling raw and ragged.

Finished with his work in the shop proper, he parted the back door curtain and walked up the steps to the living quarters. Similar to a small flat, the stairs opened up into a little living room/kitchen combo. Off to the left was a bathroom, while on the right was a short hallway. At the end of the hall was a linen closet, with his and Tiberius's bedrooms on either side. Strewn about the place were books, charms, yarn and the like.

Putting the kettle on, Asra decided to tackle Ty's side-table. Covered in knitting notions and what looked to be the start of a fine lace shawl, Asra took extra care to either put away or secure the items. Picking up a few pattern books (after placing marks in the open ones), he turned to place them on one of their book shelves. Hearing paper flutter, he looked down.

On the floor was an envelope, a few folds of paper sticking out. Placing the books, he scooped up the letter. Taking a peak at it, he saw it was from Ty's brother, Tybalt.

Not remembering receiving this, he noticed the date. Coming the day the Worm Incident happened, Asra put it on the kitchen counter, wanting to remember to bring it to either Germanius or Cordelia tomorrow.
Whistling signaled his tea was ready. Dropping a satchel of lapsang souchong into his teapot, he poured the water. As it steeped, he put a lite snack together. After removing the spent teabag, he capped the teapot before securing a cozy around it (smiling at the little knitted Faust on it). Bringing his goodies over to his pile of pillows by their balcony, he propped the door open before making himself comfortable.

The stars are very bright tonight. Especially the Serpent of Light that trailed across the sky. It's been a long time since he could just sit and bask in its light.

He may sleep in tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Additional triggers: Cannibalism (non-descriptive). I did my best to imply it, but it can be glossed over and something else attributed to it.
The caravan was giving Ty and Julian's wagon a wide berth. While birds figure prominently in their culture (being that Incubi are, essentially, demonic bird humanoids), the amount of crows and ravens roosting on top of their wagon was...inauspicious. While the birds themselves are common, a Crow or Raven Incubus isn't. Seeing such a huge flock is making many look for such an Incubus, and they are getting more and more unsettled the longer they go without seeing him. Any time one does show up, it's a portend.

Whether having so many of them show up is a good or bad thing remains to be seen.

Only Serafina or Antonius buzzed around that wagon. Little Tiberius was quite the terror yesterday, the bellow of sheer, incandescent rage and how quickly he turned murderous at Octavius's actions made quite a few remember just who he was before whatever accident he had, happened.

While quite a few youngsters were scared shitless, many of the elders had nodded in sage approval. You do NOT mess with a Warlord's spouse. Especially in such a cowardly manner. As it is, the caravan’s going to be walking on eggshells until Julian wakes.

After tucking in Julian (who is, understandably, yet to wake) and setting the girls to guard, Ty picked up their laundry bin. It was early enough that, if he drops it off at the Laundry wagon now, it should be clean by the time lunch rolls around. As he made his way over, he was given plenty of space. A few elders and 'properly' raised Umbra asked after Julian, offering to help him out until the other gets back on his feet. A walk that should have only taken him five minutes turned into half-an-hour.

It also left him royally pissed off. The swarm of chucklefucks bothering him, and thus keeping him from Julian, made him want to hurt something. Like their faces.

After delivering their laundry (that understandably smelt rank, due to the amount of fucking around they get up to), Ty was, again, waylaid by people asking after Julian. It was only after he started snarling in their faces that he was left alone. Serafina and Antonius thought it was hilarious. While sad about the cause, seeing Ty act all snarly and cantankerous over Julian was reassuring. Now, Tony just needs to get the two to sign the papers…

~Mouse? Mouse!~

Like lightning, Faust shot off, slithering quickly after one of the local rodents. Her bright form quickly disappeared into the crowd, many shoppers being careful when they noticed her amongst them.

Asra slid onto a stool at Bern's stall, readjusting his scarf as he got some shade. The sun was high and bright, the heat of the day already at an all-time high. Next to them, Gilda was running herself ragged, one of her younger grandchildren helping her out with the large crowd. Cup after cup and flagon after flagon of chilled tea was passed out, the swarm of people going nearly four deep.

“So, Asra, how you've been? Haven't seen you for a few weeks.” With a groan, Asra slumped
forward, forehead thumping onto the counter. Bern laughed. “That bad?’

“You have no idea,” Asra muttered. He let out a frustrated groan, fingers burying themselves into fluffy curls. Pulling them out as he sat up, his hair stuck up in several places. “Travel, travel, travel. If what I was looking for wasn't so important-

“But you love traveling! Ty had expressed his frustration about you just up and going without warning several times!”

Wincing, Asra leaned on an elbow. “Yeah, but, this isn't for fun.”


Eyes wide, Asra sipped his tea. Blueberry and mint, a nice combination. “What did you do?”

“Oh, nothing,” she cackled before returning to her stall.

Asra turned to Bern. “We had a visitor. One who was kind enough to be a listening ear. Poor ol’ Gilda was so sad that she couldn't do more to help you with Prew, but Lady Schroll was kind enough to lend an ear.”

“Noooo…”. While not the most wealthy Noble, the Schroll’s are well respected. Being firmly in the middle of the Noble caste, they have a series of ties to the higher-class Nobles, including being cousin to the Count before Lucio. Add in Lady Schroll's gossipy ways and Prew is probably feeling her fall already.

It couldn't happen to a more deserving person.

***

Making his way over to the Necropolis, Asra soon ran into Germanius. Needing a day away from the palace, the man was found with Tubor in one of their research libraries bitching up a storm. By the sounds of it, it seems both Nadia and Lucio are being supremely difficult.

Which is unlike Nadia.

Hearing the men harp on, it was only when one of them mentioned Ty's name that Asra remembered the letter. Cutting in, he dug for the envelope before presenting it. “Here, Tybalt sent this before the Worm. It looks as though Ty hadn't had chance to answer before he left.”

Grunting, Germanius took the letter, pulling it out and reading it. Neither Tybalt nor Belial had made mention of-

“Excuse me, gentleman. Looks like I need to take care of some things.” Standing abruptly, Germanius strode from the room, the door slamming shut behind him.

Asra and Tubor stared after him. “That...doesn't sound good,” Tubor muttered. “What was THAT about?” Asra shrugged.

***

When the caravan stopped for lunch, Julian was still asleep. He hadn't really moved from his position, either, but then again he was pinned under nearly four hundred pounds of well-muscled
Ty continued plying the singles, looking to be done with a skeins-worth after lunch. Periodically he checked on Julian, watching for signs of fever or latent infection. While the wound had closed, Julian still wasn’t out of the woods yet. Mere exposure to *Praetoria Vulgaris* can cause harm: Julian had been injected with it.

*Seeing the new skin made Ty want to vomit. He should have never needed to do what he did.*

Stopping only long enough to shove some food down his gullet (and feed his girls), Ty took a break from plying to start a new pair of socks. Digging thru his bags, he pulled out a skein of his ‘special’ stock. A blend of merino wool, mulberry silk, and a touch of baby alpaca, it was dyed a deep sapphire blue. Finding a mini-skein of the same type in a gold color, he cast on for the toe. Blue socks with gold heels and toes, maybe gold cuffs as well?

Eh, why not. Julian will be cold when he wakes, the poison known for messing with the thyroids in those few who survive it. And with everything that's happened, Julian deserves some nice, warm, silky socks.

***

“ASRA! OPEN UP! I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE!” Prew pounded on the shops door, yelling as loudly as she could. She was given a wide berth, many of the passerby unsettled by her.

The normally immaculate woman was, well, a mess. Her hair was a bit greasy and matted, her usual salon unable to accommodate her, due to a sudden influx of customers needing to ready themselves for a party. Lord and Lady Harkkon decided that they would be holding a garden party, celebrating the bloom of the rare Sunburst Orchid. Considering the plant only blooms once every ten years, and is also exceedingly rare, this is quite the big deal. The local Botanical Society along with various other notables within the city will be present.

Everyone except for her.

Add in the fact that she’s been turned away from all of her usual haunts, the last few days were unkind to her. No one from the Gold District (where most of the Noble’s and wealthy merchants lived) wanted anything to do with her. Her usual shops? Doors locked in her face. Restaurants? Slow and bad service. Wine parlors? She's been served vinegar, and no one has wanted to buy her her drinks or meals.

She has high standards, and they are not being met! How is she supposed to support her lifestyle without mon- uh, a partner?

Asra is behind it, she knows it! He wants to keep Ty all to himself. She's seen how he looks at him! He wants to keep them apart, not letting Ty see how she would be a much better match for him than that two-bit foppish, edgy theater failure! They would be perfect together: she, delicate and demure, a trendsetter in fashion and other fads, someone to be looked up to on the social scene. He, tall, dark, and strong. Powerful both physically and magically. And wealthy! Enough so that he could put most Nobles, if not the Countess herself, to shame! Prew would live in the lap of luxury, never needing to work!

After having a few children, of course. Then, Ty would be unable to set her aside. The scandal of disregarding the *faithful* mother of his children would ensure her security.

But not if Asra continues to block her!
"YOU CHARLATAN! OPEN! WHERE HAS TY GONE!?"

"Prew."

Freezing in place, she turned. Behind her was a cloaked individual. Male, judging from the sound of his voice. It took her a few moments to place him.

"Olhn. As you can see, I'm busy."

"Yes, I can see that. But I doubt you pounding on locked doors to empty shops while shrieking like a banshee is more important that what I need you for."

She sneered. "Hah, you would think that, wouldn't you? Now piss off, I'm trying to secure my, our future."

The now-named Olhn cocked his head. "...you believe Tiberius can advance our cause? How so?"

"Buy me lunch at Thalia's, first."

"And to think, I thought you were above such prostitution." Prew hissed at his remark, offended. "Oh please, don't act so. We both know that the whores of the Entertainment District have higher standards and more scruples than you do. That aside," while his face was hidden, his sneer could be felt, "I suppose you should be fed and watered." With a twist, he beckoned her to follow him. After a few steps, the quiet padding of her slippered feet could be heard.

***

Ty received his clean, fresh laundry with thanks. One of the Laundry Maidens had been kind enough to walk it over. The earthy, floral scents of lavender and sage wafted up to his nose, filling him with relaxation. The Maiden also passed over a few sachets filled with the dried flower and herb mixture as well, instructing him to place them in certain strategic places to help Julian in his healing. He thanked her in a strained voice, hiding as best he could the quiver in it.

Sorting their things, he decided to stash them in the bed's storage drawer instead of back in their bags. They still have almost six days of travel, and he doesn't want to have to hunt thru the bags just to get a pair of socks.

Not long after the caravan started moving again, Julian let out a whimper. Getting close, Ty could see the start of a feverish flush and a layer of sweat. Sweeping up a bit on his finger, Ty sniffed it, frowning at the scent. While he was able to...remove most of it, enough poison was left to wreak havoc. By now, it'll start messing with Julian's pituitary and lymphatic systems, throwing his natural homeostasis out of whack. Heat flashes and chills will come and go, along with muscle soreness and fatigue. Hopefully, Ty was able to pull out enough of the poison that Julian will be spared the nausea.

A deep, throaty heave was all the warning Ty had before he lunged for their basin, just fast enough to catch the bile Julian coughed up. It had a purple hue and an overly-sweet and spicy scent, a hallmark of Preatoria Vulgaris poisoning. Being careful not to spill it, he drew a rune of Banishment in the air over the basin. Watching the foul liquid swirl into nothingness, Ty looked for a pen and paper. Drawing out that same rune, he placed the paper down on the kitchen counter, putting the basin on top of it.

Julian let out a quiet groan as Ty pulled him onto his side, placing pillows in strategic places to keep the redhead propped up. Using a rag to wipe away sweat, Ty then put their kettle on. Pulling
out a new basin, he dug about his bags for one of his casting kits, remembering that he stashed feverfew in one. Locating the dried herb, he dumped some into the basin before pouring hot (not boiling) water over it. As the mixture steeped, he put the runic equivalent of a ‘bio-hazard’ sign on the wagon door.

As he wet a cloth, Julian heaved again. Cleaning spittle from pale lips, Ty saw that the shivers set in. Pulling the blankets up, he tucked them around Julian’s form. Re-positioning Mazel and Tov, Ty did his best to make sure Julian would be as warm as possible.

It's going to be a loooong day.

***

Damn kids. Gods damned kids. Germanius wants nothing more than to turn Tybalt and Belial over his knee and tan their hides. Bratlings.

The little shits had the gall to send Rus a letter, and worded it in such a way to make it seem they needed safety! Serenissima is as safe as can be. He killed the last interloper not even a week before this whole shitshow started.

It would be far more effective if he yelled at them face to face, even if it means getting those damned eyes from Bel. But, he really can't afford to leave Vesuvia as it is…

He'll just bring the boys here. It will be good for them to see places outside of Principian territory, let alone Umbral. And considering Tybalt is distantly related to Nadia and is also a budding craft artisan, his fascination with her work may be enough to smooth over any ruffled feathers.

He'll still need to keep an eye on Bel, though.

***

“So, wait. Lucio led the contingent in a false flee while you came up behind in a flanking maneuver? That's not what any of the reports say!” Theodosia skulled what was left in her tankard before slamming the heavy metal onto the table. Around them, the usual sounds of a barracks could be heard. Between them on the table, a large beer keg and a platter of chicken kabobs was sat.

“What!? WHAT LIES HAVE BEEN SPREAD ABOUT OUR DEEDS!?” The snarl decorating Vulgora’s face, combined with their pale skin and large eyes made for quite the fearsome site. Theodosia could see why Lucio appointed them to head his army. Add in the fact that they actually knew what they were doing and had a solid training regimen for the troops, and it was a no brainer.

Theo belched. “Several sources state he was literally caught with his pants down and ran! Which, frankly, sounds like horseshit! The man was many things, but shying away from a fight? Yeah fucking right!”

“How dare they!” Waving their tankard around, Vulgora nearly lost all of their ale. “While it is true he had his pants down, it was all planned from the start!” Grabbing a skewer of spiced chicken, Vulgora bit off a piece. “We were outnumbered, and had to find a way to route them. Lucio, wonderful leader he is, decided to use himself as bait! He and an ‘admirer’ went a short distance from the camp. A bit further out was half our company, while myself and the rest hung out on the other side of the hill.”

“And he was ‘caught’ pants down, by an enemy detachment! Which he then led on a chase into
the trap while **you** came around the hill in a pincer attack! Genius!”

“**ONE OF OUR FINEST ACHIEVEMENTS!** Lucio had no shame, and was willing to do what it takes to win and had the skills to back it up! I feared he wouldn’t be the same after he lost his arm, but was greatly gladdened to see he was not slowed down!”

“...how **did** he lose his arm, anyways? I’ve heard not a thing.” Neither has Gothicus, which just shows how under wraps that info has been kept.

“Bah,” Vulgora waved their hand. “A cowardly strike and blind luck. Some rebel at Thunder Gorge got a lucky shot with one of their new crank guns. Disgusting.”

Theo agrees. Such a weapon shouldn’t exist. “And I guess amputation was the only way to go.”

“Hmm. We lost a good many warrior that day.” Theo grunted her agreement, lifting her tankard in salute. Vulgora clanked theirs against hers before both drank.

Both were quiet for a few moments. “So, what other false words have been spread about Lucio!?”

“Is it true the man required daily full-body massages with gold leaf infused truffle oil? And had black caviar enemas?”

“**WHAT!?**”

***

Julian has now progressed into overheating. After shoo'ing the girls off the bed, Ty stripped back sweat-soaked sheets. He had been periodically wiping at Julian's face before, and has now progressed onto doing full-body rubdowns. During which Julian spat up more bile, which was starting to turn a more natural green. Hopefully, by the end of the day most of the leftover poison will have been expelled from his body.

Wait. *PReatoria Vulgaris* likes to hang around in body fat and other humors. Julian has been regularly throwing up his tainted bile, and has been sweating buckets. He hasn't had to urinate yet, but Ty is sure that some of the metabolized poison is hanging out in the bladder.

That also means Julian will need to be...

He'll wait for Julian to regain lucidity first. Doing something like that without being given an 'okay' doesn't sit well with him.

*Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes...*

Re-wetting his rag in cool, herb-infused water, Ty went back over flushed skin. Julian had started twisting and turning, the muscle issues *PReatoria* poisoning can cause rearing their ugly head.

“Ah! Please, no! It hurts…”

Ty's heart broke a little bit.

***

Regardless of his own feelings, it was high-time that Germanius and Nadia sat down and hashed things out. They longer they fought the longer these issues would drag out, possibly putting Vesuvia (and the lands outside it) into further danger.
Running into Portia, he was led to one of Nadia's meeting rooms. It turns out, Portia had been sent for him, Nadia needing him for something. Relieved that she had finally gotten over her snit, Germanius didn't even think to ask what was going on.

Being shown in, he saw that he wouldn't be alone. Inside was Nadia, Consul Valerius, the Courtiers (minus Valdemar), his children, and Asra. Each person had a small plate of nibble and a glass filled with their drink of choice. Nadia sat at the head of the table, a smirking Consul next to her. Theodosia and Vulgora seem to be hitting it off, and if Germanius knows his boy, Gothicus has probably already wormed his way into someone's bed.

Gods, he hopes its not Valerius.

As he entered the room, all chatter stopped. Raising his eyebrow, he walked over to the only other seat to have a place setting in front of it: the end of the table, facing Nadia. Valerius watched him like a hawk.

I have a bad feeling about this…

Taking a seat, he gave Portia a quiet thanks as she supplied him with a slice of chocolate mousse cake and some spiced wine. When finished, she took her place behind Nadia.

“Now that everyone is here,” Nadia arched a brow as she ‘looked’ at Germanius, “I have news to share. Something very important to the investigation has come up, and I feel it is imperative to disseminate it. Consul? If you will.”

Dabbing his lips, Valerius stood. “Thank you, m'lady. It has come to my attention that a few parties have concealed some very important bits of information from the greater scope of the investigation into not only the Worms, but the murder of the late Count. As you will see,” he picked up a stack of papers that had sat unnoticed next to his plate, passing them out, “Dr. Devorak has connections to both incidents.”

“What, what do you mean? Oh, this sounds horrible!” Volta whimpered, wiggling in dismayed confusion in her seat as she got her copy. Germanius's stomach dropped. He knows where this is going.

Now, he just wants to know how Valerius got this.

“What this means, dear Procurator, is that not only has Devorak slain our Count, he is also connected to the Worms, and that is by blood.

He is directly responsible for both issues, and House Principia has concealed those facts from us!”

Germanius laughed. “And what proof do you have? After all, Lucio had many enemies. It is not so far fetched to assume an outside party has sent an Agent of Chaos to sow seeds of lies and deceit.”

Valerius picked up his goblet, smirking more. “Why, I found quite a bit of this information in your own Palace-supplied chambers.”

Shit. Fucking snoop. “And again, what proof do you have that I supplied this information?”

“But, how could you not have? It was found in your chambers,” Vlastomil piped up, eyes dancing from person to person. “I hate to say it, Warlord, but the evidence does add up.”

“But of course, Praetor Vlastomil. Your conclusions are based on a logical assumption. It was found in my rooms, therefore I must have manufactured them. Common sense. However, since my
start of stay, I've noticed the, lack, of security about the Palace. Add in what the Consul stands to gain by slandering me—"

"-you surely CANNOT be insinuating-"

"Leave. Now. All of you. Except for you, Germanius."

The room cleared quickly, Nadia's anger palpable. There was a veritable stampede, with an uncertain Portia being the last one to leave. A pained look on her face, she shut the door, tucked into Asra's side.

“So,” Nadia's voice was clipped. “Just when were you going to tell me about all of... this?"

“When we had a more complete picture and a viable course of action.” Gods above, but Germanius really didn't want to put up with her right now. He sipped his wine.

“So, when you took over Vesuvia?”

Eye bulging, he did a spit take, wine misting over the table. He choked, coughing hard. He slapped a palm on said table, strangled laughter emerging.

“Where *hack!* where did you get that idea from,” he wiped the corner of his mouth. “This shithole isn't worth it.”

She sneered. “Please, everyone knows how Umbra, and Principia in particular, procure their territory. You find a town or city, destabilize it, then overthrow the ruling government. Then you just slide in one of your own and ta-dah,” she fanned out her arm, “new land, and all without a messy war on your hands.”

“How cute,” Germanius cooed. “The little Countess—” Nadia hissed, giving Germanius a clue to her having some sort of Inferiority complex “-thinks she knows how House Principia works. Don't worry, your position is safe,” He ended that last word with a growl.

“How DARE YOU-!”

“I DARE many things! Look good and hard around you, Countess! The city is literally falling apart, your Court is full of half-assed fuckwits, and since your reemergence you've sat on your ass doing nothing! Frankly, Vesuvia has nothing that House Principia wants. Your port isn't anything special, crime is rampant, the major trade roads are rife with bandits, and don't get me started about how the Palace is run!

You have no leg to stand on. I can, and will, pull my assistance from both the Investigation and the Worm issue. Your city's destruction would be no skin off my nose.”

Nadia stood shaking, pale in anger. “The sister of-”

“Yes, yes,” he batted her comment away with a negligent wave of his hand. “The younger sister of that dastardly Doctor has been working as your handmaiden for years. Oh woe is you, for she could have murdered you herself at any time.

Except, she didn't. I hate to say it, Nadia, but you have a shit-talent for reading people. You used to be unparalleled. What the fuck happened? Did Lucio's death rob you of your ability to reason?”

“Why YOU—”
“I ‘dare’ because you seem to have lost all sense of reality! I’m half-tempted to just usurp you on 
**sheer** principle.” He stood, coming close. He bent over, getting right in her face. Part of his mohawk 
brushed her forehead. “Get. Over. Yourself.”

With a swirl of his cloak, he stalked out of the room, door slamming behind him. Nadia was left 
standing alone, the rays of the setting sun warming her clammy skin, but doing little more than that to 
chase away the chill settling into her bones.

Looks like she has some thinking to do.

***

Asra had escorted Portia to Germanius's rooms, doing his best to comfort her. Once safe behind 
closed doors, he sat her down at a table. Taking a few moments to get some bread and cheese from 
Germanius's ‘snack bar’, he sliced them up before plating them. A glass of watered-down wine 
completed the meal.

“I-, I don’t-, what's going on?”

Asra's chest felt tight at the broken look Portia was currently sporting. “The investigation into the 
worms, is, well. It's complicated.” And that’s an understatement.

“But, how did they find out? That Ilya is my brother?” She had done everything possible to 
conceal that, wanting to find out for herself what had truly happened. Her brother isn’t a murderer!

“Valerius snooped,” Germanius shut the door behind him, sighing. Slipping off his cloak, he hung 
it on a peg. Walking over to the table, he pushed his fingers thru his mohawk as he dropped into a 
vacant chair. A few strands dropped down into his line of sight, and he **swears** that it's gotten whiter 
since this morning. “He had to have gone thru my personal effects. I kept all of that stuff stored 
away. Nosy bastard. It would have been NICE if he put that nosiness to use when Nadia was gone. 
Asshole.”

“So, what do we do now?” Asra bit into a slice of bread with some creamy, herb-filled cheese 
spread on it. He pushed the plate he made towards Germanius.

Going to bite into his own slice, he shot a melancholy Portia a ‘look’, clearly not liking her not 
eating. He kept it up until she picked up a rye slice with a smokey cheddar on it, nibbling on it like a 
squirrel with an acorn. “I let Nadia have it after she had the gall to **insinuate** that House Principia 
wanted Vesuvia for ourselves. As if we want this dump.”

“Hey…”

“Hey!”

“Sorry not sorry, kids, but it's true. Vesuvia has done nothing but gone downhill since ol’ Lucy bit 
it.” A few sighs acknowledged his point. “As it is, House Principia has its hands full with some 
good, Umbrian politics of its own.”

Portia had sat her half-eaten snack down and was now playing with her fingers. “Will, will I see 
the inside of a cell?”

“Not if I can help it. Asra, while I don’t think it will, if anyone makes a move before Nadia and I 
can come to terms, take Portia, find Cordelia, and book it. You kid's don't deserve to get caught up in 
our pissing contest.” Germanius got up, walking over to a wardrobe. Riffling thru it, it came back 
with a long dagger. “Here, take this,” he passed it over to Portia.
“What!? But-”

“No ‘but’s’, young lady. Now, take it.”

A grumbled ‘okay, fine Dad’, was tossed out as she slid the hilt into her belt. “Now that that's out of the way, there may be something you can help us with.” Explaining to Portia about the house and how her family was connected to it took quite some time, but she listened avidly.

“So, because Mama was a Fogladh, and the original wardwork may have been done by Aoife, I could possibly be granted entry?”

Asra nodded. “Well, it's more like ‘Granted’. There's a big difference.”

“How so?”

“Basically, because Aoife was the first magical owner-”

“-we think-” Germanius cut in.

“-that means something. In most magic systems, the first person to enchant or spell something has precedence over ownership. It's one of the reasons why a person can legally claim back something that may have been sold decades ago. The magic remembers. It's also shaped some of the laws of inheritance when it comes to many other mundane things.” Like land ownership.

“So, how can I help?” If she helps in this, Portia may be able to leverage it to get her brother cleared off all charges, regardless of him actually committing the act.

Asra turned to Germanius, who picked up the explanation. “Because the rest of the wardwork on the house had been built on and into the first layer, undoing the base can unravel everything else. Including the wards the Cult has since put up. Martel has a few ideas on how to undo it all, but he still needs a few days to map out what he can.” Which has proven difficult. Germanius suspects the Cult knows somethings up, for they've had someone on the houses roof nearly round the clock, and the Invisibility Charms that Asra and the other magicals can cast only last a short time when spread over more than one person. Add in that you can't recast it while it's still active without becoming visible briefly…

Studying the house has become a bitch.

“Let me know when I can help!” Portia clenched her jaw, a determined look on her face as she met Germanius's eye squarely.

He mentally cooed, her face looking soft and kittenish even with it scrunched up. Makes him want to pick her up a put her in his pocket. “Trust me, we will. You may even see a fight or two,” he laughed at the excited look she sported. Seems Julian isn't the only rowdy one out of the bunch.

Now he wants to meet their parents.

***

Valora was quickly packing, shoving clothing and essentials into a bag with little regard. She has a tight schedule to keep, and taking time to fold her clothes would be time wasted.

Germanius had just sent her a missive: head to Nevivon, and find Siobhan and Ivan Devorak. Stay with them. Protect them from all comers, killing if necessary. Gemmy had made it quite clear that Valerius may try to hold them ransom, to try and draw Julian back. Add in that the billy goat himself
confirmed that Julian had nothing to do with his demise and there would be the real possibility that Valerius would order the execution of an innocent man.

So, bodyguard duty it is. Nevivon is south and a bit west of Vesuvia, on the border. It's actually in contested territory, with Vesuvia, Mokba, and Silures claiming ownership. Mokba has the strongest one, seeing Nevivon was held in their possession for nearly seven hundred years, despite being founded by the Silurian Potentate. Vesuvia, however, has always coveted the little port town and its salt mines.

Fucking politics.

***

Julian went thru more phases of extreme sweating and chills. Ty had to strip the bed of sheets and blankets multiple times and had even laid down some layers of towels as well. Poor Julian had soaked everything to sopping.

Ty was really starting to get worried. It was early evening, and the caravan would soon be setting up for the night. These bouts of temperature swings were showing no signs of stopping, and with the amount of water and salt lost, Julian was in real danger of dehydration.

When Ty goes to drop off their bedding (again), he'll need to make inquiries to the Matron's about what he can do to keep Julian watered. If he loses much more...

Julian twisted with a moan, rolling onto his side before curling up, shivering. Resigned, Ty pulled sheets and blankets back up, exhausted from his tending. As it was, he hadn't been able to get back to his plying, instead working on the new socks when able. With the amount of getting up and about he's had to do, finishing the lace just wouldn't be possible. Currently, he was knitting the leg, having just turned the heel. Depending on how the night goes, he may just finish it before bed.

***

Walking to the docks, Valora looked for her boat. Nevivon was about five days of hard riding, but a boat would cut it down to three, maybe less if they could get a good wind. She's fairly certain that Valerius hasn't sent anyone out yet, so she should have enough time to get there and settled.

Pushing thru the late afternoon crowds, she spotted her ride. Cordelia had found a large boat (or a small ship) that makes a usual run out to the salty little town. Specializing in hauling cargo, the Tiger Moth was one of the main providers of Nevivon's salt to Vesuvia. Cordelia knows someone who knows someone, and was thus able to secure her a discreet spot. By this time in two days, she'll be in her new station.

Greeting the captain, she was shown to her cabin. Very small and cramped, it was only large enough to have a bunk, a chest of drawers, and a very small desk. The under area of her bed doubled as storage, with a wire rack hanging over the desk as well. It was very small, claustrophobic even. Standing inside, the walls would be scant inches from her fingertips when stretching her arms out.

Meh, she's slept in far more cramped conditions.

Swinging up her two large duffle bags into the hanging rack, Valora slipped off her overcoat. Once the boat pushes off and clears the harbor, dinner will be served. Until then, she was going to read up on Nevivon.

***
Knocking on the wagon door, Antonius slowly pushed it open, sticking his head inside. He saw little Ty sitting on a chair, glasses on his nose and knitting away on a sock. A kerosene lamp was lit, putting off just enough light to see without disturbing the shivering lump that must have been Julian.

“Ey, Ty. Can I come in?”

Jolting, Ty whipped around. “Oh, uh, yeah. Just be quiet. What's up, GiGi?”

Quietly shutting the door, Tony held aloft the sheets of papers he carried. “Just finished up the report about what happened. Need some signatures before sending it off.” He shuffled closer, pulling out a hard-topped pen case as Ty set his knitting aside. Tony had to tiptoe around a full laundry basket, nose wrinkling at the stale scent of sickly sweat wafting from it.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he pointed out the areas that needed Ty's signature. “Want to read it over? We've got time. Need Julian to sign as well.” He scrubbed behind dog ears, one of Ty's girls laying her head in his lap as she sprawled over Julian. The other one let out a quiet whine, begging for pets as well.

“Nah, between you and YaYa, everything should be covered,” Ty flipped up the bottom of each page, signing on each line above his printed name. Near the end he paused, eyebrows disappearing into his hairline. “Shit head ran off?”

“Mhm.”

“How? Dola ain't no slouch.” She's the head of caravan security for a reason, trumping the head of the Captain of the Guard.

“Someone wanted to talk to him.”

“Why? The man's done for. He-” Ty stopped, GiGi placing a hand over his shoulder.

“Someone wanted to talk to him.” Tony gave Ty a pointed look.

“Ooooooohhhhh. Okay then. We'll let Bettiny deal with Hieronymus.” Finishing up, Ty handed the papers and pen back. Tony took a few moments to shuffle everything into a neater pile, watching surreptitiously as Ty looked over Julian, wiping sweat away with a cool rag.

Getting up with a few token old man sounds, Tony made his way back to the door. “I'll leave you to it.” Before leaving, he picked up the laundry basket. “I'll drop this off, along with an order to give you boys priority. One of the Matron's should be by with grub soon.”

“'kay,” came Ty's distracted reply.

Doing as he said, Tony then sat on his wagons back steps. He could hear Serafina futzing about inside before she plopped down, passing over a plate with dinner. “So, did he sign?”

Tony hummed around his mouthful of mashed potato, gulping it down loudly. “Yep. Stopped when he read about Octavius going 'missing’, nearly giving me a heart attack.” She chuckled, leaning into his side. “Now we just need to wait for Julian.”

“...how is the boyo?” She will be very put out if he doesn't come out of this fine. If anyone deserves a happy ending, its little Tiberius.

“Couldn't be in better hands.”
Dinner finished and drinks with the crew had, Valora lounged on her bunk. A lamp was lit, giving off bright light and letting her read more about Nevivon.

Currently, she was reading a timeline about notable events, such as the different territorial disputes surrounding it. After being founded by the Silurian Potentate Michéle Provençal the First, it was lost to the Calistain Chaplet, the precursor to the Vesuvian citystate. Vesuvia didn't even exist yet, nearly a thousand years needing to pass before the hamlet that would turn into Vesuvia would be built.

After being under Calistain rule, it would pass back and forth between it and Silures for a couple hundred years before Mokba would steamroll in. After that, it would be held by the large, snowy Zharship for about seven hundred years. Even now, being a functionally independent town for almost a century, many Nevivonites identify as being Mokban and speak a derivative of the Kirilic language.

All because of the salt flats the town sits on. Salt is a MAJOR commodity, both when it comes to flavoring and preserving food, but also healing. The large, green-hued mineral is said to have a crisp, sharp taste, and mixing it in a bath has shown to alleviate body aches and pains along with drawing out pollutants dwelling in the skin. Massaging a paste of the salt and camphor oil over areas such as the lymph nodes and letting it sit for a few minutes also flushes the system, and tonics using Nevinesse salts has greatly helped with digestion issues and to regulate menstrual cycles.

It's worth TWICE its weight in gold.

Knowing that this is the town of Portia and Julian's birth, she was interested in seeing what it actually looked like. It must be an extraordinary place, with the elder Devorak's being amazing people, to have produced such talented siblings.

She'll need to bring home souvenirs.

Bleary eyes blinking, Julian had to fight to focus. Trying to bring his fist up to rub his eyes, he quickly found that he was rolled up like a burrito in several layers of sheets and blankets. He wiggled, shuffling his arms as he fought to unwrap himself. A whining Mazel crawled up beside him, poking his cheek with a wet nose as her tail thumped onto the bed. He grunted, renewing his efforts, Mazel wiggling as well in solidarity.

Where was Ty? And why was he so tired?

“T-, Ty,” he croaked, wincing at how much it hurt to speak. He tried to wet his lips, only then realizing how dry his mouth was, and how thirsty he felt. Lazily turning his head, he couldn't see Ty. Wiggling as hard as he could, he was dismayed to see how little movement he made, along with how weak he felt. It was almost like his arms were made of rubber.

“Maz, can you, help?” Hell's fires but he's never felt so weak, so helpless. Lucky for him, it seems the dogs understood, because one started tugging an edge of fabric, jerking it hard. The other shoved her muzzle under Julian's ribs, pushing him into a roll. Slowly, he was unwrapped from his cloth prison. Laying on his side, he panted hard, dizzy from the motions. The girls sandwiched him, cuddling close as he started shivering.

“Sweetheart? Oh shit!” Julian could hear china rattle along with heavy footfalls, before being turned onto his back. Large hands cupped his face, Ty looking down at him in stark relief. “Fuck,
you're okay. Thank Hedonism your okay!” He started petting Julian's hair, not caring about how greasy and tacky from sweat it was.

“Well, if I died, you wouldn't have to had worried about my funeral shroud,” Julian weakly chuckled.

“Please don't joke about that,” Ty bit out, breathing shallowly but rapidly. “Please don't. You. You nearly did.”

Freezing briefly, Julian brought up his hand, covering the one still cupping his cheek, grinning weakly. “Heh, we both knew I'd be fine. My-”

“Your mark didn't work for nearly twenty minutes,” Ty choked. “I watched your face swell to twice its size, and listened to you gag on your inflated tongue.” A few tears escaped the corners of his eyes. His breath hitched, eyes squeezing shut as he brought a hand up, trying to wipe away his tears. “Your, your heart stopped. You died. And then your seal flickered.”

Julian had stopped breathing. He...died? He had died, and his seal never activated?

That's never happened. It shouldn't have happened! The poison should have been burned out of his system before it got to his heart! He's done the experiments! Each time, no matter the poison, no matter the dose, he's only felt the barest of symptoms before warm, clean heat flowed thru his blood. “How, how long?” He could only whisper his query, too scared to say it any louder.

Ty sniffed hard. “Ugh, haa, um, a minute. Maybe a bit longer.” He scrubbed his face, eyes red and itchy.

“...I'm sorry. I, I won't joke like that again.” Hearing Ty hiccup, he pulled the other down on top of him. As Ty buried his face in Julian's neck, Julian wrapped his arms around the other's shoulders. After a bit of shifting, both men were as comfortable as they would get.

Feeling puffs of breath along his jaw, Julian just squeezed Ty as tight as he could, doing his best to ignore the wetness now running down his neck.

Chapter End Notes

I'm in need of ridiculous, over-the-top, and outrageous rumors about Lucio. Toss 'em at me on my tumblr, it's also classlesstulip
Asra, Lucille, Tubor, and Ty’s uncles were roused at the ass-crack of dawn by Martel himself. Their grumbles were quickly silenced at his pronouncement that they finally had a break.

A junior member of the Citadel had been doing the late watch, which took place from midnight to false dawn. Part of their disguise was that of a wino, and he had been slumped in the doorway of Aoife's home. Empty wine bottles had been scattered around him (appalling Tubor), and the front of his cloak had been wet with the liquid, adding to the deception.

About an hour before, he heard footsteps. Feigning sleep, he went boneless, mouth open and letting out the occasional snort. The lax grip he had about the bottle in his grasp allowed it to slide away from him easily as one of those approaching kicked him harshly. Rolling aside and acting the drunk, his slurred speech and wild gestures let him stay close, deemed a non-threat, and let him hear the password the shorter of the pair uttered, granting them entry:

“When the Worm Moon waxes.”

“How typically dramatic,” Tubor drawled. He got glares from everybody present. “What? Don't look at me like that. You know I'm right.” He slumped, night robe slipping down a toned shoulder at his movement. He didn't miss the interested looks he garnered from a few of those present. “For once, and please, disagree with me if you wish even though I'm right, can a secret society who uses passwords and key phrases use anything oh, I don't know, NOT highly dramatic and a dead give away?”

“You've not had much exposure to Julian, have you?” Asra yawned, hand over his mouth. “You wouldn't be this bothered if you had.”

“Oh come on! If your going to have a secret society that is hellbent on world domination and the subjugation of the human race, maaaaybeee not having such an ominous password would help you keep things under wraps. Or even frame everything under a different purpose. Like, meetings for the ‘Lucio's Tit's Appreciation Society’. First order of business: cleaning his statues of lipstick residue! Who wants to care for his marbled dick? We'll draw lots!”

“Oh Behau, Tubor, you’re such an ass…,” Lucille covered her face, leaning on her elbows as Martel chuckled and Germanius and Cordelia laughed.

“I mean, really-”

“That's enough, Tubor,” Martel cut off the disgruntled Master Necromancer with a final chuckle. “As it is, we now have a way in. I propose we have someone enter, possibly plant a listening sigil, and get a gander at as much as possible.” He fished out a flask, unscrewing the metal cap before taking a swig. He brushed off Lucille's shocked ‘Martel!’ with a roll of his eyes. “The house will need to be taken down either way, but gathering more information would be nice.”

Germanius held out his hand, wiggling his fingers demandingly at Martel. “Oi! Give it here!” He pouted as Martel casually threw a rude gesture his way. “Oh, you're not fun anymore,” he leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. “Besides, are we just sending one in? And what happens if they're caught out?” Murmurs broke out at his last question.

Martel sighed. “Unfortunately, we can only send one, and they'll be on their own. We can't afford to tip the cult off that Vesuvia is on to them. A singular agent can be easily explained.”
Everyone got quiet. Someone will have to volunteer for this mission, knowing that there would be a great possibility that they’ll never walk out of that house alive.

“I still have a few days to map some of the wards. Use this time to think, and spread word. The Citadel will provide everything possible to ensure that the volunteer comes back alive, but, well, I'm sure you all know the possibilities.” Martel stood, pushing away from the table. He bowed, giving a somber ‘Good Morning’ before walking away.

Asra never thought the sound of a closing door could sound so final, but then again, he feels like he’ll be learning a lot the next few days.

***

Julian had fallen back asleep shortly after waking the night before, but it was a more restful one. Ty had been unable to contemplate joining him, worried that if he does, the other would cease to be. Instead, he stayed up, working on the socks. Knee-high, he finished the one and got halfway up the leg of the next (his natural speed and fear motivating him) when the pale beams of a dawn sun streamed into the wagon. Julian had curled around him, face nuzzled into Ty's outer thigh as he gently snored away.

Ty's heart clenched when he got up and Julian whimpered, but needs must. The girls following, all three relieved full bladders before stumbling back into a cozy wagon. Julian, while still asleep, had stretched an arm out, searching. Ty was quick to rejoin the bed, tucking sheets and blankets back around pale shoulders.

He didn't move from his position until a few hours later. Serafina lightly knocked on their door, poking her head in shortly thereafter. She saw Ty sitting up in bed, glasses perched on his nose and a double-pointed needle tucked between his lips as he finished a cuff. Next to him was a large lump, she presumed Julian, and Mazel and Tov were snuggled up against the recovering doctor.

It was so adorably domestic, her teeth started hurting.

“Hey, bubby,” she called him by the nickname she gave him when he was small enough to tuck into the crook of her arm (and gods, was it really that long ago?), “we set up camp next to some springs. Should help Julie sweat what's left out.”

“It would also be nice to get clean,” Ty mumbled around the needle. “A nice scrub would do wonders.”

“I'll bring you something light to eat. Anything in particular?”

Ty ‘hmmmed’, thinking. “Protein, carbs, and some fats. I think that Julian's healing factor may have sapped him of what little fat stores he had.” The man did indeed look more pinched and drawn than usual. Julian is very lean, despite what his stature would have you think. As Ty was tucking the man back in, his fingers skimmed over protruding ribs and hip bones.

Ty hadn't liked them before, but he really doesn't like seeing them now. He'll need to work double-time to pack on not only what little body fat Julian had, but an additional few pounds.

“.Toasted bagels, herbed cream cheese, and prosciutto? With some jams?” Shouldn't bother Julian’s stomach, and is light and filling.

“…do you have apple jelly?”

Serafina smiled. “I've got Lady's Apple jelly.” Despite being a fully-grown man, it seems little
Tiberius is still partial to his childhood favorite.

Regardless of everything about him that's changed, it seems that this is the one thing that didn't.

"Thank you, YaYa."

***

Swallowing her pride, Nadia straightened her back. In front of her was the door to Germanius's assigned rooms. Behind it, she could hear faint movements and quiet murmurs, one deep and male, the other higher and feminine.

She had spent the last day thinking hard, coming to the painful (literally) conclusion that what Germanius had said was right: what is wrong with her? The city is truly falling apart, crime is rampant, and the Worm issue far outweighs bringing Devorak in.

And Portia? If she had wanted to finish her brother's job, she could have easily smothered her in her sleep, and with no witnesses. Portia was her primary caregiver for a few years, giving her ample opportunity to do the deed.

Steeling herself, Nadia rapped her knuckles sharply. Moments later, Portia's freckled face peered at her from between the door and jamb, both apprehensive and wary. She opened it wider with a quiet 'm'lady'.

"Are you both available? It seems I have some...apologies to give."

***

Setting an overstocked tray down, Serafina was shortly joined by Ty in slicing and toasting a variety of bagels. She had brought several different types, from plain to bluberry to onion, all in an effort to tempt Julian into eating. Add in multiple types of creamed cheeses, several pots of jelly and jam, and a mound of rich prosciutto, and she is certain that the man will have difficulty resisting.

She may have also snuck a small jar of black caviar in, as well. Not Nivinesse, but still.

She and Ty made small talk, all while doing their best to ignore two sets of puppy eyes. One of the girls started doing a rolling chuff, trying to get attention with her antics.

It was as they were finishing up with the toasting (and warming a few cheeses and jelly's) that Julian started to stir. His face was heavily shadowed, a beard coming in. He yawned as he pushed his hair back from his face, grimacing at how thick, greasy strands caught in his fingers. Sitting up straight, he squinted, trying to focus as he smelled warm toasted breads and the sweet and savory scents of...cheese and fruits? “'ey,” he croaked, before clearing his throat. “Mornin’.”

“Hey ya, Julie. Ready for some brekkie?” Serafina gestured at the mound of bagels. “Gots ya sweet and salty.”

The man in question frowned before working his mouth and jaw, trying to get the nasty taste in it out. “I'll, uh, pass. My stomach feels sour-” a loud growl erupted. Julian blushed, eyes wide as a hand covered his gut. “Ummmm...”

Ty shot him a knowing smirk. “Yep, you sure don't sound hungry.”

“Quite! Must have been the girls! Have they had their breakfast yet? Wouldn't want them to starve!”
Ty whistled at them. “Go find GiGi. He has food!” A few thumps as they left the bed, and soon the dogs were shooting out the open door.

Julian started shivering, pulling blankets up and around him as his heaters left. Ty saw the man bring his knees up, and wiped his hands clean before digging into a cabinet. Grabbing the finished socks, he descended upon Julian. After a bit of squawking, a disheveled Julian noticed a new pair of socks on his legs and that a warm, thick sweater was on his person.

The sweater must have been Ty's. It was much too large to fit Julian, and he estimates it would hit a few inches above his knees when standing. The wool was soft and tightly knitted, colored a deep red, a shade very similar to the first pair of socks Ty presented to him. Breathing in, he caught a whiff of what he can only describe as ‘Ty’, a deep, musky scent. Hoping no one was looking, he ducked his nose inside his collar, inhaling deeply.

Serafina smirked. Looks like Ty'll be keeping this one. He's already dressing the other in Principia Red and knitting for him. “Any special request?” She motioned over to the tray, “got a variety of things to try. Sweet and savory cheese, different jams and- Ty! What are you doing!?”

Ty had taken the time to fix up a few bagels of his own. Cinnamon and raisin with plain cream cheese, he used the WHOLE jar of Lady's Apple jelly on them, leaving just faint traces of the sweet, golden concoction in the jar. And the man had the audacity to look unapologetic! “Whut?”

“Why you! You! Argh! You're just like your grandfather!” The man does the same thing! She swears, this jelly must be like catnip for them. “Now how is Julian going to try it, you pig!?”

“He can have one! I made four!”

“And what if he doesn't like cinnamon raisin, hmmm?” She put her hands on her hips, glaring up at the godless heathen before her.

“...oh.” Oops.

***

Shoo'ing a still snarking Serafina out, Ty brought the tray over to their bed. A bit of maneuvering later and soon both men were looking at the feast before them. Seeing the amount of food, Julian's stomach let out another grumble.

“Eh urp, burb,” Ty spoke around the bagel in his mouth. Oh great galaxies, but he loves Lady's Apple jelly!

Knowing that Ty'll hound him until he eats, Julian tossed together an onion bagel, plain cheese, and a few slices of prosciutto. After a few bites he became ravenous. Devouring the first one, he soon tossed together a second and third. For his fourth, he spied the caviar and dolloped a HUGE spoonful of the stuff on top of a sesame seed bagel with garlic herb cream cheese and prosciutto. He bit into it with great gusto.

Oh gods, it's been soooo long since he had a good caviar...

Ty gave the bagel a disgusted look. “Don't try to kiss me after that.” Fish eggs, blegh! He'll stick with his jelly's, thank you very much!

In retaliation, Julian leaned close after swallowing, breathing into Ty's face with a loud ‘HAAAAAH!’
Ty gagged, pushing Julian's grinning face aside. “Oh by Hedonism, but that's foul! And ugh! Your face! It's itchy! Keep it away!” The rough, coarse pricks of Julian's (short) facial hair on his palm sent shivers up Ty's spine, and NOT in a good way.

Leaning into Ty, Julian wrapped his arms around the other's shoulders, rubbing his scratchy chin and cheeks into a tanned neck and collar. He could hear the sounds of rough hair on smooth skin, and added in a bit of a growl as Ty tried to shove him away, protesting the ‘rough’ treatment. With a bounce, Julian also planted a series of big, wet kisses on soft lips. “Mwah, mwahmwhahmwha, fishy kisses for you!”

“NOOOOoooooooo!”

***

“RISE AND SHINE, BITCHES! GO ON NOW, GIT!” The barracks door swung open, slamming into the wall as Theodosia stormed in, bugle to her mouth as she started upturning beds. Behind her, an ecstatic Vulgora tromped, pumping a gauntleted fist.

“AWAKE AND AWAY, YOU LAZY BASTARDS! TODAY MARKS THE START OF A NEW DAWN!” They pulled a man from his bunk by his foot, dropping him onto the floor. “NO MORE SHALL THE CITY GUARD BE THE LAUGHINGSTOCK OF THE EMPIRE! ARISE! ARISE!”

“AND RUN, BITCHES! RUN!” Men streamed out of the barracks in an explosion, all in various states of dress. Some even ran out wearing nothing, cupping their bits with their hands. Outside, laughter from the citizens could be heard.

“WHO GAVE YOU THE RIGHT YEOWCH!” The Captain of the Guard jumped, dancing away from the flick of Theo's whip that landed at his feet.

“I DO, YOU WASTE OF DICK!” Another flick of her whip sounded, the loud *CRACK!* it made resounding around the now-empty building. She got right up in his face, shoving the cone she was using to magnify her voice right at him. “ALONG WITH HER LADYSHIP, COUNTESS NADIA! NOW MOVE!” She grabbed the man by the back of his shirt, shoving him out the door.

“RUN! FIVE, NO TEN! TEN LAPS ALONG THE WALLS!” This is the second-best day of Vulgora's life! Finally, a person of action! A fellow warrior, one who is unwilling to let the weak and indulged rest on their laurels!

She is the Second Coming of Lucio!

Pumping both fists, Vulgora threw their head back with a mighty howl. Stomping their feet a few times in an impromptu war dance, they dashed after the stragglers of the Guard, a few of their own soldiers following with a laugh.

The rivalry between the Vesuvian military and the town guard is legendary, and EVERYONE, from the lowest foot soldier to the most decorated general, is enjoying seeing the lazy guards get whipped into proper shape. Now the soldiers can actually do their job and have time off, having pulled double-duty for the last few years.

Theo took off, following the trail of chaos Vulgora left in their wake. She lost them briefly, only able to locate them when a cloud of feathers burst into existence, followed by incoherent clucking and a yell of anger. As she dodged the early-morning crowds, the loud *SNAP!* of breaking wood could be heard, followed by the anguished scream of ‘MY CABBAGES!’.
Eh, Daddy'll take care of the damages.

***

Finished with breakfast, it was only when Julian went to stand that he realized how badly he needed to go. Feeling wobbly, he stumbled over to their shoes, stuck on a random pair, and off he went (uncaring that he was essentially wearing Ty's sweater as a dress). As he was relieving himself, he chanced to look down and jumped, nearly pissing all over himself.

Purple! His pee was a bright lilac color!

This doesn't seem physically possible!

Stumbling back into their wagon, he started stuttering and stumbling over his words. “Ty! Um! How is, what I mean is, uh, HUH!?”

“...you okay, Sweetheart?” Ty was putting together a basket, filled with grooming items and the like. He already had a few pairs of sandals ready, and was getting ready to strip himself bare when Julian ran in in a panic.

“PURPLE!”

It took Ty a few moments to connect the dots. “Oh, yeah, *Pretoria Vulgaris* poisoning tints a lot of your humors a purple color. Sweat, tears, mucous, piss...even your cum.”

Julian stopped faffing about at that last one. Hands hanging at his sides, he slowly looked down his front, eyes wide. Ty made a mental note to ask him about his eye later, he's been meaning to since he spied its condition at Shepherd's Stop.

“Ummmm, what?” Julian will admit, he's of two minds. One is absolutely fascinated, wondering what compounds of the poison causes such a reaction. The other is horrified. “If I, um, ‘emit’,,” he flushed deeply, “it'll be-”

“Purple,” Ty finished. “Bright lilac, to be precise.” He waggled his brows, “wanna see?”

“Is that a trick question?” Ty huffed. He thought it was funny. “YES. Anything that can alter the body in such a way, *especially* with such an unusual color, is worth observation!”

Julian yelped, stomach digging into Ty's shoulder as he was slung like a sack of potatoes. Said man smacked a rump, grinning. “Well then, Julian. To the bed! FOR SCIENCE!”

***

Nadia rubbed her forehead, eyes pinched shut. She could faintly hear Portia sniffle and a few clinks of china, Germanius must have put together some nibbles.

She felt exhausted, having unloaded much more than she anticipated along with her apology. Only now does she realize that her actions were not those of someone overworked, but of a spoiled brat. She should have taken back complete control after she woke, once learning the state of the city, she should have tossed the courtiers out on their rears for their actions (or lack thereof), and she should NOT have treated Germanius as she did.

Her actions were not those of a lady bred for statesmanship, but that of a spoiled child. As much as she would like to blame her upbringing on being the youngest, and thus most pampered, of seven daughters, it would only be a thin excuse. She'll be seeing forty in a handful of years, and this is no
way for a woman of her station to act.

“While it is nice to finally see you pulling your head out of your ass,” Portia gasped at Germanius's language, “but that still leaves one thing: why. This is not like you, and reinforces the impression that something else is going on.” Too many things are coming together and pointing at some sort of supernatural interference. Lucio being stuck between the living and the dead, and the fact that he may have tried to Mantle the Devil. Julian being unable to remember nearly a year's worth of memories. Nadia's extended sleep and her abrupt change in personality. The worms…

“I will ask you this once, and only once: will you submit to an examination for magical or ritual interference?”

She grimaced, picking up her cup of now-cold tea. “I really have no choice. These, swings, in personality have no rhyme or reason, and are having a definite effect on my ability to properly rule.

I cannot subject Vesuvia to such a thing.”

Portia looked back and forth between the two political powerhouses, nibbling her lip. She wanted so desperately to ask-

“Spit it out, shortstack.”

“I, um, that is, can we-”

“Mother of Shadows, but you sound like Julian,” Germanius huffed.

Nadia stared hard at him. “You've met the man?” The heat of anger simmered in her blood. This proves, without a doubt, that House Principia is in league with Dr. Devorak! They'll finish what was started and then wrest Vesuvia into their clutches!

She gasped, sputtering from the glass of cold water that was sloshed into her face. Portia had backed away from the table with a shocked gasp before picking up a napkin and tending to Nadia. Germanius, meanwhile, was still in his seat, holding tightly the glass he had filled from a nearby water pitcher.

“You thinking clearly, now?”

“I, what?” Nadia pushed wet locks away from her face. “What happened?”

“Looks like something or someone has cast something, and it seems to be steering you towards acts of self-sabotage. Which is disturbing,” Germanius muttered, squinting. He was mentally going thru a list of demonic beings and spells, trying to figure something out. However, not having full access to his library, he was at a loss. “I'll get with Martel and the heads of the local Circle. You being examined is now top priority.”

Portia just sighed.

***

Towels wrapped around their waists and sandals on the feet, Ty and Julian made their way across the road and down the embankment. Entering the treeline, splashes and laughter rang out, along with the faint smell of aerosoled minerals.

They weren't the only ones with thoughts of a bath on their mind. Already a small trail has been worn into the ground. Many were eager to get clean, with most people making the journey bare.
Suffice to say, Julian was having a, uh, hard time.

“Why am I like this,” he whimpered. Ty just laughed at his misery. It also doesn't help that they had been interrupted from their ‘research’ by a cockblocking YaYa.

And they had just been getting to the good part!

Breaking thru the trees, the springs revealed themselves. Large pools of steaming water interspersed with little ‘islands’ of land, surrounded by flats of short and stubby green grass. The waters had a green tinge, and a haze hung over the area. Already, scores of Umbra could be seen literally frolicking thru the jets, with the young children having fun pushing each other into the deeper pools.

Ty steered them towards a smaller pool, set a bit away from the main cluster. It had a overhanging ledge on one side, and a bush full of bright red berries. Setting their basket down, Ty pulled out a wide-toothed comb before setting his towel aside and slipping in.

“Hey, Sweetheart? Think you can help with my hair?” Ty had started undoing his braid, frowning at the smooshed condition of his curls.

Sliding in as well (dancing and ‘ooh-ing!’ at the hot water), Julian helped with the braid before starting to resection it and comb thru. It was sticky with grease in places, making him frown. “Good golly Miss Molly! Ty, your hair-”

“Yeah, I, uh, sweat a lot when I get worried. Sorry.” And considering how worried he had been over Julian…

“I’ll have you right as rain in no time!” Slipping most of Ty's hair over a scarred shoulder, Julian got to work. Being super careful to not tug on knots, he slowly made his way from ends to scalp before pulling over a new section.

Finished faster than expected, Ty dunked his head and scrubbed his scalp. Coming back up with a groan of relief, he saw Julian doing the same. Spying a large submerged boulder, he pushed Julian onto it before going into their toiletries basket. Pulling out a straight razor, he hissed when he realized that he forgot their shampoo. “Shit.” It also isn't helping that a still keyed-up Julian was running his hands up and down Ty's thighs, paying special attention to the backs. “Forgot our shampoos, and the soap I brought won't be good for- Julie! Hands off!”

Julian snickered, pulling Ty closer to his seated position by the hips. “Hmmmmm, we have time,” he leaned in, dropping an open-mouthed kiss to the strip of skin between Ty's belly button and groin, smirking at the jerk he got. He leaned in for a few nibbles-

“Pfft! Thbppppt! Pituhi!” Julian sputtered, pushing himself back onto the boulder he had been shoved from. “What was that for!?”

“Y'aint getting close to my bits until you shave,” Ty had his hands on his hips, brow arched with a sneer. Hearing more whining, he rolled his eyes, looking about before pausing on the bush. “Speaking of…” he trailed off.

Pulling off a large berry, he smooshed it between his fingers, rubbing the thick liquid between them. “Yep, just as I thought: soapberry!”

Julian sidled closer, bringing his nose near Ty's hand and sniffing. “I take it that, based on the, uh, name, that it's used for soap making?”
Ty grinned. “Not just that, but if it's exposed to enough of certain minerals and water, it actually turns into soap!” Dunking his hands just under the springs surface, he rubbed them together as he pulled them back up. Before their eyes a rich, pinkish lather started working up.

Bouncing in his seat, Julian spun himself around. “Ooh, me! Do me!”

“I'll do ya, alright.” Ty dug his hands into wet, oily locks before digging his fingers into warm scalp, scratching and massaging in circular motion.

“Yessssssss…” Julian started to melt, a warm and tingly feeling running up and down his spine just to traverse along his scalp. “Hey! It tingles!”

“Mhmm.” Ty pulled off another berry, lathering it before diving back into now-cleaner locks. Soon, thick suds had built up into a fluffy crown. “‘kay babe, dunk.”

Taking a few moments to rinse, Julian was amazed. His hair has never felt so soft and silky. “This is amazing!” He attempted to continue talking as Ty started to lather his beard, but choked and sputtered as the acrid-tasting suds got into his mouth. “Hey!”

“Then hush.” Once happy with the coverage, he picked back up the discarded straight razor. “May I?”

Leaning back, Julian sighed at the feel of cool metal gliding along his hot cheeks. The soft touch of Ty's fingers tensioning his skin or guiding the position of his head was lighter than a whisper. “This feels so nice. Why do you spoil me so?” He could hear a faint sound as Ty flicked the razor, flinging away suds and hair.

“Because I can. Lean back more, luv.” Julian leaned back against the edge off the pool, neck stretching out and humming deeply as Ty straddled his legs as he worked on Julian's neck. Julian was quietly amazed, because Ty hadn't even nicked him once.

Wiping away the remnants of the improvised shaving cream, Ty looked over his work. Happy to not have missed a thing, he dropped a few kisses to lax lips. Julian hummed, smiling as his hands grasped strong hips and rubbed a muscled lower back. Deciding to take a chance, he cupped Ty's backside, not missing the chuckle he got.

He should help the other with his hair, but they could do that after a few cuddles.

***

Gothicus was swanning about the Palace, looking for his latest conquest. He was hoping for a repeat of his and Valerius's last encounter when he happened upon said man.

He found the other in the Northern Tower, surveying the morning on one of the many balconies that dot the place. Even this early in the day the Consul wasn't far from his wine, a golden white resting in a tall glass by his hand. He seemed to be looking intently down at something.

“Hey, beautiful! You from around here?” Gothicus leaned against the archway of the balcony entrance, being sure to display himself with a jaunty wink. He got a disdainful sniff for his efforts. Rude.

“Please refrain from any, shenanigans, this early in the day. I don't have enough wine to deal with both you and whatever Pontifex Vulgora is currently doing,” and boy was that an understatement. Since Valerius arrived on his favorite balcony almost three quarters of an hour ago, he has been
utterly fascinated by what was going on below him. “It seems something has put a bee in the Pontifex's headdress, for they are currently chasing a great number of the Town Guard along the walls.”

“Ooooh! Lemme see!” With a bump of his hips, Gothicus shoved Valerius aside with a yelp. Taking a few moments to look for the crowd, Gothicus let Valerius's bitching about his ‘uncouth behavior’ and how Gothicus was the ‘epitome of low-bred and uncivilized men everywhere!’ just roll off his back. He's heard it all before, and will only really pay attention if the man says something new. “Hey! What's Theo doing down there!”

Following Gothicus's pointed finger, Valerius took a closer look. “Hmm, and it seems some of the Army is involved as well.”

“Ah, if the Army's involved, that explains a lot.”

“How so?”

“Theo's the head of the Principian Armies of Serenissima. While both of us ain't too impressed with the Guard, she must be really pissed.”

“Do please refrain from such coarse language in my presence.” Gothicus didn't need to look at the other man to know his lip must be curled up in a sneer of near-epic proportions.

“You weren't complaining a few days ago. Hell, you said quite a few ‘coarse’ things as well.”

Valerius took a few moments to loudly clear his throat behind his fist, a flush high on his cheeks. “I hardly think it was necessary to bring that up-”

“Eh, whatever, I'm bored now and it looks like Theo's having fun down there.” The frankly EPIC game of tag has gotten closer to their spot. “Later, babes!” And with a shove Gothicus hurled himself over the balcony railing with a loud ‘WEEEEeee!’ doppler away.

With a choked gasp, Valerius hurried over. Looking over the side, he was relieved to see Gothicus sliding down one of the many banners hanging from the Palace that was anchored to a nearby building. Seeing the man leap from the banner and bounce off a stall's cloth roof onto the road with a roll, Valerius leaned against the bannister, hand to his racing heart. Spying his undisturbed glass, he snatched it up before chugging it down, hearing hoots and hollers echoing up to him from the streets.

It is way too early to be dealing with this shit.

***

Julian was a blushing, stuttering mess. Like Ty had done earlier, Julian had suds's up his hands and started working on Ty's curls. While he enjoys running his hands thru the thick strands, it's not enough to really, uh, get him going.

But with the way Ty was moaning…

Loud, rolling growls that sounded more like purrs rumbled out from his throat. His eyes were heavy lidded and he easily went with Julian's motions in a lazy and lethargic manner. Everything put Julian in mind of a large wild cat, like a lion or tiger sunning themselves.

He had made good progress on the others hair and was happy to see the opal streak had gotten even longer. It now was hitting Ty's waist. Soon, it will be the same length as the rest of his hair.
Speaking of, “darling? How is this lock,” Julian tugged the silky strands, shuddering minutely at the growl Ty let out, “growing so fast?”

“Hedonism, babe. Lost some hair due to my fight and injuries with the Worm, but was victorious. We only lose our hair when we lose.”

“So, He's growing it back for you?” Sounds fake, but okay.

“Mhmmm. If I and say, GiGi fight and I lose, he'd be at liberty to shear me.” And as far as Ty knows (and due to the length of his hair) he's never lost a fight.

“But, Antonius, Cordelia, and Germanius all have short hair? Are they not Warlord's as well?”

“Retired. Which say's a lot. Most of us don't live long enough to claim ‘retirement’, Sweetheart. Cutting their silvered manes short is telling everyone that the only thing that's beaten them is time.” Feeling Julian withdraw his hands, Ty dunked. Coming back up he groaned. “Ahhhhh, clean! Feels good, man.”

“On topic, but not really, here.” Julian pushed towards Ty the bottle of hair oil he bought at the spa. He was kind of nervous. “I, uh, really like how you smell with this an, um, you've gotten me so many nice things that I-”

Ty grasped the cool glass, looking at the label before he connected the dots. “A present! You got me a present! Help me put it in!” He was fairly vibrating as Julian smoothed a thin layer of Ty's custom scent along his curls. Sectioning the hair, each section was spun up into a coil and clipped into place. The scent of roses, vanilla, and sandalwood permeated the air, and Ty knows that as they walk back to the caravan that everyone would be able to smell it and be getting all up in his business.

And he will take great JOY in telling them that his lover bought it for him and that it's his custom scent! So fuck off!

***

“RUN MOTHERFUCKERS! RUN!” In addition to her holler Theo snapped her whip, goosing the ass of one of the stragglers in front of her.

She was so NOT impressed with the Guard. They had literally started complaining about being ‘tired’ and ‘out of breath’ not even after ten minutes. No wonder the city's falling apart! The primary law keeping force is full of fat assholes who spend most of their shifts drinking, wenching, and shaking down the locals for spare change! It's more obvious than ever just why so many ‘protection’ rackets have popped up: the citizens need protection from their own protectors!

Hearing the familiar heavy steps of her brother running up, Theo made room for him to run alongside her. “Hey, bitch! Wassup?”

“What do you want, fucker?”

“Is that how to treat your favorite brother!??”

“You're my ONLY brother!”

“Hence why I'm your favorite!”

“Ugh. What do you want, ‘Icus?”
“I was bored and saw the new fitness routine sweeping the city!” He hopped over a collapsed Guard. “How goes it?” He jumped as she shouted.

“How goes it? HOW GOES IT!? These lazy sacks of shit fucking suck! I know twelve year old's with better stamina than them! Hell's bell's but even little Belial could take these fucks on!”

“I DESIRE TO MEET THIS BELIAL, IF THEY ARE AS GOOD AS YOU SAY!” Vulgora's voice rang out before the person in question elbowed themselves into their group. “BUT FIRST! I CALL A REST! HALT!” Large groups of the guard collapsed where they stood, panting and shaking. Many were quietly cursing the air blue while the soldiers just milled about, barely winded.

“Eh, Bel is still back home. Maybe we should ask Dad to bring him here along with Tybalt?” Gothicus is really starting to miss the little cuddle bug. “I could do the some adorableness right now.” Dad probably could, too.

“I heard him bitching about the two yesterday. Something about them being little shits and a letter.” Theo is so damn happy she wasn't involved with whatever that was. Daddy sounded like he was about to erupt.

“THEN TELL ME WHEN HE ARRIVES! I FIND MYSELF DESIRING A PUPIL!” Which is an understatement. Vulgora has trained all the talented individuals they could get their hands on. It's why Vesuvia's army is as good as it is. But, it's been quite some time since they've had an actual apprentice.

By this time, most of the Guard got enough breath back to start complaining and none were on the ground. Back to work!

“ARMY TO ME!” Gauntleted fist raised high, Vulgora was soon surrounded by the grunts who decided to take part in this fuckery. “Next, we divide the ranks! Each of you will pair up and take charge of a group! It is now time for discipline and to remind them that they serve the citizens of the city! Have them do whatever tasks are needed to make it sink in! ARE YOU READY!” A loud ‘OOH-RAH!’ erupted from the huddle before it broke apart, the soldiers quickly pairing up and splitting the guard up before melting away.

The Pontifex strut over to the two siblings, who were getting the leftovers into some semblance of rank and file. “THE TIME HAS COME! SHOW ME MORE OF YOUR CAPABILITIES!”

“Ah hell yeah! Let's do this!” Gothicus pumped his fists and added a pelvic thrust for emphasis. “By the time we're through, the Guard will be transformed! Better than ever!

YEAH!”

“YEAH!”

“WHO'S THE BEST?”

“WE'RE THE BEST!”

“WHO RUNS THIS HOUSE?”

“WE RUN THIS HOUSE! HOO-AH!” Saying the last part in sync, Gothicus and Vulgora did a jig, clapped their hands and jumped into a chest bump, Gothicus sending the much shorter Vulgora flying backwards to land on their rear. Blinking a few times, Vulgora leapt to their feet with a bloodthirsty grin before charging with a warcry at the guards, chasing them further down the streets, Gothicus fast on their tail.
Wondering what the fuck just happened, a resigned Theo gave chase. If she doesn't catch up to the two meatheads quickly, who *knows* what they'll get up to.

***

Still a bit wobbly, Julian sat on the back steps of his and Ty's wagon, admiring the new socks he had. He wiggled his toes happily, bouncing his feet slightly in happiness. Serafina snickered at him from where she stood. Julian thinks she doesn't have a leg to stand on, considering she's literally dancing with Mazel and Tov.

“Never thought I'd see a fully grown, young adult man get so excited over a simple pair of socks. What are you, eighty?”

Julian sniffed, tossing his drying fringe. “I'll have you know, my good woman, that I've just turned twenty-seven!” And who says he's not old enough to get excited over a nice pair of socks? Good socks are hard to come by! Especially nice ones!

“Pfft. Kids these days, getting excited over socks and the like. When I was your age, I was getting all hyped up over things like swords and the dick I was about to crawl all over.”

Julian smothered his face as he leaned back, groaning in mortification. Why are all the old ladies he meets perverts!?

“Um, well,” he floundered, flustered. “Well, Ty's twenty-eight.” The man told him so himself. And if he's going down, Ty's coming with him.

Her jaw dropped. “Twenty-eight? **Twenty-eight!?** That dummy!” She dropped the large paws she had been holding, “Aye yo TY! WHERE YOU AT!?” A few wagons back, a frustrated screech could be heard, shortly followed by a plume of flour rising up into the air.

After a few more clatters and crashes, a flour-covered Ty stalked up, a snarl twisting his face. “WHADDA YA WANT!?" He did not like being interrupted in the middle of his baking. As it is, the Tiramisu recipe he had been trying out was now *ruined.*

“You DUMBASS!” Serafina jumped up, smacking her grandson upside the head. “How old are you!?”

Ty rubbed the back of his head, wanting to take the wooden spoon in his apron pocket out and smack his granny with it, much like she did when he was a child. “I'm. Twenty. Eight,” he ground out.

“Wrong calendar, idjit!” Serafina loves her grandson dearly, but *boy* can he be stupid.

“Wha-” Ty started before stopping. His brow furrowed as he thought, before muttering things in another language under his breath. He quickly brought both of his hands up, counting on his fingers as he thought. He stopped, eyes going wide.

“Shit. Fuck. Uh, I'm 32.” He keeps on forgetting the the Umbrian calendar is slow compared to the Stellarian one. Despite him keeping track of many things with the latter, he still uses the former one when it comes to his age and holiday's.

The Umbrian year is 420 days long, and follows the moon. They have 15 months of 28 days each. On even numbered years with lunar eclipses that cross over Harmonia, there's a leap week.
And don’t get him started on how they track the seasons. One method involves a groundhog…
“and what the hell brought all this up?”

“Just talk on how you and Julie-boy there,” Serafina tossed her thumb back, “are old men trapped in young bodies. Socks? Really?”

“Good socks are hard to come by.”

“THAT’S what I thought!” Julian leapt to his feet, throwing himself into a bewildered (but not protesting) Ty's hold. “By the Morrigan but you're perfect!”

Dropping a peck to upturned lips, Ty released Julian. “Not that I don't want to stay and chat, but I need to get back to cooking,” he prodded Julian in the ribs. “I don't like how skinny you got. Need to fatten you up.”

“*gasp!* No!”

“...tiramisu?”

“What are you standing around here for!?” Ignoring Ty's smirk, Julian spun and shoved the other. “Back to the kitchen my good man!”

***

Ty spent the rest of the day in one of the kitchen carts, working hard to prepare not only food for the masses, but things specifically meant to tease and tantalize Julian. As a result, when the wagons started moving at lunch, Julian spent the rest of his day alone with the girls, catching up on his reading.

As the caravan stopped for dinner, Julian decided to visit Tony. The man's a breath of sanity and Julian could really use that right now. Trotting up the line, he spotted Serafina sat outside their wagon, a large basket of what looks to be apples between her legs.

“Ah, I've never seen this type of apple before,” Julian gingerly picked up one of said fruit, marveling at its size and colors. Larger than a Red Delicious, it was also a brighter red with a cap of gold ‘dust’ on top with a kiss of snowy white on its bottom. All the colors were very intense, almost over-saturated.

“Not many of these make their way out of Umbra lands. It's a ‘Lady's Apple’. Nice and crisp,” Serafina continued to go thru and rub the bushel with a cloth. “Take one. Share it with Ty. I don't think he's had one since long before his accident.”

“Are you sure?” Julian can tell she's going to use them for something, and he doesn't want to short her.

“A single apple isn't going to mess up the wine. Go for it!”

As Julian skipped away to share his bounty, Antonius popped his head out the wagon. “I noticed how you didn't mention that it has another name…”

His wife snorted. “A ‘Lover's Apple’ should always be first shared with your lover. The first bite is ALWAYS the most memorable.”

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” Tony ducked back inside at the snarl he got, chuckling.
Well, she's not wrong. It'll certainly be ‘memorable’, all right.

***

Julian dashed thru the caravan, eager to share his bounty with Ty. He had wanted to try it when he first saw it, and when Serafina mentioned how long it's been since Ty had last had one, well, sharing is caring.

As he got closer and closer to their cart, the apple in his hand seemingly getting warmer, he was filled with the urge to share it. With Ty.

And only Ty.

That single desire filling him, he skimmed over their back steps before entering. Seeing his quarry on the floor, long legs stretched out as Ty rested from his work, a heat suffused his being. He started feeling warm and sluggish, and hungry. Looking down at the apple in his hands, Julian knew just the thing to satiate him.

“Hey, Sweetheart, what's—” Ty stopped dead, stiffening. His pupils blew wide, and he dragged in a deep breath, the delightful scents of Julian and something else, something mouthwatering, into his lungs. Widening his legs, he looked up, seeing Julian in the doorway and in a similar state. Once his eyes saw the other, he froze, biting his lip as heat shot to his groin; he knew what was up.

He wants to find out who had a Lady's Apple, and why they left them out where Julian can stumble across them. It's been sooooooo long since he last had one. The sweet juices, the firm flesh that parts under ones teeth with a snap...

“Ah, um, I was told that it's been a while since you had one,” Julian waved the apple in question. “Would you like to share?”

Ty's fingers flexed as his eyes glued themselves to the gently panting man before him. Oh, if only Julian knew what it means to share, to want to share, a Lady’s Apple with someone...

“Come here,” Ty leaned back against the foot of their bed, Julian happily plopping himself into the available lap with a sigh. Placing his hands on slim hips, Ty steadied Julian before leaning in for a soft kiss. “Why don't you take a bite,” he murmured against warm lips.

“Oh, but Serafina mentioned how long its been since you had one. I wouldn't want to keep you much longer.” Julian is so sweet, wanting to give Ty the first bite.

“But you've never had one. Go ahead.”

With a smile, Julian brought the apple up, lips tracing the cool fruit skin before his mouth opened and he took a large bite. The loud *SNAP!* of teeth breaking into the apple flesh was quickly followed by a loud moan as the sweetest nectar Julian has ever drank trickled down his throat.

Feeling something nudge him, his eyes opened just to go wide as Ty bit into the free side of the apple. Head twisted slightly to the side, Ty's nose was a hair's breadth away from his own. Large, dark eyes were lidded and glazed, a faint flush dancing over his cheeks. The sheer amount of smoulder in them made Julian's heart skip a beat.

Completing their bites with a jerk, both men moaned as something electric shot between them, bridging at the apple. Julian's eyes rolled and he fell backward, Ty following him and the apple rolling away. Now bent in half, he chewed his bite, licking his lips as he went hot. Opening eyes he
hadn't realized he closed, everything came into hyper-focus. The last rays of sunlight pouring into the wagon looked like liquid gold, and he could see each individual grain in the wood of the wagon. Looking at his wonderful, amazing Darling, each delicate web of Ty's pupils could be seen in agonizing detail, and every breath Julian took brought scents he's never smelled before into his lungs. And Ty…

He looked amazing. Warm skin pulsing with life, lips shiney with a glaze of juices, each hair on his head shown with highlights Julian doesn't remember the other having, colors like golds and emeralds and pinks and starlight! He could see every flicker of an eyelash, every minute twitch of muscle.

Pupils wobble! As Ty searched his face, an almost drunk and desperate look on it as he brought a hand down, Julian watched as his dark, liquid night eyes moved and saw the pupil bounce and sway as the dark around it exploded into browns and caramels and gold-

Upon Ty's hand making contact with his overheated cheek, Julian shouted as pure, unadulterated heat shot thru him. He suckled the thumb that brushed his lips, letting out a breathy moan as he tasted more of that sweet, sweet juice. Lips met lips and breaths were given and taken and touch and feeling and ohgreatgoddessabovebutthisallfeelssohotandwarmand-

Bucking up into the hips pinning his own down, Julian let out a short, bitten cry, Ty's own meeting his as something wonderful ran up and down his spine and shot forth from him. He jerked and jumped and twisted, the only points anchoring him to reality being the hips grinding into his, the hand fisted into his hair, and the searing lips wandering over his face and neck in rapture.

It was over all too soon. “What,” Julian whispered, “what was, how, oh that was wonderful!” He buried his nose into Ty's dark locks, relishing in the scents of the man himself and his hair oil. He could feel the other huff into his neck in amusement.

“That was a Lady's Apple. Also known as a Lover's Apple. Three guesses to how it got its name.”

Basking in the afterglow of the orgasmic not-orgasm, hands wandered and rubbed over hot skin. Julian was starting to miss how everything looked while under the Apple's influence.

“Can we...do that again?” Ty just snorted into his neck.

***

“Hey! It IS purple!”

“Told ya so.”
Worm, worm, worm, worm...

Lucio doesn't have much he can do to pass the days, what without having a body and all. He can't really sleep, the closest he can get to such a state is to dissolve into the Ether between the living and the dead.

*The one time he saw the Wall, he ran as far and fast as his cloven hooves would take him.*

So, he usually spends his days as thus: mope about his burnt-out rooms, fuss over his pups, spook his wing's few attendants, contemplate his state (which, to be honest, he doesn't dwell too long on), and rinse and repeat. He can't really interact with his environment much outside times of high emotion, and not many people want to stay and chat with a ghostly goat.

He's regretting how he treated Germanius last he was here. *It's so lonely…*

“Alright you!” Lucio bleated like a young kid finding his jump as a large hand settled on the back of his neck, pulling him into a headlock. The other arm wrapped around one of his horns, keeping him immobilized.

*Speak of the Devil.* It seems Germanius himself was the one assaulting his person. The man had a very fed-up look on his face, like a father wrangling a very, *very* wayward son. Lucio doesn't want to admit it, but he's happy to not be alone anymore. He had seriously been contemplating finding the other man.

~*Aye, watch it! Hands off the merchandise!*~

“Don't you sass me, young man! You're coming with me. Need you for a ritual-” Germanius jumped as Lucio let out a bleat just shy of a scream. One clawed hand came up, pushing at Germanius's chest as hooves danced on marble.

~*NO! NO MORE DAMNED RITUALS! I will have no more shackles upon my person!*~ And he won't! It may have took him quite some time, but he eventually did learn that making deals with demons was a BAD idea!

With a jump, Germanius released the other, startled at how *vehement* the other was. “What did you do?” He swears to Hedonism, but if Lucio is under some sort of broken deal, then his plans will be bust. He met someone who lived under one and, well, it wasn't pretty.

But...Rus thought the other tried to *Mantle* the Devil? It explains the appearance, at least. Failed Mantling's result in the usurper-to-be being stuck in a half-complete state, provided that they don't get erased from existence, of course.

~*I have no earthly idea what this ‘Mantaling’ is. Isn’t a mantal a type of cloak?*~

“A MANTAL is a cloak. MANTLING is attempting to supplant an already existing supernatural
being or deity with yourself. Which you did...with the Devil?” Germanius was so confused.

~Um, no. I was young, dumb, and full of too much ambition. Instead of doing things myself, I instead tried to outsource the work...which I do NOT recommend doing, by the way!~

Oh dear. “Lucio, what did you do?” If the man was stupid enough to have made **multiple** deals…

~It's not my fault! If Mother hadn't done what she did, none of this wouldn't have happened! And it was so **easy** to make those bargains!~

Germanius pinched his brow, counting to ten before letting out a long exhale. “Lucio you DUMB mother fucker.” He ignored the offended *bleat!* he got. “As. It. Is,” he enunciated thru gritted teeth, “this is a ritual to strip a curse off of your wife. As her HUSBAND, you need to be present to ensure it's removal.”

~Curse? CURSE!? Who DARES put such a foul thing upon my Noddy!? I'll devour their heart and shit out their soul for doing such an underhanded thing! The nerve! The AUDACITY!~ As he spoke, Lucio made his way to the stairs at the end of his wing, Germanius following. Getting to their base he took a left before stopping. ~Ah, where are we going?~

Germanius pointed to the right. “Nadia's wing. We have a room set up. We just need you.”

Following close behind a still ranting Lucio, Germanius made a note to really sit down with the guy and have a talk because frankly?

This shit was getting ridiculous.

***

Julian was enjoying one of Ty's many, **many**, stuffed buns on the back stoop. Sweetened potato flour wrapped around a mix of diced carrot, onion, and some sort of ground spiced meat that was then baked to a golden, flaky crispness. Each one was only about the size of his fist, and so far he's eaten two pork, one beef, a chicken, and a **strawberry rhubarb pie** one (he was so surprised to find fruit ones mixed in. Ty refused to tell him which were which, but Julian knows a ploy when he sees one. Ty won't trick him)!

Feeling his hand hit linen, Julian looked down, then disappointed. He's emptied the whole damned basket! Fuck!

Ty must have heard him, because Julian could hear him chuckling inside the wagon. Asshole.

“You may have succeeded this time, but I'll be prepared for the next!”

“Whatever you say, **babe.**” Ty's familiar tread could be heard as he came up behind Julian, a similar basket in one hand. “Umhmmmm, yeah. You want more?” He shook it, not missing the contemplative look Julian shot at it. “I have quite a bit more in here…” he trailed off.

“I really shouldn't-~”

“Oh, shut up and eat. Once we leave the caravan, things will get lean and **quick.** Ya know you wanna!”

“*siiiiiiigh* Okay fiiiinnnnneee,” Julian plucked another up before Ty just dumped extras into the other's basket. “You're just **trying to get me fat,**” he mumbled around his bun.

“Just makes you harder to kidnap.”
Finishing breakfast, Julian went to retrieve their laundry, Tov at his side. He was only gone a few minutes, but that was long enough apparently for someone to get all up into Ty's business.

Two women, one significantly older, had cornered the man. The elder was talking at Ty while the younger looked at him in thinly-disguised lust. Julian couldn't really blame her, Ty has a gorgeous body and was only wearing a simple pair of linen trousers and had his thigh-length hair unbound. The morning sun had its run of warm skin and rainbow obsidian curls. Add in a face that looks like it belongs on a god and Tiberius Principia was a walking work of art.

(So why is he with me?)

"-as such, I believe that you and my youngest daughter would be a good match. While her pedigree is not quite as impressive as your own, she comes from respectable stock nonetheless. We are also quite aware that additional marriages may be required of you, and know that compromises may need to be made," the elder intoned. Her haughty accent put her at the upper crust, an aristocrat. Sounds like she's trying to broker a match.

"While you have made fair points, Matriarch Therismina," Ty intoned from his position leaning in their doorway, "I will have to decline your proposal for the time being. My partner and I are currently on an assignment of utmost importance for House Principia and the Citadel, and unfortunately will be unable to engage in any meaningful courtship until its conclusion. However, if you wish to pursue your line of interest, do not hesitate to send word to either Warlord Germanius of Serenissima or Warlord Cordelia of the University of Medical Magecraft."

As Julian got closer, he got a glimpse of Matriarch Therismina. Like Serafina, she looked like she could be anywhere between forty and sixty and had a very regal air about her. Standing straight, she reached a very respectable height of about six feet or so, and had her steel locks pulled up onto a braided crown. An over-vest that hit at the knees with wide-legged riding trousers and a shirt with bell-sleeves completed her look. She had a stern face, like she was used to ruling, and may very well do so.

Her daughter on the other hand left much to be desired, and Julian didn't feel bad for thinking it. True, she's young, and thus has time to grow into herself, but compared to her mother, she was more of a stiff breeze in the face of a hurricane.

She also has no tact. The ENTIRE time Ty and Therismina spoke, she was drooling. She shuffled occasionally, like she was trying to get his attention. She even twirled a lock of her hair.

Pft. As though her limpid brown locks could dare to compete against Ty's butch and manly tresses!

Hearing Julian's approach, all three turned to look at him. Ty lit up like a pine tree on the Winter Solstice, snagging the laundry from him and greeting him with a chaste kiss. Matriarch Therismina swept him head to toe with piercing eyes before inclining her head while her still-unnamed daughter quickly hid her sneer.

Perhaps," Therismina began in a slow drawl, "we should revisit the topic at a later date. With perhaps one of my other children." Her daughter let out a hissed 'Mother!' at that last bit. "By your leave, Warlord. Sir." With slight bows to both men, Therismina turned and walked away, but not before jerking her still hissing daughter by the elbow.

"Sooooo, what was all that about?" Julian followed Ty inside, watching as the other started sorting their things.
“The Queen Regent of Port Heralis, Matriarch Therismina Castellian Principia no ul Draconis, was making her interest in Matching me to one of her viable daughters known.”

“...what does that mean for us?” Julian wanted so badly to shake the man, but refrained. If Ty can trust him, he can trust Ty. Hells bells but Ty has displayed so much more trust with him than has been returned.

He can do this!

Ty sighed, standing up from his previously crouched position before turning to face the other. “I...won't lie to you. There may come a time that I may have to take on a wife, or several. Even a husband. Where I fall in the hierarchy of House Principia, despite being Ostracized, means that I'm too important to not have children.” Stepping close to Julian, he set a hand on a cotton-clad shoulder before cupping a warm cheek. “What I can promise you is that if, when,” he corrected himself, “that happens, you will be informed, and can...decide if our relationship is worth trying.” He rubbed his thumb over a high cheekbone, wishing he could see what the other was thinking as those beautiful lavender eyes were cast down to the floor.

Julian wrapped his arms around himself, chilled as he leaned into the warm hand on his face. “Hypothetically speaking, what does marriage mean? For someone like you?”

“There are different types. Some are political, basically us producing a child or children to fulfill an agreement, like a treaty. Others are to ensure rare talents will continue. Others, well,” he chuckled, “as sappy as it sounds, others are for sheer pleasure. Love and adoration, to have a true partner at your side as you journey thru the adversities of life, and to hold their hand as you both, in the end, enter the Gates of Rapture and spend the rest of existence in each other's presence.” He tilted the face he was holding up, smiling softly, “that last one, with you, wouldn't be difficult.”

As Ty leaned in for a kiss, Julian stubbornly shoved his doubts deep into the back of his mind. As their lips met, he felt a small, tiny spark of hope.

Now he just needs to fan it enough to live thru anything else that comes their way.

***

“Is it truly necessary for me to be, unclothed?”

Asra looked up from where he was scribing on the floor next to Tubor, smiling sympathetically. “Unfortunately so, Nadia. Anything you wear into the circle could interfere with what we're looking for and then, hopefully, remove.”

The Countess nodded, leaning back further into the simple chair she sat in. She sipped from a glass of chilled water, pulling closer around her the sheer robe she was wearing. Her lip curled as Lucille, clad in similar attire, looped an arm around Nadia's shoulders. “C'mon, Nadi, lighten up! How long has it been since you last got some, hmmmmm?” Lucille's smirk could be felt.

At Nadia's growl, both Asra and Tubor not-so-discreetly slid away.

“It isn't so much that as it is that you, my ghostly husband, and I will most likely fall upon each other in a carnal, cannibalistic orgy! How is that going to work!? Lucio's a damn goat!”

“Pffft! Like a little bestiality ever hurt anyone,” Lucille laughed at Nadia's scandalized gasp. “Relax, nothing like that's going to happen. We just commune with Behau, see what She can do, and give her Tribute. She's considerate so most likely ol’ Lucy boy will be given a temporary body.
Although…” a very sleazy look crawled over her face, “I wonder what else about him is horny.”

Nadia felt sick. “Oh but that is fou!" She could hear Asra and Tubor laughing and gagging (respectively) over in the corner they had scuttled over to. “HOW could you THINK that!?!” Lucille just flopped against her in a giggle fit, muttering things like ‘goat boy’ under her breath.

~You called?~

Lucille threw her hands up, face rosy. “Oh great Baphomet! Let us dance in your sacred glade, flowers woven in our hair as we give you praise!” With a few hops and skips, she started to dance about a newly-entered Lucio.

A concerned Nadia turned to Asra. “Is she...okay?”

Asra snickered. “Oh, don't worry about her too much. As a Priestess of Behau, to be a conduit she has to prepare and drink a, well um, a drink that has a looooot of good stuff in it.” He's had some before, and boy oh boy is it potent. A few shots and he woke up days later out in the middle of the Nopali desert wearing some ladies lingerie, ass-less chaps, and a highborn ladies bonnet while clutching a tambourine with no memory of how he got there.

He also had to apologize to quite a few parents back in Nopal as well. Along with paying a ‘deflowering’ fee.

~I'll wear you like a feed bag.~*grrroooowl*

‘*giggle* Goat boyyyyyyyy!’

~Hang onto my horns!~

Oh great goddess, there's TWO of them. Nadia doesn't think she'll come out of this mentally sound.

She needs a drink.

***

As the caravan got moving again, Julian picked back up his (Ty's) book. He was nearing the end and had gotten to the part where the Shire was invaded. Ty had finished plying all of the singles, so all that was left was to skein them, thwack (whatever that means), and then re-skein. As it was, the man was lounging next to him, casting on for a new project. Around Ty's waist was some sort of odd belt.

“What are you making,” Julian slid in a bookmark, shutting the book with a soft *snap!*, rolling over to get a closer look. Next to Ty were several different balls of yarn wound into cakes, each a different color. A few were fuzzier than the others, but everything looked to be the same thickness, more or less. Currently, Ty was using one of the green yarns to cast onto a ridiculously long needle.

“Eh, making a scrap blanket. Don't have enough of each individual yarn for anything in particular, so why not?”

“And the belt?”

Ty tapped what Julian had thought was an ugly buckle. It was oval shaped and had pits of different sizes in it. “A knitting belt. I support my working needle in one of the holes and it'll free that hand up to let me knit faster.”
“...surely you jest?” Ty going faster!? Impossible! He will admit that all the colors Ty picked for the blanket will look nice together, though.

“E-yup. Just gimmie a few and I'll show you.” Ty continued casting on, pushing the fresh stitches down the needle. Soon, he had a massive amount smooshed together. Docking the bare needle in his belt, he wrapped the yarn around some fingers, positioned the other needle, and rested the meat of his working hand against the needle, swinging his hand like a lever to wrap stitches. After a few stitches, he sped up exponentially.

“You're a witch. Just how? HOW!?" It took Julian everything he had not to shake the man snickering at him.

“Lever knitting. Best thing I've ever learned. Give me a few days and I'll have a nice, snug blanket to roll you up in.”

Julian just snuggled closer, utterly hypnotized by the quick, repetitive arc's of Ty's fingers. He never noticed himself dropping off into a nap.

***

The door shut behind Asra, the sound of wood on wood echoed along the bare walls. All who were left was Nadia, Lucille, and a beastly Lucio. Stretching along the floor was a large and intricate Diagramma, the black ink used to paint it a crisp jet.

“So, what do we do?” Nadia just wanted to be done with this. She didn't want to share a room, let alone headspace, with her deceased-yet-not husband and a 'high' priestess for any longer than necessary.

In response, Lucille threw off her robe with a blinding smile, an interested Lucio giving out an excited snort. “You,” she pointed at Nadia, “lay down there. And you, goat boy, opposite. Lay down with your heads in, uh shit, these fuckin’ circles here. I'll be, like, over here.” She started to drift over to what was to be her spot before stopping, “oh, and be naked!”

Nadia just rolled her eyes before doing so, making sure to set her robe far outside the reach of the diagram. She could feel Lucio's eyes trace her form as she laid down. As she settled, she could hear the soft *clicks!* of a corporeal Lucio move, closely followed by some scrambling, presumably as he tried to lay down with assistance of a single arm. He grumbled under his breath as he did so, but it was soon drowned out as Lucille started singing.

Nadia felt a disturbance in the air near her head, along with a few hollow taps. ~I...take care of my horns, Noddy~

“Why? So you can gore me?”

~Don't say such things! They make my heart hurt.~

Before Nadia could deliver a scathing remark, Lucille's voice grew in volume. A plume of pale fragrant smoke started to drift across Nadia's vision, bringing with it memories of her favorite garden back in Prakra, smells such as the lemon trees in bloom, her mother's favorite gardenia patch, and how the evening air would bring with it the scent of the sea. Her chest felt tight.

Then everything went white.

***
The caravan started to slow down much sooner than anticipated for lunch. Their goal for today was to turn south and head for the lesser city of Neptunia before going east again. This would put them only a few miles from the coast, and at some point today the Altean mountains would be seen, signaling how close they would be to Saturnalia’s gates.

Setting aside his work and untangling himself from a gently snoring Julian, Ty snuck out of their wagon. Seeing everything at a stand still, he trotted up the line to see his grandparents and learn what was going on. Before coming even with them, he could see the problem: a mist hung over the road, an acrid smell accompanying it. Within the thick of it was a large form, that of some creature that had been caught in it.

“Want me and Jules to suit up? We both have the equipment,” Ty murmured to Tony. He doesn't know if the caravan has the proper suits and masks to deal with something like this: all routes are plotted for both maximum profit AND safety.

“If you feel confident. The most we can do is cast temporary breathing charms, and considering we don't know what this...miasma is made of,” Tony trailed off.

“Got it. Give us twenty.” Ty walked back to his wagon, dancing about people and animals as Serafina shouted an order to back up. Reaching his wagon, he found Julian tiredly rubbing his eyes, having woken due to the noise outside. “Hey, Sweetheart.”

“M'Ty, what's, what's goin’ onnnn,” Julian interrupted himself with a jaw-cracking yawn, squawking as Mazel jumped onto the bed and stuck her nose into Julian's open mouth. The man sputtered and pushed the curious dog away as he spat. Mazel just flopped onto the bed, tail thumping.

“Whatever critter took over the mines also blocked the road. I need to suit up, get my gasmask on, and see what can be done.”

Julian perked up. “Can I help?” Since Ty bought him that deluxe uniform, Julian's been itching to try it on and put it thru its paces.

“You cannnnnn, if you feel safe. I don't know what the beastie is, and we're the only people in the caravan that can actually look into it.”

“Eh, why not? I'm bored, want to play dress up, and frankly this sounds like a two-person job.”

“Okay. If you're sure. Just. It could be really dangerous, and I may not be able to protect you-” Ty was silenced as Julian hopped up and planted a kiss to speaking lips.

“Just give me a morning star, a knife, and that pistol and I'll be fine.”

Okay. Ty can do that. But, “didn't Mazel just slobber all over your mouth?” Julian started sputtering and gagging before turning to spit (again). Ty just laughed at him.

***

Nadia came back to reality with a gasp, before choking on her own air. Her entire body ached, almost like when she was first learning how to sword-fight. Devolving into dry coughs, she curled up onto her side, shivering in the cool air.

~Noddy? Are you okay?~ The clicking of hooves was soon followed by a warm, clawed hand curling around Nadia's shoulder. She tried to push Lucio away, but the start of a debilitating migraine was making its presence known. She groaned, ducking her face as claws started brushing thru her
loose hair.

Nadia has no idea what happened. After everything went white, her surroundings (or her perception of them) changed. She could almost feel cool, moist soil under her feet, and the kiss of humid air over her skin. Things had started to solidify, like tree's and some sort of water source before something screamed in pure, unadulterated rage. She then felt like the rope in a game of tug-o-war, being pulled between two different presences.

One felt, energetic? But almost but not quite forgotten. It was like the old songs and stories of great warriors from ages ago had been given form. She swears she could feel echoes of great battles and the wistfulness of power had but lost. An air of whimsy intertwined it all, along with a strong breeze that smelt of both blood and sex.

That must have been Behau.

The other presence...it felt so wrong. Like ambition and power, but horridly twisted. Nadia would liken it to a ruler who starts a war just to see what the outcome would be. In opposition to Behau's energy, which had an overtly warm feeling, this other one felt cold and detached. Clinical.

Both felt even matched, and Nadia knows that the only reason Behau won was sheer chance. Nadia has never felt so relieved about the outcome of a whim.

~Noddy?~

She pushed his hand(?) away with a final cough. “Just, away Lucio!” She really doesn't want to put up with the antics of the person who is most likely the cause of all this. She rolled over onto her opposite side, putting her back to him.

~I'm. For what it's worth, I'm sorry.~

As the room's door opened, Lucio's form started to fade. As Asra kneeled at Nadia's side, covering her with a thick blanket (Tubor attending to Lucille, who was in a similar state), Lucio disappeared completely.

~I'm so, so sorry...~

***

Dressed to the nines and armed to the teeth, Ty and Julian examined the dead animal in the middle of the misty road. It was a black bear, not quite an adult but definitely not a cub. Ty would put it as being an older adolescent, maybe a year short of fully mature. He'd also put the bear as being freshly dead, but something just isn't adding up...

“It's not decaying uniformly,” Julian’s muffled voice sounded. On the underside of his Plague Doctor masks beak was a mesh area, allowing for air exchange and speech. He squatted, pointing at different areas of pitted and sunken flesh. “Here and here, you can see different stages of decay. This spot here,” he tapped his finger along the edge of a ragged, raw wound, “looks old. Like a week old. Here, this one looks too crisp.”

Ty bent over closer, cocking his head. His gas mask let out a slight high-pitched hiss as the canister on the side of the mouthpiece gave him an oxygen hit. “These look like injuries more than decay.”

“I thought so as well, but if you look closer at the edges, they're too...uneven. Claws and teeth
leave cleaner edges, even if exchanged in the middle of a fight.

Not only that, but certain areas start to go faster. Soft tissue like the eyes, tongue, and nose. The tip of the nose is gone, but the eyes are still there. And the tongue,” Julian hung his bayonet from his utility belt, thick-gloved fingers prizing the jaw apart. Wiggling his finger passed yellowed teeth-

“GROOOOOWAR!” The should-have-been dead bear sprung, jaw dropping lower than it should have. As Ty and Julian jumped back, it rolled onto its feet before standing. The side that had been on the ground had little skin or fur, and most of the animals chest was bare, shiny muscle. In some spots (like the shoulder and hip), greying bone could be seen.

The jaw started dropping lower, the skin and muscle around it being too weak to keep it in place. As the tongue hung slack, Ty cocked his crossbow. Stepping in front of Julian, he took aim and fired.

A wet-sounding *THUNK!* rang out, the bolts shaft sticking out of the bears gaping maw. A faint whistle sounded as another bolt found its home in the bears cheek. Julian’s pistol buried a bullet in the bears face, a small jet of blood signaling a hit.

Done with this, Ty Summoned an ethereal War Axe. Getting a good two-handed grip, he swung. Meaty thunks of metal on flesh sounded as Ty hacked away. The bear tried to swipe at him just to lose its paw. The entire time Ty was turning it into mince, reverberating and rolling growls interspersed with high-pitched shrieks could be heard.

It took some time, but Ty eventually rendered the Fell beast to nothing more than chunks of foul smelling meat. Taking a few moments to wipe blood off of his eyepieces, he watched as Julian pulled from a bag on his belt sample phials. Julian squatted again, scooping up small scraps of flesh or blood. For a third sample, he popped out a deflated eye.

“Why the eye?”

Julian stoppered and stored the samples. “Its humors. During the Plague, some of our biggest breakthrough’s came from studying the liquids suspended in the eye. I’ll be able to do a few simple reaction tests myself, but Cordelia will need to do the bulk of the work.”

“Careful. For giving him science to do, ‘delia may just marry you himself.”

“Pft.”

Shooting a globe of fire at the bears remains, Ty put a field of containment around it before they walked off the road. From the bears original position, it looked to have come from the left, where the mine is located. Both men had a weapon in each hand, prepared for anything else to spring.

After trotting thru the underbrush, they exited onto a worn dirt track. Following a bit further they found a few wooden buildings. Based on their appearance and how they were labeled, this must be the mine. As they had walked, the mist had thickened considerably, going from faint wisps to a full-on rolling fog. Lucky for them, it never got higher than Ty’s calves.

Unlucky for them, the edge of the open-pit could be seen, and it looks as though it was filled to the brim with fog.

“Looks like the pit is the source,” Julian muttered. “Should we go directly there, or explore?”

“Let’s check the buildings. Wouldn’t do to be tangling with something just to have something else creep up on yer ass.”
Starting with the Foreman's office, nothing looked out of place. The building served as the mine foreman's office and living quarters. Ledgers were spread on the desk, a hardhat hung by the door next to a pick-axe. Over the fireplace were various dried spices, and an empty pot hung suspended in the fireplace. A simple single bed had a pair of boots next to it, and a lamp sat on the side table.

Nothing out of the ordinary. It just looked like the man just stepped out to take care of a few errands. It was kind of eerie.

Double checking the floor for any cellar doors and finding none, the two then went over to the long house. Just like the foreman's office, nothing out of the ordinary. Beds were in various states of make, a few chests were scattered about. Bookshelves had an eclectic mix on them (mostly smut, to Julian's amusement), a barrel in the corner had been set up with a chessboard while a table had a game of cards on it. One of the hands was a Royal Flush.

“Tyyyyy…”

“I hear ya, babe.” This was getting creepier than fuck. “Let's check a few more buildings. Hopefully the sun will have burned away some of the fog in the pit.” Fog that shouldn't be there in the first place, considering the pit has an unbroken source of sun.

The equipment shed, pantry, laundry, and outhouse were in the same state: undisturbed. It was like everyone just up and left. Coming back to what was the center of the camp, Ty looked about more before freezing.

“Ty?”

“Can you hear that?” Ty's heart started thumping, like a rabbit on the run. Instincts born from years of practice kicked in. His breathing stayed slow and measured, and his whole frame relaxed. He quietly widened his stance.

“I can't hear anything.”

“Exactly.”

It took Julian a few moments to understand what Ty meant. There were no birds chirping, no insects buzzing. Nothing. Nature isn't quiet. It's loud and it's there. You cannot mistake it. Even plants make sounds as they grow, if you listen long enough.

But this? Utter silence.

“I've got a bad feeling about this…”

“You an’ me both, Sweetheart.”

With only one last place to investigate, the two men slowly walked over to the pit mine's edge. Stopping nearly a dozen feet from the side, Ty spun a globe of air in one hand, lobbing it into the pit. Air churned, a small vortex composed of mist and wind spun briefly before disappearing with a high *schwoop!*", leaving an open pit, a few scraps of mist, and what looks to be the start of a mine tunnel.

Finding the entrance to the mine ramp, quiet footsteps and quieter men drifted down it. Reaching the mine floor, Julian kept watch as Ty Summoned globes of Magelight. After hanging them at random around the pit, Ty Summoned one last marge one, setting it to hover at shoulder height. Taking point, Ty ducked inside the tunnel.
Julian wanted to ask so many questions, but knew that quiet was most needed. His eyes darted about behind tinted lenses, taking note of anything and everything. As they walked deeper, he became happier and happier over his uniform. Having so many layers doing so many different things really made him feel secure.

He also really likes the hat. The hat's a plus.

Ty's light lit up the corridor for quite some distance, so they knew they were coming up onto a cavern before they actually got to it. Stepping into it, Ty directed the Magelight to go higher and brighter. As it did, flecks of light erupted in a glittering wave.

“**Diamonds. Hundreds of them.**”

“It's beautiful...”

Hanging from the high ceiling were stalactites, dripping downwards like a lady's fingers in a pond. Embedded into the cavern walls and ceiling were thousands upon thousands of glittering diamonds and other precious stones. Ones that looked as small as pinheads, to ones the size of Julian's fist.

“**Dibs.**”

Julian looked at Ty. “**What? Dibs? Dibs!? We're investigating a possible monster killing and you call dibs?**”

“I like the shinies. And to be frank, babe, you looked spectacular in that loot I brought back. If I can fuck you on a bed of diamond, believe me, I'll do it.”

“...can we...?” Ty grunted an affirmative to Julian's question, giving the other something to look forward to after taking care of the current issue.

Something heavy dragged across the floor, followed by some clicks. Ty slung his crossbow across his back, pulling two Bowie knives from their sheaths along his thighs. He could hear Julian ready himself as well. “**Worm.**” Ty whispered. His heart tried to leap out of his chest, memories of his first encounter nibbling at the back of his mind. Try as he might, his breathing sped up and his hands started to shake.

*COO-RAWK!*

Hearing more shuffling, Ty glanced behind him. Shit. Fuck. Julian. Ty can't drop his guard, can't let his past experience interfere.

“**Stay to the side. Don't try to initiate close combat, and if I say run, do it.**”

“What.”

“**Promise me, Ilya, that you'll run if I tell you to.**”

Julian quieted. Ty is serious. The thought of leaving Ty behind to face a Worm alone made his stomach roll.

*But Ty said his name*...

Before they could argue further, something launched at them. The two broke apart, the utter **abomination** lading in the spot they had previously stood. Getting his feet under him, Julian glanced
at their opponent before feeling sick.

Now they know where the miners went.

The Worm (if it could still be called that) had absorbed the men and women of the mine. Its segmented body was far smaller than Ty's first foe, only about ten, twelve feet long. Stuck to the sides of its slimy, segmented body were arms and legs, giving the Fell thing the appearance of a centipede gone wrong. Embedded along its back were the heads and faces of its victims, pushing out of the pallid flesh, expressions frozen in a rictus of fear or completely slack. It turned, its newly acquired 'legs' jerking and slapping the ground as the thing moved. Its face was similar to the first Worm, with its multitude of eyes, but its jaw had more mouthparts, opening like some horrid origami flower.

*KHISSSSSSSSH!*  

Ty made the first move, pulling up, loading, and shooting a bolt. It landed in the creatures head, burying itself deeply into a bulbous eye as the thing shrieked.

Jumping, Julian took aim before unloading his pistol into the Worm. He didn't stop, going on until he heard nothing but clicks. The Worm writhed, squalling as it brought a ‘hand’ up, trying to brush the pain away as it contorted.

Ejecting the spent cartridge, Julian tried to reload, just to have the new clip jam midway in. Slamming his palm against it repeatedly got him no results, so he pulled out and threw away the clip before re-holstering. Gripping the morningstar, he charged with a yell.

“JULIAN!” That dumbass. After this is all said and done, Ty was gonna spank his ass black and blue!

Getting close, Julian swung, hips turning and arms bunching as the spiked head of his weapon sunk into fatty flesh with a squelching sound. The Worm wailed, and Julian was able to pull the morningstar out and deliver another blow before being batted away with a decaying arm. He slammed against a bejeweled wall, just missing landing on several crates of supplies.

“Fuck... Hey you! Ugly!” At Ty's shout, the Worm turned towards him (and away from his stupid, stupid... ARGH!), mouthparts flying open with a hiss. A stream of that same fog from earlier emerged. “Yeah! I'm talkin' 'bout you!” It took a few steps towards him, growling gutteraly and fogging more. Ty held up his knives, “YOU WANNA PIECE OF ME!?”

“COOOOOOO-AWKKKKKKK!” The Worm sprung forward, mouth open and dripping. It completely cleared the floor and fairly flew the twenty-plus feet separating it from Ty.

Throwing himself back, Ty dropped to the floor, holding up his blades. As the Worm dropped, it landed on top of Ty, and therefore Ty's blades. The sharp metal slid into grubby flesh like a hot knife thru butter. The thin skin parted easily, and Ty's hands followed his knives, sinking into the monster up to his wrists.

Knowing they were a lost cause, Ty let them go, rolling out from underneath a screaming Worm. Crawling on his belly, he soon got his feet under him. He danced back a few additional steps, trying to decide what to do next.

Julian decided for him. That idiot ran up behind it, aiming a blow at one of the things 'legs’. The morningstar struck true, and the wet *snap!* of breaking bone echoed throughout the cavern.
“KEEEEEEEEEEEIRRRRRRRRRR!” Twisting back, the Worm tried to lunge at Julian, only to slide as the injured leg gave out. As the Worms backside hit stone floor, that same leg detached with a wet *schlorp!* muscle and tendons stretching as ichor pulsed out. Getting back up, the Worm tried charging again, just to step on the semi-detached leg with another scream.

“TY! THE LEGS!” If they can remove a few more, it will give them more time to think.

Not needing to be told twice, Ty dashed in, getting up close and personal. Getting near the middle of the Worm’s side *(and oh, how young that miner was, such a soft face)*, Ty picked up an ‘arm’, grasping around the wrist and the bicep. Planting his stance, he tightened his stomach, dropped his center of gravity, and pulled.

*POP!* *shlorp!* *SNAP*

The Worms scream reverberated around the chamber, the pain of Ty literally pulling it apart being felt in their bones. It thrashed, skittering away from the cause of its pain. As it flailed, Julian was once again smacked away. *oof!*-ing as a thick tail slammed into his solar plexus. Sailing thru the air, he landed just in front of the crates from before, winded.

Wheezing, he coughed as he rolled onto his side. Behind him, he could hear Ty holler shortly before another loud pop sounded. Getting onto his hands and knees, Julian gagged on air before dry heaving. Pushing himself onto his feet, he spotted a very familiar set of x’s stamped onto the crate. “TY! KEEP IT DISTRACTED! I HAVE AN IDEA!”

“YOU’VE GOT FIVE! AND IT BETTER BE FUCKING GOOD!” *SLAM!* “OI, FUCK YOU WORM!”

Seeing the crates were nailed down, Julian scrambled. He only wanted to use his morningstar as a last result, what with this stuff being *extremely* volatile if struck.

Luckily for him, he spied a crowbar off to the side, next to several large bags of gems. Prizing up the top, he grinned behind his mask. His victory was quickly cut short as another arm/leg was ripped off of the Worm and hurled just besides his head. Pulling up a Bag of Keeping, he slipped multiple bundles of dynamite inside, before also sliding in all the bags of loot. Popping open the other crates also revealed more dynamite and a few cases of nitroglycerine. This was going to be amazing!

“TY! CAN YOU BRING IT HERE? AND MAKE FIRE!?”

“FIRE!?”

“AND HOW FAST CAN YOU RUN?”

“Shit. YOU BETTER KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING!” Pulling off a fourth arm, Ty then smacked the Worm in the face with it. Going to do so again, it caught it in its mouth, ripping it from Ty’s grasp. As it threw it away, he Summoned another War Axe. Gripping the shaft with both hands, he did an underhand swing, burying the axe-head between clicking jaws and thin stomach.

It wailed, swiping out and missing Ty with a leg. It cried out again as Ty landed a second then third blow. Slinking back slowly on a third less of its legs, Ty slowly pushed it back towards the crates.

Julian's mind whirled as he tried to figure out a way to pin the Worm in a spot long enough for it
to be lit, and then run, from the inevitable explosion. Grabbing a bottle of nitro, he popped the cork. Once the Worm and Ty got close enough, he darted between them, spilling the liquid behind him. He then threw the empty bottle into the Worm's gaping maw. In reflex it snapped shut, the crack of crushed glass being smothered under the Worms squeals.

Julian dashed back to the cavern entrance, pulling Ty behind him. “NOW, TY! NOW!”

Conjuring a ball of bright and brilliant flames, Ty lobbed it towards the Worm before he and Julian started running. The fire bounced off the Worm (who was frantically trying to pull out the glass buried in its mouth) before splashing onto the floor. As the flames touched the spilled nitro, more popped up, flashing along the path. They hit the end first, the golden waves still traveling towards the crates.

*BBOOOOOM!* **WOOSH!* 

Ignition. A fireball in the shape of a mushroom sprung up, quickly followed by and then surpassed by a shock-wave. The Worm was vaporized instantly, not even having enough time to click, let alone scream.

Ty and Julian were literally running for their lives. Even with the head start, their chances of coming out unscathed were slim. Already, the air pressure and heat of the mine corridor were building. Each step they took brought them closer and closer to safety.

Until Julian tripped.

Hearing the thud behind him, Ty spun. Seeing the other laid out, scrambling to get up as the bloom of fire behind them traveled up the corridor, Ty heaved the other over his shoulders like a sack of rice. Turning back around, his legs started pumping double-time. In a matter of steps, his hips and thighs were screaming, jolts going up his legs each time his booted feet slapped the hard stone ground. It was a struggle to get enough oxygen to his lungs.

“Ty, hurry!” Julian had a front-row seat to the flames progress. Each foot they cleared, the fire gain one-and-a-half. Sweat started trickling down his face, the edges of his under-balaclava getting soaked in seconds and his gut screamed as it pressed into a muscled shoulder. “It's gaining!”

Ty was wheezing, but the exit was now so close. Just another fifty feet…

“TIBERIUS!”

Hurling to the side, Ty skidded onto packed dirt, slamming both himself and Julian flat. With a roar the flames cannoned out of the mine shaft, the air turning into a fier. The howling of oxygen being consumed echoed in their ears, despite the protective headgear. What little miasma had been left from earlier was soon destroyed, the flames hitting the other side of the pit and splashing around.

Their ears rung for a long time. It took a while for them to realize the fires were gone and that it was safe for them to unmask. Rolling off of Julian, Ty pushed off the others flat hat before unclipping the bird-like mask. Seeing the damp, flushed face of the other, lips parted as he panted and eyes screwed up to block out the bright sun (and oh, those lashes…), filled Ty with so much relief.

Filled with an irresistible urge, Ty ripped off his own mask before diving in, lips slipping over slightly chapped but still oh so soft and pliable ones. His hands molded themselves around high cheekbones and his fingers tried so desperately to bury themselves into soft, curly strands just to be thwarted.
“Ah, Ty...”

Oh, but Julian sounds so sweet, gasping against Ty's lips as he too, tried to work long fingers into Ty's braided and covered hair. When they get back to the wagon, he'll have to smother the other in affection.

But only after getting smothered between Julian's glorious thighs-

“HEY! YOU YUCKS OKAY?!”

Gods fucking damnit.

YaYa, you are a fucking cockblock.
Julian didn't like this. At ALL. Not one bit.

After following a cackling Serafina back to the caravan, Julian was looking forward to some good, hard, ‘thank the gods we're alive’ sex. He was ready for it, and from how Ty had attacked him after their escape, he knew the other wanted some, too.

But, it seems that Ty had remembered how Julian had entered the fight with the Worm.

That is to say, he completely disregarded Ty's orders and jumped headfirst into the fray. Just WHY Ty had still been pissed off about it, Julian has no idea. They won! His idea worked!

“I had given you one simple request: DON'T GET CLOSE. And what did you do? YOU GOT FUCKING CLOSE!” Ty slammed the wagon door shut behind them, but not before Serafina shot the two a worried look.

“Well, what did you expect me to do!? The gun was jammed! Did you just want me to stand to the side, thumb up my ass as you fought for your life!?” Julian started stripping off the multiple layers of his uniform. The sleeveless overcoat came off first, flopping onto their bed.

“YEAH, THAT WAS WHAT I WAS EXPECTING!” Julian has never seen Ty truly angry. The sheer amount of emotion in his voice as he railed at the other was borderline frightening. “I'm a PROFESSIONAL. LICENSED. CITADEL. GUILD MEMBER. It is literally my JOB to do stuff like this!”

Julian stripped off his gloves, then his long-sleeved undercoat. As he pulled off his balaclava, he snorted. “And I'm not helpless! I can do things! You want me to just not help my partner-!”

“YOU HAD SIX MORE CLIPS! I EXPECTED SUPPORT!” Ty let out a long exhale, eyes squeezed shut after his shout. “I was expecting you to check your gun, load up, and shoot. NOT to charge in, swinging recklessly.”

“That would have taken too long!”

“BULL-FUCKING-SHIT!” Julian jumped at Ty's outburst. “You pull out the clip, check the pin, do a dry fire. If the trigger works, then you reload! Less than thirty seconds. And you did none of it.”

Julian felt his gut drop. How Ty had hissed that last part was unsettling. “And we still won. Why are you angry? I can regenerate, so the point is moot.” He jumped again as Ty exploded into motion, stomping towards him. Julian thought the other would strike him, what with the dark, angry look Ty had.

Instead, Ty pushed him to the side, pulled out a duffle bag from under their bed, and started shoving clothes into it.

“What, what are you doing?” If Ty is leaving him…

“I'm staying with YaYa and GiGi. I can't look at you right now.” Ty wanted to shake the ever-loving shit outta the man next to him.
How can Julian NOT see why he is angry!?

“Ty?” Julian’s voice shook. He tried to reach out to the other, just to have his hand pushed away. “Darling? Please!? Look at me!” Ty just grunted.

Finished packing, Ty walked to the door. Opening it, he ghosted out, letting it slam shut behind him.

Julian had slid boneless onto the mattress. Numb, it took him a few minutes to realize what had just happened.

It hit him like a freight train.

Ty left him. Ty left him. Ty left him.

Julian is used to being left behind. It's normal routine! Find somebody, roll around in the hay a few times, get dropped. He had been hopeful about his and Ty’s relationship. This one has lasted the longest (he's not counting the one with that person), and had been so wonderful!

A small part had been waiting for the other shoe to drop, though.

He doesn't know how long he had been sitting there before knocking could be heard.

“Come-, come in!” Why was he having such a hard time speaking? And was it this hot earlier?

“Julian? Are you okay?” Tony slowly poked his head around the door. “Ty's madder than a hatter and- oh honey!” The large man ducked inside before quickly walking over. He pulled out a handkerchief, wiping away tears Julian didn’t know he had. “What happened, luv!?”

Julian hiccuped, sniffing loudly. “I, I-I-I don’t know. We found, found the creature. And fought, but Ty, Ty told me to not? But how can I not and-”

“Hey, now,” Tony put his hands on Julian's shoulders, startling the other from his babbling. “Just take a few breaths, and start from the beginning, okay?”

It took Julian a long time to talk. He kept starting and stopping, his old childhood stutter coming out in full force. By the time he was done, he was a teary, hiccuping mess with red, blotchy eyes, a pink and runny nose, and he had thoroughly wet Tony's kerchief. He's always been an ugly crier.

“Why is he mad? We, we won! I distracted the Worm! And then came up with a, with a way to kill it! I don't get it!”

Tony sat next to the mess on the bed, rubbing a hand over his face. Oh, to be young again…”what Ty's issue is, is that you didn't think. He has a point: you had other options, but didn't exercise them. You could have gotten hurt.”

Digging out another kerchief, Julian loudly blew his nose (again). “So?” His query was muffled and nasally. “I can regen'rate.”

“Can you come back from being dead?” Tony smiled grimly as Julian froze. “You can't bet on that. Ty's been trained from a young age in many forms of combat, both physical and magical. He knows what he's doing. Not only that, but it hasn't even been half-a-week since your near-murder at the hands of Octavius-”

“I had no control over that!”
“I’m not saying you did! But, look at it. Two near death experiences in less than a week. One a result of you being, truthfully, stupid. And arrogant.” Tony gave Julian a look as the other opened his mouth to argue (and giving Tony a bit of relief: if Julian can get angry, then he can get through this), “you were! You thought you knew better than a Principian Warlord, who is undefeated in battle, and one of the Top Journeyman members of his combat class in the Citadel. If not for that damn accident he had, he may have been a master by this point.” Seeing Julian huff and look away, he sighed gustily, “I can see I won’t get through to you, when your like this. I’ll leave you to think.” Heaving himself to his feet, Tony meandered to the exit. “If you want to stay in for lunch or dinner, just tap the teapot stand, and food will be brought to you.”

As the door shut, Julian flopped back onto the bed. Ty’s just being stubborn. Nothing happened, his idea worked, and Ty’s just being stupid.

He rolled onto his side, pulling Ty’s pillow close, under his chin. Taking a deep breath, Julian’s chest hitched at the scent of the other.

If he’s right, why does he feel so alone?

***

Nadia was curled up in her bed, a pillow over the top of her head to block out any light. Her temples pounded, like something was trying to knock its way thru a closed door. The pain was constant and strong enough to leave her feeling nauseous.

Her usual methods for dealing with a migraine didn’t work. Her tea just upset her stomach more, the thought of any sort of food was unappetizing, and her usual yoga stances actually made the pain worse. She had asked Portia to leave because just the sound of her breathing was enough to hurt.

It’s been so long since she felt something like this. She’s trying to remember what the trigger was last time, but the memory just slips past her like water between her fingers.

If only she could sleep.

***

Where the fuck is Asra? Lucille needs some dick, and she needs it NOW. Despite the ritual essentially failing, Behau still requires payment. As it currently stands, the longer Lucille goes without, the more painfully aroused she gets. She’d do anything to put out this fire, including Tubor!

Speaking of… "Tubor! Get in here! I need you!" She twisted on the covers, hotter than a cinder in a fire, even nude as she was.

The man in question burst into the simple room Portia provided her to recover in, having been standing as a sort of guard outside the door. Looking slightly panicked, Tubor rushed to the end of the bed. “Lu, are you okay!? What is it!” Despite both people being magical (and personality) polar opposites, that doesn’t mean he wishes her injury. He’s had a bond snapped before and knows that the repayment can be harsh.

But Behau is supposed to be a more benevolent deity! Why is She hurting Lucille so?

Coming to the bedside proper, Tubor shouted as Lucille grabbed his collar, pulling him down onto the bed. He slammed against the mattress as Lucille slid over his hips. “Lu-cille! What are you-!?”

“Tubor, I’m so fucking tight and wet, it hurts. I can’t wait for Asra any longer! Just, fuck!” And oh, goddess, he looks so good. All that pale skin, dark hair and eyes, those features! Lucille can only
imagine how wicked his lips and tongue would be on her.

Oh, to have him bare beneath her, it would be a treat!

“Can't you just wait for Asra!? Why am I being dragged into this?”

“He's with Germanius currently and I want some good dick NOW.”

Tubor stared up at her with an unimpressed look, much like a cat being annoyed by a squalling child. “You have hands.”

Oh, that beautiful bastard. Why is he such an ass? “Already. Tried. That,” she hissed thru gritted teeth, trying not to rub herself over his groin like a bitch in heat.

They had a stare-off. Tubor broke first, rolling his eyes with a huffed ‘fine’. “This won't become a regular thing, you hear me? Just once and- mmph!”

Lucille shoved her tongue down his throat, moaning at just how nice his lips felt and how good he tasted. Her hands scrambled to part his over-robe, fingers fumbling with the platinum clasp on his chest before breaking it with a frustrated growl. Soon, his hands joined in, pushing fabric aside and trying to push down his trousers, failing considering Lucille was still perched on his hips and had started grinding.

“I swear to Lord Mesperius,” Tubor muttered against her lips, “if you ruin my trousers-”

“My girls are good at removing fluids from fabric. Don't worry your pretty little head.” Ripping their mouths apart (and oh Behau above, but Tubor looks good with red cheeks and bitten lips!), Lucille wiggled and pulled down his trousers, fighting with his boots before stripping his lower half. Soon, he only had on some knee-high socks, his tunic, and over-robe. “Damn, Tubor. You have some nice legs,” she ghosted a hand up one, from ankle to calf, gripping the thick swell of muscle before going higher. “I'm keeping these on you. I wonder what you would look like in proper stockings?” He was also largely hairless, so everything she touched was smooth and soft.

Tubor pushed himself up onto his elbows, sneering. “Can we PLEASE get on with it? If you haven't noticed, I'm also now in good need of some sex!” He pointed at his still-covered groin, a prominent tent at the junction of his legs ruining the line of his fine cotton and silk tunic.

Pushing up the thin fabric, Lucille palmed the heavy cock, not missing Tubor's jump. Gently pumping it, she then kneeled, licking a hot trail from root to tip, moaning as she got a nose-full of his musk.

He fell back, a quiet gasp falling from between his lips. His hands fluttered about, looking for something to grip before settling on her hair. She steadily sucked him down, and his leg jumped as his head hit the back of her throat. She gave a loud, slurping suck, making his hips jump and his feet dance, looking for purchase before one settled on the back of her hip, just on the swell of her ample ass.

She bobbed a few more times, tucking her hair behind her ear. Abruptly, she swung her hips, perching her wet mound on top of Tubor's swollen lips. Before she could say anything he was already gripping her thighs, holding her in place as he licked from her pearl to her opening in one, broad stroke. She choked on the dick in her throat, moaning as he did so again before suckling at her. As he pushed his tongue inside, she pulled off his cock, gasping with a line of saliva at the corner of her lips. “Oh Tubor...”

It's been a while since he last laid with someone, but Tubor is glad to see he still got it. With a
whispered chuckle, he flattened his tongue and drug it over her clit, lapping at her slick as his lips caught it. One hand moved to her front, his fingers searching out and rubbing her swollen nub as he again started tonguing her opening.

“Oh shit, Tubor! Fuck-!” Lucille shook as she came, squirting as she shouted her release.

Several long moments passed as she caught her breath, forehead resting on one of Tubor’s bare thighs.

Said man wiped his face. “Can you warn a man next time, Lu? Or do you just drown your victims after they sign their will over to you?” He licked his slick fingers clean, eyes going lidded as he savored the taste. Feeling mischievous, he dove back in tongue first, laughter muffled around the cunt on his mouth as Lucille shrieked. With deceptively strong arms, he pulled her up into a proper sitting position, getting harder as she sat on his face ass-first.

“Oh! Oh. Ooooooooorrrrrrhhhhhhhhhh…” Lucille wiggled a bit, shifting her folded legs to allow the wicked tongue between them better access. She lazily fingered her clit and tweaked a nipple as hot pulses and licks swept her. She gently bounced, moaning. Her eyes went wide as Tubor changed his target, licking firmly over her rim before pushing his tongue in, making her squeak.

He just laughed, thumbing her cunt as he shoved his tongue as deep into her as he could. If it's been a while since he last got laid, it's been even longer since he found a nice, eatable ass. It was nice and tight, and surrounded by firm cheeks. Perfect to slobber over.

Lucille pulled her cheeks apart, helping Tubor get as deep as possible. Her eyes were nearly crossed and she was constantly moaning past a bitten lip. Most of her clients bitch about wanting good service but hardly return the favor: it’s the main reason why she charges so much for some things. If Tubor’s this talented at being a dirty old man, she'll spread for him any day, and perform any act, for free, so long as he gives her some of this good stuff.

She gave a high, breathy moan as his arms wrapped around her waist, snaking thru hers, and pulled her down onto that wonderful tongue speared past her rim. Soon, he was bouncing her on his face, growling as he felt her juice run down onto his neck and chest as she moaned like the professional whore she is. He could feel his own saliva run down his chin and cheeks and he couldn't wait to pin her down and slide inside her tight, wet heat.

“Ah! Tubor, I need. I need you to, fuck!” Jerking forwards, Lucille cried out as that delicious, delightful tongue was pulled out of her ass. She lunged for the side table, scrambling for her oil. She could feel Tubor scoot about below her, before a hand settled on one of her jiggling cheeks. The other came up and started petting her pussy, a few finger tips ghosting inside before withdrawing. A thumb rubbed her rim, dipping in before being dragged away.

Oh, she was going to absolutely sit on his cock and milk it until dry. She doesn't often do anal, but for this she will. Anyone that can play her ass like that deserves royal treatment. Asra can pump her cunt later.

Oooooh, getting filled at both holes…

She squawked as Tubor gripped her hips, spinning and pulling her at the same time. She ended up on her upper back and shoulders, knee’s by her ears as Tubor sat against the headboard, arms wrapped around her middle and pressing her back along his front, and looked down at her from between her legs.

How can someone who looks like an angel be so wicked?
Grinning like some sort of demon, Tubor attached his mouth to a sopping wet pussy, slurping loudly as he got a mouthful of hot slick. He shoved his tongue as deep inside her cunt as he could, delighting in the jump she gave before wrapping her arms around her calves and crying out as he pumped it.

“Oh, shit. Tubor, get that horrible, nasty tongue back inside my ass!” Well, you can't say Lucille doesn't mince her words.

He sucked her mound hard, huffing thru his nose as he felt something squirt onto his tongue. “Mmhmm,” he hummed thru his mouthful of puss. “An’ why sh’ld I?” He curled his tongue up as he started bobbing his head, almost hearing Lucille's cunt squeeze tight around the slick muscle. He moaned (embarrassingly) loudly as she fist his hair. His eyes became hooded as she pulled his head up, glaring at him.

“Because I'm going to fucking bounce on your cock until you beg me for mercy, and then keep going.” Shit. Her cunt spasmed at the look currently on his face. He's got the face of an angel, the mouth of a sinner, and a body made for bedrooms.

Next time, Asra's joining in. Both of them NOT nailing Tubor nice and hard would be a sin.

“Okay,” and then Tubor started licking her rim, tugging on it with the tip of his tongue on each pass. Then he pointed it, pressing in and just breaching her before withdrawing. He did that for a few minutes before she grunted in frustration, legs trying to shift. Snickering, he took pity on her, pressing his tongue all the way in, not stopping until he couldn't go any further. He relished in her sweet sigh before he started pumping his tongue in and out, a well of lustful satisfaction igniting in his gut at the wet, slushing sounds the act created. The scent of her wet cunt right under his nose just added to it.

Lucille moved and grabbed her cheeks again, letting out a trailing groan. She could feel the slick in her cunt start trickling out, she was so damn excited. Soon, she'll need to get a good stretch and just slide onto Tubor's perfectly sized dick.

After all is said and done, she'll need to figure out how to keep him around. Necromancer's and her ilk just don't really get along on principle.

She rubbed her mound, moaning as she felt a puddle of her juice get pushed over, near her ass. Tubor must've smelled or tasted it, because he was quick to slurp up as much as possible before going back to stretching out her ass with that fantastic tongue and- oh!

Oh.

Oh, he is so dirty: using her drippings to get her rim wet and wide open. She can feel how much more wet and slick it was back there. And the sounds of his tongue pushing in and pulling out were just obscene.

Pussy feeling thick and heavy, she started fingering herself. Her breath started to speed up, and each flick of talented fingers over her hood and wet curls caused her hips to twitch and her ass to clench. Very quickly, she felt trails of juice run over her cunt and start dancing down her belly. She was going to Squirt so fucking hard…

Breath hitching, she slipped two fingers inside, curling them up just so. Pressing into her spot, it was only the matter of a few moments before she creamed all over herself. A well of her slick tumbled over her apex, rivers of her juice running down her stomach and landing in spurts on her chest. Each spasm wrung a cry and another gush from her. Soon, her back, stomach, chest and tits,
even her face, were wet with her essence.

Tubor wasn't spared. His face, from his forehead down, was wet and shiny. He nearly drowned when Lucille's rim clenched tight around his tongue, and he had to fight to pull back, lest he truly did drown. As she had pulsed, he also took great joy in drinking up as much of her as he could, and his chest was wet with all the juices he had missed.

Lucille just lay there, panting. The only reason her backside was still up was because of Tubor, otherwise she'd just be a wrung-out mess on the now-soaked bed.

Now, she just needs to slide down, roll over, get mounted, and get taken to fucking town. She won't be happy until Tubor's loaded her up so much, she's dripping for days.

Shit, when has she become so thirsty for dick?

Doing as needed, she soon was on her knees and chest, ass popped to display a pink, ready-to-get-spread hole. Already she could feel herself getting tight and wet again. “Tuuuuuborrrrrr,” she swayed her hips, looking over her shoulder. “C'mon,” she slipped a hand beneath her, fingering her cunt. Her new slick was already making wet noises as she pumped inside herself.

“Tuuuuuborrrrrr,” she swayed her hips, looking over her shoulder. “C'mon,” she slipped a hand beneath her, fingering her cunt. Her new slick was already making wet noises as she pumped inside herself.

Not needing to be told twice, Tubor kneeled. Sliding up the bed, he held one of Lucille's cheeks to the side as he fingered her rim. He can't wait to stretch out that pink ring with his cock.

Feeling cool glass roll against his knee, he picked up Lucille's oil. Pulling out the cork, he drizzled a generous amount down her crack, the finger of his free hand slowly pushing in. Hearing her quiet ‘ahh’, he pumped it in and out a few times before adding a second. She got on her elbows, bouncing back against him shallowly. Once happy with how loose she was, he then added a third finger.

“Oh~oooooohhhhhhh!” There we go. Oh, the sounds she was making as his fingers worked her over...he can't wait to just slide on in.

“Oh, fuck. Shit. Tubor! Just, fucking nail me already!” She was so fucking ready for her ass to get plowed.

“Are you sure?” Tubor is a bit of a sadist (nowhere near Ty's level, but then again, few are), but he knows his physiology. Average in length, but he's fat. He doesn't want to hurt her

Growling in anger, Lucille got up and twisted, pushing Tubor onto his back. Crawling on top of him, she steadied his dick before squatting over it, sinking.

“Oh. Oh wow. Shit, Tubor…” this feels fucking GOOD. She's taking access to her ass off the market and stamping 'Reserved for Master Necromancer Tubor' on it. His dick was made for this. Just the right length to get in there nice and good, but fat, stretching and burning her just right, with the head being just a bit tapered compared to the rest of the shaft.

Once she got an inch or so in, she just plopped down. “Fuuuuuuck…” she could feel Tubor's hands gripping her thighs tight enough to leave bruises. Wiggling a bit, she rearranged herself before starting to bounce.

“Oh Lucille…” fuck if her name in Tubor's mouth didn't sound divine. She started bouncing with great enthusiasm, loving how his cock stretch and rubbed her, and how he muttered nonsense under his breath. He had his head thrown back into the bedding, dark hair haloing his flushed face. Add in the tunic she pushed up to his chest and the over-robe that is now guaranteed unsalvageable and he looks like some fairy tale prince that's been seduced by some sorceress.
Asra quickly closed the door behind him, face flushed as he took in the sight in front of him. He...would be wrong to say that he didn't want to join the festivities, though. He knew that Lucille may need to coax someone into helping her if he couldn't get to her in time, but TUBOR!? But, to say it wasn't a compelling sight would be a lie. Asra just wished she had let him in on her plan!

Asra quickly stripped, walking over to the bed as he did so. Getting to his pants, he nearly ate floor as the legs got caught on his sandals. Kicking everything aside with a grunt, he scrambled onto the bed.

Damn, if Tubor didn't look good. Panting, brows furrowed, hands bruising Lucille's thick thighs...and was that a bead of blood on bitten lips?

Leaning over, Asra's plush lips captured Tubor's, and he moaned loudly as he found the answer to a question he's had for quite some time: Tubor tastes delicious. He also knows how to kiss, using hot lips and a slick tongue to great, breathtaking effect. Asra moaned hard, gripping a pale jaw and holding it in place as he tried to eat Tubor from the mouth down. His free hand went between his legs, gripping his own cock and pumping it as such a simple act of kissing Tubor set his blood on fire.

“Fuck, but both of you look good,” Lucille gasped. Cool Tubor getting the soul sucked out of him by a warm Asra was a sight that should be immortalized in art. Getting onto her heels, she leaned back a bit before bouncing again, free hand already playing with her clit. Her groin was hot and heavy feeling, her curls wet with a frankly ridiculous amount of slick. Enough was flowing out of her that several thick drops had already deposited themselves on that lovely stretch of skin between Tubor's naval and root.

Pulling his lips away from the ones below him, Asra looked up at Lucille, his eyes burning before he did a double take. “What? Why does Tubor get the V.I.P treatment?” The entire time they've had ‘relations’, he's never gotten what she calls ‘Premium Access’!


Men. They're never satisfied until they've had it all.

“Lu…”

“Oh, honey,” she cooed. Damn, if that wasn't a face of utter torment, she doesn't know what is. “Mmph, I'm so close, honey, I'm gonna bounce your soul right outta you, dick first.”

Asra snickered, burying his face in Tubor's hair as the other grimaced. “Lucille?”

“Hmm?”

“You suck at dirty talk.”

She would have been offended if Tubor hadn't pulled her down by her thighs, forcing her legs to splay out. She cried out at how deep this forced him in, and she fucking loved it.

Next time he's asleep, she's making a cast of his cock. She'll be able to give her ass a treat on
Gripping her tight, Tubor dug in his heels and started to bounce her hard and fast, not letting her go far off before pulling her back down. She was hissing out a loud ‘yessssssssss!’ as she bounced.

Asra shifted, scooting between Tubor's legs. He wrapped his arms around Lucille's waist, muscles flexing as he held her in place, allowing Tubor to focus more on getting his load in. Each thrust of his hips pushed a high, squeaky cry from Lucille, and Asra took pity on her, a hand moving down to her pubis and rubbing her clit hard and fast.

“Az, Az, Az, Azazazazaz oh fuck…” with a shout she came, gushing hard on the fingers between her legs and onto Tubor's stomach below her. Each ripple of unadulterated pleasure caused her to loudly cry out, squirting more. There is no way Tubor's overrobe or tunic can be saved now.

Feeling a tight ass clench him hard and perfumed slick roll up his chest and belly, Tubor grunted before giving out a hoarse cry. Pushing up as far as he could, he ground as he came. At each spurt he jerked, thrusting as he sobbed out in the throws of bliss.

After a few moments, Asra had to help the two shaking, worn-out fools in front of him detach. Pulling back, he brought Lucille with him. As he pulled her free, she moaned as a now-soft Tubor slipped out, allowing a frankly unholy amount of cum to gush from her loosened rim.

“Tubor!?”

“If you want some of me,” Tubor panted at Asra, rubbing a hand up and down a slick thigh, “you'll shut up and fuck me good.”

Asra literally tossed Lucille aside, rushing up as Tubor tiredly pulled off his robe and tunic. He chuckled as Asra frantically looked for Lucille's oil in the sheets.

“If you want to be my first bottoming experience, you'll find that oil now.”


Damn kids. Tubor huffed, head rolling back. “Are you deaf, woman? If Asra wants to be the first to stick a dick in me, he better hop to it.”

Asra renewed his search, while a wobbly Lucille slid off the bed. She could feel thick gobs of cum seep out of her as she minced towards her bag. If Asra wants to ride the Tubor Train, he needs to get on it now.

Pulling out a spare bottle, she tossed it towards Asra. “Here.”

“Thanks and, gods but you look good with a spunked-up ass.” He'll need to figure out what Tubor did, to get back there. He wants to see her on her hands and knees as he utterly spreads her cute little hole around his cock.

But first: Tubor.

He's wanted to do things with Tubor for years. Lucille can wait.

Helping the other roll over, Asra just took a moment to take it all in. A pale, toned back that melted into lightly muscled shoulders and arms and a great ass that sat over beautiful folded legs.
Asra is the luckiest man on the planet. He's about to absolutely rail the daylights out of a beautiful man, and nothing will stop him.

Sloppily dribbling oil down a sweet cleft, Asra had to force himself to slowly finger the other open. And it was so hard! The sweet sighs Tubor let out slowly turned into groans and growls, and then a cry as Asra brushed that sweet, sweet spot.

“Asra…”

Oh fuck. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck. Fuck, shit, Asra is so ready to do this, it's embarrassing. Slicking up his cock, he took a few breaths to calm himself before he lined up and pressed in (ignoring Lucille's snicker as he did so).

Tubor buried his face into the pillows, gasping gutteraly as Asra pushed in. The hands on his hips held him in place as inch after inch of burning cock sunk in. Tubor's thighs quivered, and he cried out when Asra bottomed out. He sagged, legs slipping and pancaking as he lost the energy to stay on his knees. He could hear Asra chuckle as he panted. “Shut up and let an old man catch his breath…”

“You're not old: you're only thirty-seven,” Lucille murmured as she stroked his red cheek, settling beside him.

“And you're, what? Twenty-six?” There has to be almost a ten-year age gap between them and him. Therefore, he's old. Tubor cursed as Asra pulled back and thrust harshly back in.

“All that matters is that we're all old enough to do this to each other.” Asra has had a ‘thing’ for Tubor since he was a teenager. He's never acted on his desires, let alone thought he would be the one to plow the other into the mattress. Seeing the other for the first time, a fresh-faced Necromage perusing the wares of Asra's little stall ignited the fires that Asra later learned were lust. After learning about the others personality and penchant for studying the dead instead of the living, Asra kept his infatuation to himself. Over time he (sort of) grew out of it.

But, if he ever got the opportunity… oh, but he was going to have so much fun pumping him full of cum. Asra can't wait to see milky thighs just spattered in thick ribbons of cum, or of a loose hole dribbling with it.

“You know,” Tubor panted into musty bedding, “with all your ‘experience’, I'm disappointed in my first bottoming.”

Tubor is an ass. “Oh, really? Let me rectify that,” and with a glare Asra pulled back out, moving to sit on Tubor's thighs, butted up right against a firm ass. Spilling more of Lucille's oil, Asra spread it over pale skin before delivering a light slap, gripping the jiggly flesh. “I never would have thought you would have such a girly ass. Look at how it jiggles,” he chuffed before slapping the other cheek. Tubor pushed onto his elbows, turning to glare at Asra with a sneer on his lips. Before he could say anything, Asra slid back in before slowly thrusting.

Lucille rolled closer, utterly amazed at how Tubor just melted into the bed after getting some dick (and oh, how he just moans) . Lucille is proud of her vocal abilities, having years of practice and professional knowledge of how the perfect moan at the right time could undo a man. She just didn't think he of all people would be a natural. “Hey, Azzy? Think you could flip him on his back?” The faces Tubor was making as he got rode were being hidden in the bed, and that was just a waste.

Asra really didn’t want to stop. Tubor was fucking tight, and the way he was squirming was so satisfying. His hands were constantly twisting into the sheets and his hips bucked and jerked, a deep groan from his chest emerging at each brush to that lovely sweet spot. Asra was getting close to
having to actually pin Tubor down in order to fuck him nicely: Why would he want to stop!?

Lucille snorted. Men. “So you can see his face, dumbass. You’re missing a wonderful show.” Despite having cum several times herself (along with having a cummed-up ass), she felt the faint stirring of lust again.

Lucille...has a point. Pulling out, Asra rolled Tubor over, nearly coming when he saw the look of tormented bliss on the other’s face.

Asra really needs to take his time and savor this. Most likely, Tubor only consented to this ‘waste of time’ out of pity for Lucille. If either of them want another shot at what is turning out to be some **phenomenal,** filthy and debaucherous sex, Asra is going to have to make it **count.**

Pushing legs up and open, Asra got on his knees and lined back up. As he slid back in, Tubor's eyes rolled and he let out a deep moan. His hands clenched the sheets at his sides and he legs just fell open like a flower blooming as Asra pushed.

Shit, but if Tubor wasn't **perfect** for taking dick. The way he moans, the way he sighs, how he spreads so sweetly…

Moving his hips, Asra set a slow and steady pace. Each time his hips met Tubor's cheeks, Tubor let out a sound of sweet torment. Speeding up slightly lost some of those sounds, so Asra returned to his previous speed. Tubor apparently is a ‘slow and steady’ bottom.

Shifting a bit, he leaned forward, searching of Tubor's mouth. Lips and tongue slid against each other, and Asra delighted in the mewl he got for his soft touches. Wanting to feel more softness, he tucked his hands into black strands, stealing more kisses. Quickly, both were tearing at each other's mouths, fingers clawing into each others hair.

Lucille could only sit and watch in amazement as Asra melted Tubor. If the biting and aloof Tubor can be turned into putty with Asra's magic dick, it was seriously making her consider investing in a strap-on.

...**they could take turns smashing Tubor.** If he falls apart like **this** with a simple, vanilla sex act, what would it be like riding him to completion, just to have the other take over?

It'll take **months** to get Tubor to that point, but it'll be so worth **it.**

Lucille jumped, a cry warbling out from the other two disrupting her daydream. It had to have come from Tubor because Asra had his teeth buried at the base of a pale neck as his hips sped up. Burying himself balls deep, he ground **hard** as Tubor cursed into a leg-shaking orgasm. Asra moaned as sharp nails dug into his shoulders and Tubor bucked as he came between their bellies. Asra followed the other shortly thereafter, enthusiastically cumming hard into the tight heat around him.

It took Asra a longer time than he would admit to pull out, legs weak. He nearly fell over as he kneeled, Lucille giggling at his condition and Tubor huffed. Said woman crawled over, leaning to lick up Tubor's still-warm spray. It had puddled all over his stomach, the second load as large as the first.

“Hey!” Asra pushed her head to the side, replacing her tongue with his in the clean-up effort. In retaliation, she nearly shoved him off the bed. The object of their kerfuffle just snorted before rolling onto his side, gifting the others with the **wonderful** view of spunk seeping out from between his pinked cheeks.
“That is a very, VERY good look on you, Tubor,” Asra reached out, grabbing a thick cheek and giving it a jiggle (liking the contrast of his warm, tan skin on milky pink), snering as Tubor swatted at him, glaring at him over a shoulder.

“It may have been a while, but I seem to remember that, as my ‘top’, you’re duty bound to clean up your mess. So,” Tubor snapped his fingers twice, “hop to it.”


Grumbling, Asra did as he was told. Cleaning himself up, he brought a wet cloth from the en-suite, taking his time going over Tubor before going to dispose of the cloth.

“Hey! What about me!?” Asra just snorted at her, walking away. “Tch, that’s rich, coming from the guy who came in less than ten min- phgo wr!?” She flailed, nearly elbowing Tubor in the face as she tried to remove the cum-rag Asra chucked at her face.

“Stop. It. I'm TRYING to sleep.”

As Lucille freed her face and slid out of the bed to clean herself up, Asra slid in behind a dozing Tubor. A part of him wouldn’t mind another go at that thick, plush ass, but considering Tubor is a Master Necromancer…

Wiggling himself so his semi-erect cock would be cradled between soft cheeks, Asra settled in for a nap. Feeling Lucille slide back in, he eventually drifted off to the sounds of Tubor’s deep and even breathing.

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Julian stayed in for both lunch and dinner, only emerging to relieve himself. At some point he was joined by Mazel, her presence taking up space on the bed and leaving him feeling not as lonely.

Why is he lying to himself? He feels so alone. Not having Ty by his side made the bed feel so big and cold. Even if Tov was here as well, it wouldn't change a thing.

The first few hours after their fight, Julian was fine, so certain in his self-righteous anger and thoughts. What right did Ty have to question his actions? His reasoning? Julian is not stupid, he's not helpless, and he knows how to fight. He's had to fight since the night of the Count's death, he's had to fight during his time as a medic, and he's had to fight since he left home. From the age of fifteen and on, violence has been met out to him and he's dished it in return!

Has it really been eleven years…?

But, he can only stew for so long before the anger gives way to the crushing weight of depression. Is it worth being right if he has nothing to show for it? Is being alone the price he has to pay, the reward, for sticking to his guns? In the past, he's always bent before the will of others in his ‘personal’ life, always been the one to back down. He’d thought then that it would be better to accommodate them, regardless of them being right or wrong, so he would still have someone. It took him years to unlearn such habits, the results of which left him a twisted facsimile of a happy man.

But this feels so different, and he doesn’t know why. And that bothers him. This sense of wrongness keeps itching his brain, keeping him from sleep or food. His appetite has died, and he's only drunk a few glasses of water, the food he received earlier tasting like ash in his mouth.

Mazel was being a good girl, cuddling up to him, keeping him warm and giving the occasional
doggy kiss. Her being so sweet hurt his heart, reminding him of his since-passed Brundle, who
did the same when he got like this.

After the sun had fully set, he changed into some cozy pajamas, pulling out an extra blanket.
Despite the layers of thick wool and brushed flannel, he still felt cold. Tossing about and spooning
Mazel did little to help.

Sitting up, he gathered the thickest of the blankets around him like a coat. Padding to the door, he
slipped on some simple shoes before stepping out.

The camp had, for the most part, bedded down for the night. Only a few were still up (aside from
the night watch), making his trip much shorter. Each step he took, his heart beat faster and the ball of
fear (?) in his gut got heavier and heavier.

All too soon, Julian was standing in front of Serafina and Antonius’ door. Mazel whined behind
him, nosing his leg as her tail thumped the ground behind her. He raised his fist as if to knock
multiple times, pulling back at the last second. He started muttering under his breath, trying to psych
himself up for what could actually turn into The Talk.

He really, REALLY hopes that it doesn't. Ty makes him feel...warm.

Hearing something clatter behind the door, he jumped as it was whipped open. On the other side
was a disheveled Serafina, scowling thru strands of hair that had freed themselves from her sleeping
braid.

“Get yer ass in ‘ere,” she grabbed him by the collar, hauling the squawking man inside. Holding
the door open long enough for Mazel to snake in, she let it slam shut. Dragging a sputtering Julian
behind her, she stomped over to the couch a surly Ty had taken over, Tov draped over his legs.

Said man had sat up, covers pooling at his waist as he blinked darkly at the pandemonium YaYa
stirred up. “Wha…?”

With a grunt, Serafina heaved Julian into an over-the-shoulder throw, taking sadistic satisfaction at
the grunt and yelp that Ty and Julian let out respectively at their collision. “You little shits need to sit
down and talk. You,” she pointed her finger at Julian, “need to pull your head outta yer ass and
actually think about the consequences of being a dumbass and YOU! Mister! Need to learn to
ACTUALLY communicate!” She jabbed Ty on the nose for emphasis.

“What-!”

“YaYa-!”

“Fuck you,” she pointed at an offended Julian, “fuck you,” pointed again at a glaring Ty, “fuck
you-, wait! No! You and Tov are good girls. No ‘fuck you’. In fact, come!” Both large dogs cuddled
close to her, “you’re sleeping with Tony and I. And you two! Get yer shit together!”

Both men stared as she stomped to the bedroom door, flinging it open. After the girls trotted in she
followed, letting the door swing shut as Tony’s chuckle drifted out.

Ty and Julian were quite for several long moments, just staring at each other. Neither knew how to
start such a conversation, yet alone wanting to be the one to do so.

“C'mere,” Ty sighed, opening his arms. He ‘oof’-ed as Julian cannon-balled into his chest,
sprawling as the other started babbling apologize and other random nonsense into Ty’s neck.
“Honey, sweetie?” Julian kept up his muttering. “Ilya.” Julian stopped in his proverbial tracks. With
a sigh, Ty shifted them about, eventually getting them into a more comfortable position. Settling on their side, facing each other, Julian was pressed into the couch back and Ty was perched near the edge. With only a few inches of cushion between him and a fall to the floor, they'll have to be very careful.

“Um, Ty?”

“Shush,” a soft kiss was dropped onto a pale forehead. “We can talk in the morning.”
The port of Nevivon was beautiful in the early morning light. The sky was just feeling the blush of sunrise, and the emerald waters had a faint mist hovering over them. The docks were busy with fishermen readying their skiffs for the day, and a bit further up, large cargo ships were lined up and waiting for their loads of salt.

Valora was impatient to get off the boat. Her foot tapped in agitation, trying to expel her cooped-up energy from being confined to close quarters for so long. She's used to riding on horseback and even the rare airship, not being stuck in a room tiny enough to be considered a mid-sized closet.

Pulling up to a free dock, she helped to secure the ship before hopping off. Waving back at the cried farewells of the crew, she trotted off in the direction of the towns center. Hefting her bags over her shoulders, she got many looks from the locals, an Iriq not being a usual sight. Add in her ceremonial scars, tall stature, and strong physique, and she stood out like a fox in the hen house.

Finding a somewhat rundown but tidy inn, she had to go thru three languages before she could secure her room. Happy to have a double-bed to stretch out on, she secured her things before ordering some breakfast. Interested in trying some of the local fare, she ordered a serving of some sort of fermented fish dish, to be served on a type of dry, multi-grain cracker with a spreadable cheese along with a bowl of fruit and a pot of strong tea. This *Surstromming*, she thinks, will be an excellent way to start her stay in Nevivon.

***

Julian and Ty were rudely woken with a bucket of water. Snapping, snarling, and sputtering, Ty had shot up swinging, eyes squinted shut as he tried to take out the asshole who did it. Julian had burrowed further into and under Ty's side, trying to wipe his face dry.

“Wakey, wakey, or no eggs and bakey,” Serafina trilled out. She grinned in sadistic glee, having darted well out of Ty's swing. “Get yer asses up and out! I don't wanna hear the bitchstorm the two of you will cook up. Y'all'er got a conversation to have.”

Julian coughed, squinting at her with a single eye. “What if I was a vegetarian?”

“Wakey, wakey, here's your eggs and sadness. C'mon on, now, git.” She sat the bucket aside, vanishing the water that had spilled onto the wagon floor. “Stupid-heads,” she muttered under her breath.

By this point, Julian was a shivering mess. He was trying to pull off his soaked sleepshirt as Ty sat next to him, hunched and cursing. Growling, said man shoved the wet blankets onto the floor. “Ya gonna give us some fresh clothes? Or should I just go out, dick swinging?” Hearing Serafina snicker before going back to her bedroom, Ty growled again.

“Ty, let's just go. So long as we're quick, we can- *TY!*”
“Gods be fucking damned,” ripping off his shirt, Ty slammed the heavy, wet fabric onto the floor, the loud *splat!* of the impact spreading water in a star-like pattern. His pants followed, leaving him bare.

“T-, Ty! *HRGK!* Julian spat as Ty quickly stripped him, leaving their wet clothes in a pile for The Wench to take care of. “Ty! We can't just walk about starkers! As beautiful as your body is, it wouldn't- *OOP!*”

Shoving Julian in front of him, Ty snorted. “The most that would happen is we get some whistle and looks. Now hurry up! I'm cold.”

Walking thru the camp, Ty's assessment was correct. Many a man and woman let out whistles, hollers, and a few comments at seeing two fit and healthy young men walking about in the nude. Julian was going about whilst covering his bits with his hands, but Ty just didn't give a plain old fuck.

Then again, he's got a lot to be proud of.

Getting to their wagon (Julian rubbing a pink butt cheek, someone getting a lucky swat in), they pulled on some dry clothes. Julian stole a pair of Ty's lounge pants, quite liking how the silk felt against his skin, while Ty had pulled on a loose sleeveless top and knee-long shorts. He stepped out briefly before coming back in with a basket full of food.

“Um, what are you-”

“We're gonna have a fight,” Ty said, setting the basket down before starting to put a few things together. Turning to the stove, he continued: “We're gonna fight until we come to an agreement. Whether that means we're still a couple or not remains to be seen.” Sliding a slab of thick bacon into a skillet, he started toasting bread, slicing it thick enough to double as doorstops. “Just a heads up, I'm gonna put up a fight if you want to leave,” he flipped the bacon, a warm and sweet smell coming off it, “you're the best thing to have happened to me.”

Julian had sat at the little breakfast nook, chin cradled in his upturned hands and elbows digging into the solid wood. “Humph, I find that hard to believe. You can only remember a few years back.”

Sliding the bacon onto a plate, Ty cracked a few (dozen) eggs into the skillet, frying them in the leftover bacon grease. Slicing a few thin slices of a soft and creamy cheddar, Ty quickly had the fixin's for bacon and egg sandwiches spread. “Doesn't make it any less true.” Sliding everything onto some large plates, Ty brought everything over. Placing everything, he sat down and started making himself a few sandwiches. “Eat up, I've got the feeling that we're both going to be roaring assholes pretty soon.”

Feeling somewhat awkward and off-footed, Julian did as suggested. It was surreal, to eat a meal while sitting across the table from the person who, after the fight, may no longer be yours.

Washing up afterwards, Ty put on the kettle. Putting the dishes away, he sat on the bed before looking Julian square in the eyes.

“So. That fight? With the Worm?

You were a fucking idiot.”

***

Stomach queasy, Valora stumbled out of the inn, the loud laughter of the other patrons ringing out
before the shutting door muffled it.

Surstromming is fucking disgusting! Nevivon is a godless land. Who fucking thought creating such a blasphemy was a good idea!? And how do some actually enjoy it!?

She knew something was up when a horrid smell wafted out of the kitchens right before the waitress brought her her food. As her tray came closer, the smell got worse and worse. The locals around her had turned around, quite a few of them with gleeful grins.

She found out just why they were so interested minutes later. Sliding a thin fillet onto the cracker, she took a big, honking bite. She had assumed that, despite the smell, it would actually taste good. A variety of fermented foods taste better than they smell.

Hurling the disgusting thing away from her, she dashed towards the bathroom. Retching into the toilet, the loud laughter from everyone who saw her reaction smothered her heaving. Cleaning herself up, she then meekly requested a simple porridge dish.

The barkeep was kind enough to waive her previous meal.

***

“And you're a disingenuous, arrogant, meathead!” Brandishing a finger, Julian rose from his seat, snarling, “I had everything under control and knew what I was doing! I-!”

“Absolutely did NOT have ‘everything under control’,” Ty made air quotes, eyes rolling. “Hells bells, but it's amazing how you have even lived so long if that's what you considered under control-.”

“-created a distraction! Gave you time! Time it looked like you needed after-”

“-getting hurled against a stone wall? Well fuck me sideways, I musta been doing it wrong for years!”

Waving his hand, Julian huffed. “And you, darling, seem to have forgotten something,” jabbing his chest with his thumb, he smirked, “my regeneration.”

“Ooooh~hoho~hooo~ho! Look who thinks he soo smart,” Ty poured a cup of tea, slinging the kettle back onto the grille with a negligent twist of his wrist. “So, genius, care to tell me why I saw a brief flicker of that same green light that that flared when ya got shanked?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about. Any time my seal activates, I can feel it. You must be getting old! You already have the skunk stripe to prove it,” Julian pointed at the opal streak on the side of Ty's head.

Grinning cockily, Ty just tossed his loose curls, the sunlight streaming thru the windows bouncing off the strands and making rainbows appear. “Just means I have the time and experience to to leave you youngin's in the dust.” He smirked, “after all, this old man ain't the one to shoot-off at the first opportunity.”

Julian glared. That? That was fighting dirty.

***

Cleaned up, Valora started exploring the town. The Main Square was located right next to the docks (which were HUGE!), a large clock tower in the center. Around it were the more expensive
shops, followed by the mid- and low-tier ones. ‘Uptown’ had fancy town homes while ‘Lowtown’ had more rundown ones. There were no slums or anything, but there was a difference in the state of neighborhoods. Outside all of that were the small farms and family houses. A few rolling hills, covered in houses and greenery, made for a pretty scene. Most buildings were white stucco with red tile roofs, but something about the wood accents around the windows and doors, the shutters, said *Mokba* instead of *Silures*.

Maybe the carvings and the colors?

Asking about, she eventually learned where Ivan and Siobhan lived, no less from Ivan's nephew Dima. The resemblance between Dima and Julian was there, mostly in the nose and lips. Stopping to make small talk with a butcher (who turned out to be Dima's father and Ivan's brother, Vladimir), Dima had overheard them talking. Telling them why she was here, Vladimir started muttering about ‘Ilya’s’ and ‘blyat, fucking nephew’s’ before they set her on the right track. Heading east out of town, she started walking up a little stone-paved track to a cottage on top of a hill.

Midway up, she stopped to take in the sight. She had an unadulterated view of the sea, and the breeze coming off it brought the scent of salt with it. On the ocean-side of the track, small trees, spear-shaped, provided a barrier. Ivy climbed up and around some of said tree's, a few flowers open to greet the sun.

Faintly, she could hear raised voices further up. Due to today being a loading day for the salt mines, Vladimir said today would be his brother's day off, making her quest to speak to both of the Devorak's possible. One voice was male, very deep and rumbling. It *should* be Ivan's, and he could give Germanius and Cordelia a run for their money with how *deep* he sounded. He's gotta be *huge*. What she presumed to be Siobhan's voice was more difficult to hear, but it sounded like one used to 'cracking the whip’, so to speak.

She can't *WAIT* to meet them!

***

“I can't believe you're acting this way,” kicking the ‘kitchen’ counter, Julian spun once, arms and hands gesticulating wildly, “do this, not that, but also that! Your demands make no sense!”

“They make perfect sense! Think, don't just do!”

“Now listen here, you, you dink! I-”

“What.”

Julian blinked, stopped in the middle of his rant by the utterly deadpan question-but-not-a-question from Ty. “What do you mean, what?”

“What you called me.”

“A dink?”

“...I'm not a dink.” Ty's pout was audible.

“Yes, you are. You're the dinkest dink to have ever dinked!”

“Oh yeah? Well, uh,” Ty struggled to find an insult. “Well, you. Shit! Uh,” he flung a pointed finger in Julian's direction, a semi-triumphant look on his face as he crowed, “you've got a dinosaur head!”
Julian was shocked. “Nuh-, nu-huh.” He brought his fingers up, insecurely tapping his chin and cheeks. “No I don't!”

“Dinosaur head!”

“Dink!”

“Cottage cheese butt!”

“Thunder thighs!”

Slapping his thighs with a smug chuckle, Ty pulled up the legs of the loose shorts he was wearing, wedging the fabric between groin and leg as he showed off the defined muscle clinging to his legs. “Pffft, I know ya wanna sink yer teeth into these hams, don't try to hide it!”

Julian sputtered, going red. “That's, that's besides the point! Anyone would be happy to be cruuhhhhh…” he trailed off awkwardly.

“I knew it, ya filthy fuckin’ kinkster! You-” Ty ducked, the pillow Julian had hurled at him sailing over his head. “OI!”

Julian was breathing hard and glaring fit to commit murder. He was tired, hungry, mad and sexually frustrated. He also didn't appreciate Ty treating him like he didn't know how to fight. “Listen here, I don't appreciate you trying to bat aside the issue by showing a sliver of skin, you harlot! If you're not going to take this seriously-”

“Ey, you're the one who started with the name calling!”

“- then you can just leave!”

Ty gapped. “...the hell're you saying-?”

“Get out! Just, leave! Go back to your YaYa's! Take your stuff and leaAA RGH!”

Hauling a squawking Julian over his shoulder, Ty started walking over to the door. He had opened it, and was halfway down the steps when Julian gasped out a ‘what ARE you DOING!?’. Stopping midway down, Ty closed his eyes, counted to ten, then slowly exhaled thru his nose. “You told me to take my stuff an’ git, so I am.”

“And you grabbed me, whyyyyy?”

“You're mine.”

“...can we go back inside?”

***

“Oy, Mishka, be careful,” Ivan Devorak called up to his wife as she climbed onto the cottage roof. He stood at the base of a wooden ladder, holding it still as his beautiful Siobhan hiked up her skirts and slowly stepped across cracked tiles. His native Nevinesse accent was thick, with that same nasal tones that Mokban has.

“Careful? Careful!? Aye, dinnae ye worry yer arse, Ivan! Aft'r alle, 'm only on tae roof, 'bout tae fall tru cause ye cannae dae ye fookin’ job! Bloody fookin’ wanker! Alle show ye careful!” Ivan just laughed. She's got a fair point, that and he thinks her accent is just so cute, especially when it gets thick when she's all emotional. “Tae fook ye whist'lin ‘bout now, ye great baw bag!? I ken die at any
Valora was...not expecting this. What she had in mind for the Devorak parents was vastly different. Ivan was MUCH shorter than she thought. The man was five-foot-five on a good day. He had a very squat, robust build. Broad muscled shoulders, a barrel chest, and his gut hung over his belt. Said gut moved more like muscle than fat, though, and Valora suspects that there is a lot of strong muscle hidden under it. Add on a bald head with a familiar hooked nose with the biggest, bushiest beard in a deep auburn she has ever seen, and one would think this man was a dwarf.

Siobhan, on the other hand, was his complete opposite. Tall and lithe, she was long of both limb and neck. The first thing you would notice about her was the hair. It was a bright, flaming orange-red, and had a wiry and curly texture. With the way the sun hit it, it haloed her in fire. Julian must have gotten his height from her, because she stood a full foot taller than her husband. He must get his way with words from her, as well. He just chose to be dramatic. She curses worse than a sailor. Which, considering she was brought up on merchant ships, is understandable.

From what she can see, Valora guesses each child took after their opposing parent. Portia looked a lot like her father, just with her mother’s nose and coloring and Julian is the opposite. With parents like these, the kids had no other choice but to turn out gorgeous.

“OI, YOU!” Valora jumped at the shout, eyes locking onto the accusing finger thrust in her direction by a very angry and vulgar mother. “SHUT YER GOB! AN’ WHO DAE FOOK ARE YEH!?”

“Ah, uh, I'm Valora, Right Hand of Warlord Germanius Principia, and I'm looking for the parents of Julian ‘Ilya’ Devorak and Portia ‘Pasha’ Devorak. Are you them?”

A few seconds passed in silence, both parents staring at Valora in stonily before Siobhan whipped out a long dagger out of nowhere with a quick jerk of the arm. “Who sent yeh?”

“Mishka! Please,” Ivan waved at his wife in a pleading manner, giving Valora the impression that this was a regular occurrence. “Just, put that away. Now, dear,” he turned to Valora, “come in. I'll be honest, we...haven’t heard from our boy since he left home.”

“Aye, dinnae fergot tae roof? Alle not be havin’ tae roof fall on in as we have a sitty an’ sum tea!” Standing at the edge of the roof, Siobhan pointed to a stack of fresh roofing tiles, their reddish hue fresh and bright. “Come on up!” Hiking her skirts back up, she walked away whilst muttering under her breath.

“Shibby, love of my life and light of my soul, I'm too heavy-”

“AYE THA'S BULLSHITE AND YEH KNOW IT! An’ asides, yeh only weight two stone mor’an me!”

Valora just looked at a snickering Ivan. “Your wife is very...spirited.”

“Heehe, that she is. In her defense, though, I've been bothering her all day. She's usually more polite than this.”

“And less foul-mouthed?”

“Oh, dear Yaga no! She's like that all the time.”

***
“I also don’t appreciate not being listened to!”

“Um hmmmmm,” Ty hummed around the comb between his lips. With a boar-bristle brush in one hand, he pulled it and his free hand thru a pouting Julian's waves.

“Seriously! I'm an adult,” Ty snorted at that proclamation, “I am! I'm well traveled, and have had to defend myself multiple times!” Ty just rolled his eyes as he turned Julian's head, his knee’s wide to accommodate the other sitting on the floor between them. The girls had also taken up residence in Julian’s own lap, and were soaking up the attention they were being lavished in.

“M’ issue innit tha’ you 'an’t fight,” Ty slurred around the comb, “is tha’ you don’ THINK!” He thumped the brush against Julian’s skull, glaring right back as Julian twisted around, ready for another unholy snit. “’isten,” Ty pulled out the comb, “you haven't been trained like I have, you haven't Fought a **WORM** like I have. I know that you can fight, but I didn't NEED you to fight. You could have stayed off to the side-”

“Tiberius, I swear to the Morrigan, if you're going to say-”

“Oh will you just shush! What you could have done was check your gun. I know you know how to use one, your one helluva shot. If your gun was jammed, **TELL ME!**” Julian flinched back slightly, still glaring like a kitten who was denied their toy (which had been taken away because it could actually kill them). “I need **clear** and **concise** communication in a fight. You just doing, **whatever,**” he waved the comb in a lackadaisical manner, “could seriously hurt someone. **AND NOT JUST YOU,**” he barked as he saw the other mulishly open his mouth, no doubt to be a sarcastic little shit.

Harrumphing, Julian twisted back forward, arms crossed. “I could help, if you let me…”

Using the thin tail of the comb, Ty started to section auburn hair. “And as you seem to have forgotten, I can handle myself. This Worm had **nothing** on the first,” he ignored the slight flinch Julian made at the mention of the first Worm encounter. Fingers working deftly, Ty started a simple five-strand braid. Beginning at the top of Julian's scalp, it centered at his widow’s peak before growing fatter while still staying close to his scalp. “You can help all you want, just, tell me?” His sigh was quiet but audible as he got to the top of the head, debating how much further he should go. Shrugging, he quickly merged five strands into three before anchoring the braid just after the apex of the crown. Teasing the newly made tail, he was happy to see Julian's hair had just enough length and texture to fluff up. A bit of teasing to the woven strands later, and the man in question had quite the fetching 'do.

Setting his tools aside, Ty murmured. “I...suppose I can teach you a few things, as well. I doubt you'll stop leaping in head-first.” He got a peck to the cheek as Julian stood up, going to let the girls out. He joined Ty on the bed afterwards, pillowing his head on the others scarred shoulder.

“That's all I really want.

By the way, Darling, my hair looks amazing.”

***

“So, what can you tell us about our Ilya?”

The two Devorak's and Valora were currently ensconced inside of the Devorak home. The inside was a mixture of whitewashed walls, dark red brick, and heavy wood beams. There were many windows letting in sunlight, and plants were everywhere. Books also littered the space, with a few
mid sized bookshelves taking up wall space along with being found on many other surfaces. Add in the usual furniture and rooms of a family home (including the usual clutter), and one wouldn't think that this was the original home of the Count's Murderer.

Well, alleged murderer.

Sitting at the heavy kitchen table, Valora watched as Siobhan sliced some meat and cheese for a bread plate, and Ivan puttered about the stove, making a kettle of strong tea. Not wanting to be too nosy, Valora cast her eyes about the space. An old, iron cook-top over a brick oven, a well-used bread kiln, many spice racks, a war axe, a cold chest-

Wait, what?

“Ah yes, I see you found Oberon,” Ivan set a large...kettle(?) down on the edge of the table.

“Siobhan's axe. She's had him for many years! A great opposite for my Olga-”

“Who tae foook's Olga?”

“Ahhhh *cough* I mean,” Ivan scrambled, “Svetlana, Svetlana! I don't know who this, this ‘Olga’ is!”

Siobhan snorted as she caught the alarmed look Valora was currently sporting. “Calm ye tit, is na’ what ye think.” Sliding the snack board into the center of the table (and over the childish carving of Ilya gouged into the wood), she filled all three cups with a small amount of very, very strong smelling herbal tea from a smaller kettle. “The ol’ baw bag like's tae wind me up. Svetlana,” she stressed as her husband chuckled hoarsely, “is ‘is hammer. OLGA is tae town's whore.”

“Shibby!”

“Oh, doan act tae maggot. Not'ting wrong being a working girl like Ekaterina. Olga's just a slag.”

“Ah, Shibby-”

“Here, girly, this is how tae use a samovar,” gesturing to the large, weird kettle-that's-not Ivan had placed, Siobhan took a few moments to explain the contraption, and soon both Valora and Siobhan had a tea they were happy with. “Now, what fookery has my boy doon now?”

Valora took a deep breath, before launching into, well, everything. “It all started with a murder…”

The kitchen was quite for a long time after Valora finished speaking. Julian's parents looked like they had aged ten years, with Ivan leaning against the table as Siobhan slumped, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Valora wanted to comfort them, but it is difficult to do so when you've just told the parents of an individual who hasn't been home (let alone written a letter) that said person is wanted for a heinous act.

So she just sat there. Quietly. Sipping her tea.

“Do you have any good news,” Ivan asked.

“Your son has powerful allies in House Principia. My liege, Germanius and his uncle, Cordelia, are in the process of conducting an investigation and exonerating him.”

Siobhan sat up, bright blue eyes locking in on Valora. “An’ why? Wha’ in'trest do dae have in m'boy?”
“Julian is, involved. Romantically. With Germanius's nephew, Tiberius.” Valora jumped, pushing back from the table as Siobhan buried the head of a hatchet (that came out of fucking NOWHERE!) into the wood of the table.

“Nu blyat, MISHKA! What the blin-!”

“Tae fooker bet'er be treating m'boy right! Not a single hair on 'is head is to be harmed!”

“Ma'am,” Valora put her hands up, “I can assure you, Ty adores your son! Is head over heels for him! I know for a fact that he's doing his best to spoil the other.”

***

They were only a few days away from the end of their travel time with the caravan. From there on out, it would just be them, the dogs, and open sky. No beds or actual shelter.

If Julian wanted to see how far Ty would...follow him, he need's to ask it now.

“Um, Ty? Darling? I wanted to ask, um, oh dear this is embarrassing!” Julian sat at the foot of their bed, ramrod straight. He was squeezed in on himself, twiddling his thumbs as his legs were as tight together as possible from thigh to knee, and knee to ankle. He was trying so hard not to let on just how hard up he was…

“What's up babe,” Ty continued to wind the finished yarn onto a niddy noddy. This would be his final skein. Now, if only his glasses would stop sliding down!

“Um,” Julian bit his lip, continuing to look down at his lap. “Remember how you said, uh, that if I, I needed anything? That I could ask you?” His breath hitched slightly. Gods, he was so scared of what Ty's reaction would be, but excited at the same time. Some of the things that Ty has done to him before are just, extrapolations of what Julian is going to ask him.

But at the same time, past partners have reacted with shock and scorn. He doesn't know what he'll do if Ty reacts the same way.

“Whaddya need, Sweetheart?” Ty is this close to being done. Just a few more yards to wind...

“Um, I need you-”

“Need me for what?”

“Ah, I just need you.”

“Again, babe, what do you need me for?”

“I need you to come over here and hurt me,” Julian gasped, covering his face in mortification.

Ty's head shot up, eyes targeting the near-wreck on the bed. Taking a sniff, he let out an inaudible purr at the thick and heavy scent that was uniquely Julian's arousal. Setting the niddy noddy aside, he slid from his chair to the bed, slipping off and setting aside his glasses. Getting close up and very personal, he ghosted his nose up a pale neck before burying it behind an ear with a growl, not missing the gulp or gasp his delightful prey made.

“What type of hurt we talking about, Beautiful?” He leaned close, bracing himself on the bed. His free hand slowly rubbed over a taught thigh, fingers digging in and grasping lean, muscled flesh. The sound Julian made…
Julian had froze, head tossed back. His lower lip was caught in his teeth, a small bead of scarlet blooming. The way Ty was petting him shorted his ability to think.

“I need an answer, honey,” Ty’s hand had moved up further, now rubbing the the delicate flesh where inner thigh and groin met, coming close to but not touching the large tent between Julian’s legs.

Taking a deep breath, Julian shuddered. “Ah, um, I, shit! Your hands. I want them to bruise me-”

“But they already do.” Ty loves leaving marks on pale, milky flesh, but hates when those same marks fade away. They do so so quickly.

“-deeper bruising! I want to see black and blue!” Oh, please don’t turn away from him. He needs this so bad-

“Where do you want them?”

Ah, this is too good to be true! Whatever did he do to get such a perfect, wonderful man? “Um, I, my thighs. And my hips. And, and my ass. And oh, when you had choked me, I wanted it tighter-” Julian sucked in a deep breath of air, tensing up as Ty cupped him roughly thru his trousers. He bucked as Ty alternated between squeezing and rubbing him.

“Do you have a favorite safeword?” Oh, Ty was going to ride his Julian hard and hang him up soaking wet. He’s been waiting for Julian to ask him...

“N-no. What are they?”

Wanting to tear someone apart for never educating Julian about proper ‘slap and tickle’ rules and etiquette, Ty shoved that to the side. Right now, it was more important to take care of Julian than to tend to his anger. “Words that you say to tell me to stop or slow down. Things that stand out and cannot be ignored. You can say no all you want, but the moment, the instant, you say your safeword, it stops. Permanently or otherwise.” Wanting to have this important discussion with a clear-headed Julian, Tiberius pulled away completely.

It took several long minutes for Julian to get a hold on himself. Finally looking at Ty directly, he was somewhat taken aback at the serious look the other was sporting. “Ah, um. What words do you recommend?”

Oh, but Ty wanted so badly to suck that bitten lip. His eyes stayed glued to that small bit of red as he spoke. “Something easy for you to remember, but would also not be conceivably shouted during regular sex. Have two: one for a hard stop, the other to pause or slow down.”

Julian sat, thinking. What words could he use? Most that he came up with he discarded, all being things related to sex acts or thing he’s been known to ramble on about when he’s lost in lust. Medical terminology could be used, but he has some unpleasant memories attached to that.

“Can you choose? For me?”

“Strawberry and banana. Strawberry for ‘stop’, and banana to ‘slow down’.”

“Strawberry and banana,” Julian murmured. He repeated it a few times, liking how the fruit colors reminded him of the road signs some of the bigger cities used to control traffic. He grinned. “So, does kiwi mean ‘go’?”

Ty leaned in, dropping a soft kiss onto even softer lips. “We can do that. Now, how do you want
to do this?"

***

After the roasting Siobhan gave her, it was Valora's turn with Ivan. Settling his wife with some sort of fruit pastry, he left her to her muttering as he topped up his tea.

“Now, tell me about this ‘Tiberius’. I'm a little surprised that Ilya would go for another man, considering the major crush he had on Olva when younger. What does Tiberius do?”

Taking a bite of some cheese, Valora washed it down with tea, making a mental note to pick up some before leaving Nevivon. “He's a Journeyman Sorcerer with the Citadel. Has been for quite some time. His mother was the previous High Priestess of Hedonism, with his uncle Germanius Principia the current Warlord of Serenissima. He has two younger brothers he adores, and two Principia Standing Hounds that he spoils like the big babies they are.

He's also completely smitten with your son. Does everything he can to spoil him, weather with material objects, home cooked meals, or affection. It wouldn't surprise me if Rus has already knitted a pair or two of socks for Julian.”

“How much mon'ey and how big is his cock?”

“MISHKA!” Ivan's shocked screech was near semi-sonic.

“Listen, ye great bollock! My boy deserves tae ‘ave a good life! I want tae know he'll be taken care of!”

“Rus,” Valora cut thru the squabbling, voice high, “is very independently wealthy! If he were to stop working right now, he and Julian could live comfortably for the rest of their lives. He receives a sizeable pay cheque from the Citadel, he has side projects and investments, his inheritance, and then his stipend from the House he receives for being an unmarried man, which would increase by forty-percent if he gets married.

As for your...other question,” Valora blushed slightly. “He's a healthy young man who's had his lovers before Julian, and it was my understanding that they never walked away unsatisfied.”

“Good. An’ he wouldn't hurt m'boy?”

“Never. At least, not without Julian's permission.”

***

Stripped bare, Julian laid on his back in the center of the bed. He was swallowing rapidly and breathing hard, having difficulty believing that this was really happening. Every one of his requests had been met with neither scoff nor scorn, and Ty had taken quite some time to ask Julian about what would satisfy him and how he wants it done.

His request to be bound had been met with a knowing smile. One that Ty wore the entire time he had been putting Julian’s torso into a box-tie and his legs into frog-position. Each knot and loop that was made was joined with teasing touches and soft strokes of long fingers. Soon, Julian was naught but a puddle of tied limbs and rushing hormones. It was only near the end of Ty's work that Julian saw the single big flaw in his request: he can't TOUCH Ty. The realization was like a punch to his gut when the other left the bed to get their oil and a few...’things’.

“Ah, Tyyyyyyyy...please, touch me…” Julian tried to wiggle, only able to do little more than
twist. The way Ty had tied his arms behind his back left him unable to use them (barring the loop over a thumb, one meant for quick release).

He loved it and hated it, all at once.

“Don't worry, Sweetheart. I'll take care of you,” a thick palm settled just above Julian's pubic bone, long fingers swirling before slowly pushing up, skimming over a flexing torso. Kneeling between bound but spread legs (mentally patting himself on the back for looping rope around the knees and pulling it behind Julian's neck. The view…), Ty got nice and snug. Thighs tickling from the close proximity of them to the back of Julian's, he sat next to him on the bed the things he had gathered.

“So. You mentioned a few things. Something about ‘bruising’ in a few area's?”

Blushing hard again, Julian clenched his eyes tight. He doesn't know why he's so shy when it comes to intimacy with Ty, why he's so apprehensive to share his wants. At the beginning of this ‘relationship’, he was an unashamed harlot. As they've progressed, with few exceptions, he'd gotten more reticent. Now though…

Ah, fuck it.

“Ah, well, you've um, you have some nice, big hands. Broad palms and loooong fingers-”

“And let me guess? You've been a naughty boy who needs a spanking?” As he was saying this, Ty flipped Julian over. With a few pushes and pulls, he soon had the other face down, ass up. Making sure that nothing would obstruct Julian's breathing, Ty rubbed his palms over warm cheeks. He's always thought Julian has had a cute little butt. Small but there, and high and tight. It's cup-able. It's also surprisingly hairless, which is saying a lot when it comes to Julian. While not super hairy, the man does have a decent amount of it. Short and silky, a nice dusting of it on his chest easily curls into a stream going to his lower stomach and groin. Add in the thin layer on his arms and legs and it makes for a pretty picture.

Speaking of, as Ty was massaging a cheek, long fingers dipping under and near a tight sac, his fingers brushed a few stray pubic curls. Feeling playful, he gently tugged one, smirking at the jerk and startled gasp Julian gave. Testing the waters, he repeated his action a few more times.

“Ohhhhh darlinggg…”

Deciding enough was enough, Ty slid to the end of the bed, pulling Julian with him. Sitting sideways, he snuggled Julian's rear against his stomach with one arm as his free hand rubbed pale cheeks firmly. He made sure to grasp and pull at random, almost massaging them.

*smack!*

Julian jumped, letting out a moan. Ty had only used the meat of his fingers, giving the pliable flesh beneath them a light but firm swat. Testing the waters. He rubbed the sting away, dropping a feather-light kiss.

*smack!*

Another swat, this time to the other cheek. A whisper of a groan floated up, Julian wiggling his behind in a blatant asking for more. Teasingly, Ty only manhandled the cheeks below him.

“Tyyyyy...please...I want-*SMACK!* oh!”

In the midst of Julian's whimpering, Ty delivered a loud, hearty slap. One that shot bolts of
pleasured pain straight to Julian's cock and left Ty's hand stinging. The grasping of that same cheek caused Julian's toes to curl and pushed a huff from his throat. The complete withdrawal of those same hands, done only after one good spank, confused Julian.

“Ah, but Ty-”

“Just a moment, Sweetheart. Just getting the oil ready.” Ty had opened their bottle, making a mental note to procure more, and soon. He drizzled it over reddened cheeks before stoppering it. The cool liquid hitting warm skin caused Julian to jump, and Ty let out a chuckle as he started to work the oil into soft skin. He made extra sure to go between the cheeks, dragging long fingers over a pink ring. The little area between sac and entrance also got some love, pulling moans and gasps from the man below him. Dragging his fingers back, he made sure to catch a moist ring.

*CRAK!* “Oh Ty YES!” Julian shouted again as another hard slap was delivered to the other cheek. His cock jumped at each blow, and a few beads of cum leaked out, just to get smeared over Ty's bare thigh.

Another blow, another gasp, and another twitch. Soon, Ty was raining down delicious pain onto Julian's ass, the cheeks turning a deep red. Finger and palm prints could be seen glistening on the abused skin, and Ty randomly rubbed his fingers into an oiled cleft. On one such pass, he snaked his middle then ring fingers past a tight ring, pushing them in deep. Julian's legs jumped, trying to extend at the sudden but delightful intrusion as he let out a sharp cry. One that was quickly followed by a deep grunt as Ty delivered another hard blow. Soon, Julian was doing his best to rock back onto the digits buried deep inside him.

“Hnng, Ty, please! Hurt me more…” Julian shouted as another, third, finger made its way inside, the fuzzy burn of his stretching joining the pain of his spanking and making him harder than he has ever been before. He could feel Ty’s palm meet his overheated flesh as fingers sunk in to the knuckle.

A few more swats later, and both fingers and hands removed themselves. Hot hands gripped shaking hips before gently rolling Julian onto his back. The rope harness kept his bound legs pulled up and spread, and Ty checked to make sure that his arms wouldn't be in an awkward position. Soon, a dram of oil was poured over an angry cock and red curls before one of the palms from before gripped it tight and started pumping. After a few passes, Julian's hips started twitching, trying to chase release.

The fingers from before soon buried themselves again, searching and then curling upwards. Julian's entire body jerked hard, trying to curl up more as both his prostate and cock were assaulted. Both hands started to withdrawal soon after, and he clenched hard, trying to keep the fingers inside where they had found the perfect place.

“Ah, Ty! No! Please!”

Ty paused, breathing hard. Getting Julian all hot and hard always got him going. Hell, just having the red head look at him is enough to get ready to drop trou and go. He wants nothing more than so have a squirming and shrieking Julian screaming around his cock as he fills him up to the brim.

But he heard ‘no’. “Is that a 'don't stop’ no? Or a ‘strawberry’ no?” He refuses to hurt the others trust, especially after others had done so. Julian's never used safe words before, and Ty wants to make sure that the first time goes right.

It took almost a full minute for Julian to register what Ty was saying. Shaking sweat-soaked hair out of his face, he panted. “Kiwi...just...all the fucking kiwi,” he moaned.
Ty smiled. “Good to know.” And with that, he pulled his hands away briefly. Before Julian could beg, they returned, pushing spread thighs further apart. “Keep them here,” he squeezed them for emphasis.

“Ah, what, what are oh fuck shit TY! YES!” Julian jumped and cried out as a thin piece of leather was used to strike his inner thigh. The sharp crack of wondrous pain caused stars to dance behind his eyes and for a small amount of cum to shoot out of his neglected dick. Another strike fell onto his opposing thigh, further up at the junction.

Oh, Ty was having so much fun. Each blow made his sweet, darling Julian jump and howl. The man’s own legs fell as far open as the ropes would allow, and he tried to thrust his hips up, almost offering them like a supplicant does in prayer to their god. His head whipped about, the tossing and turning pulling his hair out of his braid and tangling it into a rats nest of epic proportions. Oh, and the tears streaming down his face… they made Ty so thirsty. He wanted to lap them from red cheeks before diving into that pink and gasping mouth.

Looking down, he surveyed his handiwork. Red, almost purple, thighs were tense and swelling. Above an angry cock was a thick puddle of cum, ready to be slurped down by a hungry mouth. Hanging just below that was a high and tight sac, thick and full of spunk. Julian’s chest flexed rapidly as he whimpered between gasps.

That same chest that was free from marks. He’ll need to change that.

Leaning forward, Ty buried his lips in the hot skin just before a pink ear. “Sssshushhh. Almost finished. You’ve done so good, Sweetheart. My lovely boy, my beautiful man, how are you so perfect?” As he spoke, he pulled pillows and lose blankets close, slipping them under Julian’s back and propping him up. Getting up close, Ty sat low on his thighs, spreading them wide. One hand that was still slick with oil pumped his shaft a few times, lining him up to a loosened hole that had gone tight again at the abuse to ass and thighs. He can't wait to bury himself inside and just shower Julian in his affection.

“Ty, I, I need you to, oh please—” Julian cried out as a thick, hard cock slid inside him. His head dropped back and he let out a long groan as each hot inch slipped in, the thick head rubbing hard his prostate as it went past. He shuddered, tense body falling lax as Ty bottomed out. “Oh fuck yes,” he breathed. Ty snickered, dropping a kiss to a slick forehead as his hands settled on a slim waist. He held the other in place a he started pumping, shallow and slow. A few wet sounds could be heard as moist skin met and parted, the copious amounts of oil covering them speaking. Lips met each other in slow, sloppy kisses, getting more heated and wet as Ty’s motions sped up. His hands started moving slowly upwards, soon settling on the ribs on either side of Julian’s chest. His thumbs spread out, looking for dusty pink nipples-

—there they are. As Julian whimpered and mewled, Ty’s thumbs pushed in and dragged down the little pebbles. Each time he did so, he could feel Julian jump and clench. Eventually, his hips started beating up, the slap’s of skin on skin ringing around their cart. Each thrust was shallow, but hard and fast, Julian letting out a constant high moan as a hard head rubbed his spot without mercy. The bouncing was causing the bed to creak, and if the cart didn't have built-in muffling runes, Ty knows that everyone would be able to hear what he was doing to his boy.

Julian’s spread legs shook and his ring burned at the constant drag upon it. His cock felt thick, and he thought his sac would explode if he doesn't cum soon. It doesn't help that each drag of Ty's skin across his own abused thighs and the hard beat of strong hips on his ass shot bolts of pleasure to his
cock.

And oh sweet goddess, what Ty was doing to his nipples…

“B-, banana…”

Ty pulled back, hearing the word sobbed against his lips. “What's wrong, love? What did I do? What do you nee-“

“I just need to cum,” Julian whispered brokenly. “Please. Just, I need it, I need it so bad.” He shuddered, huffing in frustration thru his nose.

“Okay,” Ty dropped a kiss to parted lip. “Okay, I can do that. But, your fine? Except for that?” He felt Julian bury his face into Ty's sweaty neck before giving a shallow nod. “Okay. Okayokayokay,” he started thrusting in earnest, working his hips double-time to get them both there. It looks like he's found the end of Julian's endurance.

“Pl-e-ase...mo-oo-ore...I ne-ed mo-oo-ore…”

Pushing Julian back into the bedding firmly, Ty locked their lips and thrust his tongue into a frankly glorious-tasting mouth before pinching peaked nipples and twisting harshly. He watched thru lidded eyes as Julian's shot open, going as wide as possible before rolling back as he let out a series of strangled shouts as he finally released. Ty pulled back, looking between their bodies as an absurd amount of cum shot from Julian, covering both of their groins, bellies, and everywhere in between in a thick layer of spunk. As his own cock was strangled in velvet heat, he gave one more hard twist. As Julian howled and bucked, Ty came with a shout that trailed into a groan. He grasped abused hips harshly, bruising them further as he held them in place so he could pump the ass clenching around him full of thick cream.

Shuddering, Ty slumped onto a panting Julian, a faint squelching heard as the cum between them was trapped. He showered the face and neck below him with kisses. “Oh, good boy. Such a good, sweet, nasty boy...” He felt the other tremble at the words, Ty vowing to praise the other to orgasm at a later date.

Between whispers, he slipped his arm behind the other. Fingers wiggling, he soon located the release knot. Giving it a tug, he felt Julian's bonds slacken. The other immediately took the opportunity to hug Ty, somewhat awkwardly seeing as Julian's legs were still done up. Ty quickly rectified that, and soon both men lay on their sides, wrapped around each other as they came down from their high.

Julian eventually pushed Ty onto his back, crawling up and starfishing on top of the other. They hadn't cleaned up yet, too caught up in each other. As Julian moved, he could feel a trickle of cum seep out and run down his cleft. He moaned at the sensation before settling, too tired to even attempt cleaning himself up. At some point, Ty had started running his hands up and down his back, and the soothing motions lulled Julian to sleep.
The caravan entered the farming town of Neptunia after lunch. The dirt track gave way for cobblestones, and the land had turned from woods to emerald fields, eventually transitioning into rolling farms. The plan was to set up shop for a day before setting off again, heading east from the southern dip they took. A few days after that would be the start of Saturnalia's territory.

Ty had woken shortly after their activities, the feeling of drying cum making him itch. As he cleaned himself and then Julian up, he looked out the small wagon window at the scenery. He couldn't see much, but a lot of what he saw reminded him of illustrations of Alban cities and towns. There was a lot of heavy wood buildings with whitewashed accents and wrought iron, a lot of the elements showing a heavy Tudorian influence.

Wasn't there a major fire, about eighty years ago?

Regardless, they passed many a produce and animal farm before getting to some of the more residential areas. The road had widened somewhat, and they passed many a citizen going about their business. On the opposite side of town was a large square, a few streets away from the Main Square and it's clock-tower. There, the caravan would set up, do some trade, and stock up on supplies. Most of the things they had acquired last week would be sold here. If he remembers right, Serafina needs to pick up a shipments of some produce to take to a little hamlet just outside of Saturnalia's border before they turn back north.

Ah well, it'll be an hour before they'll be needed to help out. In the meantime, Mazel and Tov need to be brushed.

***

Valora just stood awkwardly as Siobhan and Ivan packed and settled the house. Before she could tell them why she was here, the Devorak's decided to head to Vesuvia on their own and to possibly make the case for their son. When she tried to dissuade them, Siobhan steamrolled right over her as Ivan stood in the back and nodded sagely.

Resigned to the fact that her job has now gotten twice as hard, Valora tried to think on what she could do and tried to plot out possible scenarios. Most of them didn't look good. At this point, Valerius is a wild card. While he's currently slothful now, he is someone to be careful of. He comes from a minor but important Atreian noble family, one who's always been in the thick of things, politics wise. If she remembers right, the main reason Valerius is in Vesuvia has something to do with his families implicated involvement with an attempted assassination on the current Dictator's...brother?

Oh, now she remembers! Valerius's cousin Athena was Dictator Scipio's brother's mistress. And Cato had a thing for sleeping around, which she didn't like (never mind how hypocritical that sounded). Cato was found near dead in his bed next to Athena by one of his servants. Scipio tried to have her executed for an attempted murder, but the Senate blocked it. Valerius was sent to Vesuvia to be an Ambassador and rekindle the relationship between the two nations as a gesture of loyalty to Scipio.

Personally, Valora would have NOT done that. While there was not enough evidence to convict Athena of anything, a lot of people around the Ceasarius family have a habit of dying or going missing (usually after the Will was rewritten to include them). Valora wouldn't put it past Valerius to have gotten involved with Lucio for the opportunity to gain control of Ves-
Wait.

Oh fuck.

***

Wagon coming to a stop, Ty opened the door to let the girls out. Watching as they ran around the square with a case of the zoomies, he quickly penned a note for a still sleeping (but clean-er) Julian that he would be out exploring. A sharp whistle later and he was walking down a busy street with his posse.

While Neptunia wasn't large like, say, Vesuvia, it was sprawling. From what he remembers, about ten thousand people call this place home. While very small compared to Vesuvia's five-hundred thousand and Saturnalia's three-hundred thousand, Neptunia was still very important: farming. For the Stellaris empire, Neptunia on her own provided almost a full twenty-five percent of the empire's food. That's a lot for such a lowly-populated providence.

It's gotta be the soil. Neptunia is cradled in a valley that has mountains on two sides. The Ravenrock mountains start here, and a river is about twenty miles southwest. The largest mountain, Mt. Bathurst, used to be a volcano. That makes for some extremely fertile land, right there. Throw in the late-spring storms that bring water and dust from the tropical Hanjhi providence and BAM! Food out the wazoo.

The mountains made for some nice views. Also made one feel small. The edge of town that was closest to them is a short five-mile walk away from the base, to the west. Everywhere Ty turned, the mountains could be seen or felt. You either were looking straight at them, or you were in their shadow. They were inescapable.

He missed Home so much. They may be shaped differently, and be bare, and smaller, but his heart pinged at memories of the Umbral mountains. Of actually living ON and IN them, the central mountain having been hollowed out to make room for the High Palace.

...of Ma's home, tucked up and away. A little cottage that was her getaway. He wonders what happened to it. He'll have to find out and gift it to Belial.

Now he wants to just sit and cry.

“T? Is that you!?”

With a confused look, he whipped his head back and forth before finding the person he was looking for. “B? Hedonism's Ball's, it is you!”

***

Yawning wide enough to crack his jaw, Julian scooted out of bed. Scratching his scalp, he snorted and grunted as his brain turned on. Outside, he could hear a couple of people talking quite lively. Recognizing Ty's voice, he was wondering what had the other so animated. Throwing on some random clothes (being sure to slip on his patch), he yawned again as he opened the door.

“Darling, who are you-?” he paused, noticing the large cobbled square they were in. He saw several of the other wagons had tables and cabinets out front, with their occupants hawking their wares. “What did I, hm, miss?”

“Not much, Sweetheart. We'll be here thru tomorrow, leaving early the day after. Then it's only about two days travel before we enter Saturnalian territory and we split.”
“Ah. And who are these lovely ladies you've got here,” he gave a roguish grin, winking (as best as one could with an eyepatch), he got a few quiet laughs for his effort.

Jumping to his feet, Ty dragged Julian down to the little table and chairs set up at the base of the stairs. “Some old friends! Sweetheart, meet Belladonna,” he gestured to the glasses-wearing brunette, “and Jean,” the blonde. “Queen Bea, Jeanie, this is Julian. He's mine!”

The ladies snickered and Julian flushed at Ty's enthusiastic declaration. “It's, ah, nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Belladonna intoned, surprising Julian with her voice. It was deeper than he was expecting, but it worked with her striking appearance. “It's nice to see T has someone.”

“...’T’?”

She smirked. “T and B. Where one went, the other followed. Often times, we'd just be referred to as TB. Especially if we were in trouble,” she said fondly.

“They were childhood friends,” Jean sipped her tea. “I didn't meet him till much later.”

Julian started to feel a little nervous, but tried to swallow it down. “Hm, is that so? I take it your mothers were friends?”

“Pfft! We were Matches,” Ty rolled his eyes as Belladonna snorted.

“And that means?” Julian's pretty sure he knows. And is, quite frankly, feeling a bit intimidated. Belladonna is a beautiful woman, with porcelain skin, long blacker-than-black hair, fine (if slightly pointed) features and her eyes look like they have the moon trapped in them. He wouldn't blame Ty for trying to match with her again.

“Something we've been meaning to speak with you about,” Jean refilled her cup. The frost-complected blonde sipped her tea, her skin even paler than Belladonna's. Her pale hair was so white, it was nearly silver, and was cut very short and pushed back. Her eyes were a very intense, bright blue and hooded, giving her a permanent 'come hither' look. Throw in a face that looks like it was carved by one of the great masters, and Julian could see why anyone would want to match with either lady for their sheer looks alone.

“...?”

Belladonna pulled off her glasses, sighing. “While we may have broken off the arrangement, my Houses are urging me to find someone. Both of us, actually,” she entwined her hand with Jean's, the action comforting Julian somewhat. “I'll admit, the thought of a child, ideally a few, is appealing, but the males being shoved my way leave much to be desired,” she wrinkled her nose.

“How so,” Ty leaned back, brushing his shoulder along Julian's. “Do they not come from good stock?”

“Their personalities are appalling. Or they're quite a bit older than me. Or their demands are simply ridiculous.” Her face twisted into a sneer, “one had the audacity to state that he wouldn't bed me unless I set my career aside. As though he was doing me a favor!”

“Oh hell no.”

“Oh my!”
Jean kissed the cheek of her frustrated, girlfriend? Wife? Fiance? “We come as a pair. Too many males don’t like that.”

Ty snorted in derision. “Pampered pansies. You must be getting the spoilt sons of Houses and families who only managed to birth a single boy in a few generations.”

Belladonna nodded. “And an even smaller, but haughtier, percentage have Time Witch blood. And considering what happened with the Akhenti Purges…”

Ty winced. “Thus why you circled back to me.”

“Exactly. We desire children, but with a male of good character and morals. Not just power and prestige. Add in the fact that your grandfather was the son of a Time Witch—”

“—and we kinda have to make babies,” Ty groaned. He leaned back with a whimper, “why does this happen to meeeeee!?”

***

Soon, talks of Matching turned into general catching up. Belladonna and Jean were in town for research, something related to an old temple of some sort becoming active for no apparent reason after being dormant for the last few centuries. Ty offered to help out, the ladies having issue trying to figure out who the temple was dedicated to in the first place.

“You wanna come too, babe? You traveled to places I haven’t, and the god may not be local.”

“That sounds like it would, hmm, be fun. When will we meet?”

Setting a time to meet early the next morning in the Main Square, talk turned back to general chit chat, with Mazel and Tov wandering up to excitedly beg for scritches from Belladonna and Jean as the ladies mentioned a few places to shop or just kill time before the group split.

Walking over to the resale shop Jean mentioned, the two men walked in. It was wide and spacious, if a little musty. There were separate sections for clothes, furniture, kitchen wares and so on. Ty actually zeroed in on the clothing section, going straight for the fixture advertising seventy-five percent off of all winter wear.

Leaving him to his devices with the knowledge that Ty will include him in his project at some point, Julian decided to have a look about. From the stock, this shop has some good pickings. Everything was in pretty good condition, even if a little bit worn. He estimates he may find a few useful things if he digs enough. Heading over to what could only be a ‘Miscellaneous’ corner, he quickly found a high-quality canvas doctors bag, several antique chemistry beakers and flasks (who's metal decorations had a lovely patina), an incomplete set of medical encyclopedia's, and...a preserved leech?

This is too good, and weird, to be true. Looking for any sort of tags, he found that the bag and books came from the same person. Add in the fact that everything was in one spot, Julian's pretty sure that everything he found came from one J. Snow.

...wait. No way. Looking further at the beaker set, he located a year stamped onto the metal.

Holy shit this comes from Dr. John Snow. Julian is literally holding a piece of history in his hands. The man had literally created the field of Epidemiology and Disease Investigation.

“You okay, babe?”
“OOP!” Fumbling the delicate flask, Julian jumped. Cradling the instrument between his hands, he shot Ty a panicked look. “Please don't sneak up on me!”

“But...I didn't?” Ty looked like a kicked puppy behind a mound of sweaters. “I called you several times, but you were off with the fairies.”

Julian went pink, casting his eye down and away. “S-sorry. I just, um, found something really, really important and I- wait. What's going on with the sweaters?” The old, and very ugly, sweaters. The colors they were knitted in were *atroxious*!

Mustard yellow and teal!? Really!?

“I'm saving them.”

“How!? By burning them?”

Ty gasped, backing away with wide eyes. “No, you monster! I'm going to take them apart! This one,” he pulled out a dusky rose, super fluffy sweater, “is made from Southern Tundra Angora Rabbit fur. The breed is going extinct, so it's hard to get a hold of. And THIS,” he pointed to a multi-colored and textured monstrosity, “has Drakarian silk spun in the chain ply method, and this,” he babbled on and on. Each new thing, about a fiber or method, was pointed out to Julian with great gusto as word vomit spilled forth. Most of it went straight over the doctors head, but he's assuming that it is all very important based on Ty's enthusiasm and technical jargon.

Separating again, Julian walked up to pay for his goodies (and worry about storing them later) when he saw the shop-keep arguing with an old lady about what she was trying to sell.

“Five copper a piece for each is an insult! My husband paid several gold for them when he bought them!”

“And I'm saying, lady, that he was had. These are nothing but colored tin and glass.”

“I can still locate the certificate's and show you their value! Then you'll see-”

“See what? Your about to lose your home and farm, Lizzy. By the time you find how ever many pieces of paper you have, it'll be too late. Your just better off selling to me right now as is.”

As the two continued to squawk, Julian peered into the box on the counter. His eyebrows got lost in his hairline as he spotted several brooches, necklaces, and rings that were most *definitely not* ‘colored tin and glass’! One piece in particular (a gold and gemstone studded cat brooch) he KNOWS is a late-century piece! And one necklace has one of the famed Fabergé eggs!

*Everything in the box is a Fabergé piece.*

“Three coppers each is my final offer!” Crossing his arms, the shopkeep smirked greasily. Julian knows the other knows just what this lady has. He's tempted to drop his items on sheer principle.

“You can blow it out yer arse, Cadrik! I'd rather die than let these go for such codswallop!” Shaking her cane at Cadrik, the lady named Lizzy hobbled on out.

Walking up, Julian set his items down. He had memorized each ones price tag and knows that he should only be paying about two silvers and eight coppers for the whole deal.

It appears Cadrik, while he has an eye for gems and gold, has no idea the true value of what Julian has just paid for. If he did, he'd have sold it on to one of the auction houses in either Alba or Prakra.
Doctor Snow is nearly worshiped as a god for his contributions to medicine, and the governments of either nation would have paid a hefty coin for the items.

Grabbing his bag, he shot Ty a look as he left. Exiting, it took him only a few moments to locate Lizzy, her old age and box of goods slowing her walk. It was only a few steps to catch up to her.

“Pardon me, ma'am? I saw what, uh, happened. Would you be willing to sell directly to myself or my, um,” he stumbled over his words, still not quite sure how to describe his and Ty's relationship.

A very wrinkled face peered up at him, clear blue eyes still sharp underneath white hair. “Don't want to offend ya, but I doubt you'd be able to buy.”

He grinned. “None taken. Besides, Cadrik doesn't seem to understand that some things are worth more than gold,” he held up his bag. “If he knew WHO these came from, he wouldn't be running a junk shop.”

She pursed her lips, squinting. “…if yer offer ain't good-” she cut herself off as Ty walked up, bitching under his breath.

“-fucking dumbass. Has no idea the worth of HALF his shop! Pfft! One gold and twenty silver, he says. BAH!” The other two jumped at his outburst. “I should be paying closer to ten, TEN,” he held up his hand, open, and flexed it in emphasis, “times the gold for all this *p-tooht*. ” He spat on the ground, like he was trying to get a bad taste out of his mouth. As he looked up, his face scrunched up at the looks he was getting from his impromptu audience. “What? Is there something on my face?”

Meeting Lizzy's eyes briefly, Julian drawled out a ‘noooooo…’. “But, Ty, my darling? What do you know about Fabergé?”

Ty jolted like he had been shocked. His pupils blew wide and he started to breathe a tad shallowly. The air around him felt charged, like the instant before a lighting strike. “That they are a Mokban House of Jewelers, started about two-hundred years ago by Gustav Fabergé and his expose of a jeweled egg about the size of my fist. They eventually became the Royal Jewelers of the Imperial Mokban Family under the Zharship of His Imperial Majesty Zhar Alexander III. The craftsmanship is superb, the pieces affixed sturdily, and very few can get a custom-made piece outside of the Imperial Family, the Fabergé's able to dictate what they will make or sell and I want them ALL how much for the whole box!?” His chest heaved after his last statement. Dark eyes were locked onto the box Lizzy carried, much like a predator on prey. He didn't move aside from his breathing.

“Well,” Julian clapped his hands, causing Lizzy to jump (Ty was still statuesque), “let's see about having a sit-down and a discussion! With your permission, of course.”

***

Getting back to Lizzy's farm was a bit of a trek. She was located on the southern outskirts and had to trek thru the whole town. Normally it wouldn't be much of an issue, but with Lizzy's advanced age, the ground-eating stride Ty and Julian were used to was slowed to a crawl.

Julian couldn't speak for Ty, but he was loving the scenery. It looked like some of the illustrations out of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*, more specifically, that of-

“The Shire!”

“What?”
“Ty, this place looks like what I imagined The Shire to look like! From the books!”

Looking about, Ty hummed. “So it does.”

“On our way back, can we stop for a visit? Please?”

“Depends.”

Walking down the dirt track, with the girls darting to and fro, the group soon came to a small walking trail. It cut thru a tree-studded field, and had many sheep grazing. A bit off was a slight hill, a simple farmhouse on top that had Mt. Bathurst framing the background. Cutting thru the field and dancing around baa'ing sheep, it was about ten more minutes before the party was sitting at a table. Lizzy bustled about her kitchen, putting a kettle on as she got a basket of nibble together.

As she and Julian chitchatted, Ty's eyes were looking about, and he was NOT happy with what he saw. Where is her husband? Her children? Hell, a neighbor!? He can see several things that needed to be taken care of and repaired or replaced. A few cabinets were sagging, despite being nearly empty (he spied a few counter top racks full of dishes), several floorboards had large chips missing, the counters needed to be re-sanded and sealed…

He's worried about the rest of the house, and the barn behind it. Especially the roofs. It's obvious that she's on her own, and while she's in her late sixties, farm life is hard on the body.

“Here you boy's go,” a basket of bread and jam, along with a kettle of sweet-smelling tea was deposited on the sturdy but worn table. Settling, she picked up a slice of rye. “So, your interested in my sparklies, yeah?”

“Yes,” both men said in unison, excited for different reasons. Julian has an eye for Fabergé, his father Ivan having saved up for years to get a small egg pendant for Siobhan as an anniversary gift. Seeing the look on her face as she opened the messily-wrapped gift has stuck with him since he was ten.

Tiberius, on the other hand, is a fucking magpie. If it sparkles, he wants it. He can literally stare at something shining and sparkling for hours. “I'm a bit of a collector of the shiniest, and I have the money to spare,” he said around a slice of stale bread (really!? Stale bread!? Where is her family, he just wants to have a talk…). “I'll pay you a fair price for each piece.”

“...how much do you have on ya?” Lizzy may be old, but she's not a fool. She will only sell to him now if he's got the coin.

“About ten-thousand gold.”

Julian choked, one hand slapping the table as he went red and gagged on the bread he had been swallowing. Ty started beating his back as Lizzy told him to put his arms up. “T-, Ty! Just, just WHY do you have that much on you!?” What was the man going to do? Buy a fucking house!?

“I like shopping.”

“Well now,” Lizzy refilled Julian's tea cup with the (weak) sweet tea. “If that's the case, I don't see why we can't come to an agreement. Let's make a deal.”

***

This...was going to cost more than ten-thousand gold.
Like, WAY more.

Holy shit, just where the fuck did Lizzy get all this!? These were all custom pieces! Julian is a major Fabergé nerd, and has their entire catalog memorized front to back, and he's never seen these designs before. He'd call them fakes if it weren't for the Fabergé sigil stamped into the metal.

“Ma'am, I must ask,” he held up a sapphire-encrusted ring to a beam of light, throwing prisms all over the kitchen. “Just, how? How do you have all of these?” Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ty's eyes fixed on the ring, entranced by the light show it was giving off. “And you said you had certificates, somewhere?”

“Oh yes,” she giggled slightly, entertained by little Tiberius's antics and the look of awe and appreciation little Julian had. She knows that any pieces she sells them will go to a good home. “While we got the farm as a wedding gift, our fathers putting up bits of their land for us, my dear Arthur also traveled to sell our goods.” She sighed, “something about the land here makes for good wool and mohair. Every year, he would pack up a bunch and hit the road, going all over for a month or so before coming home.” She got up to prepare another kettle. “He'd feel horrible, leaving me alone with the kids. Always came back with a gift just for me. ‘Something to make up for me,’ he'd say. Oh, I'd scold him for spending money on things I would never wear, but then he'd just give me a look.”

“He was doing what all good husbands do and making sure you'd have funds, in case anything happened to him,” Ty fiddled with his braid, undoing it to put a diamond and white sapphire-encrusted hairpin in his hair. The gold metal was wrought to look like flower blossoms on a tree branch, and pale yellow gems were in the center of each bloom. “I gotta say, though, this is a LOT of pieces. He was spending quite a bit. Not unwarranted, though.” Finished with twisting his hair into a waterfall chignon, he rearranged the pin. “How do I look, babe?” Getting a squeak from Julian, he smiled, “sold!”

“Oh, he wasn't spending nearly as much as I thought he was,” Lizzy giggled again before churning out a full belly laugh. “My handsome man had caught the eye of Fabio Fabergé, and this was Fabio's attempts to court him!” Hearing Ty snicker and Julian squawk, she continued. “After a few years, I caught on. Poor Arthur! He was so worried that I would think he was straying! Especially considering how he also had a thing for Fabio! I gave him permission to have his fun, and we eventually became a bit of a menage et trois!” Ty joined her in her laughing, Julian doing so soon after, his tone a bit more incredulous. “Soon, Fabio started sending back more pieces, a way to say ‘Thank you’ for letting him and my Arthur have their thing.”

A few more hours were spent going over various pieces, with Julian staring hard at a gold-filigree, gem encrusted leaf brooch and a Mokban double-headed eagle pin. Papa was always very proud of their Mokban heritage, and Mama would look so nice with the leaf...

He could hear Ty and Lizzy start dickering about prices, with Ty getting frustrated that she kept underselling him. As it was, Julian kept going thru the box, pulling out sets of earrings and rings, necklaces and hair ornaments. His mind went back to the bags of money and gems he had stuffed during the fight with the centi-worm a few days back. It would be wise to hold on to as much as possible, but, he wants to buy a piece just for Ty. He'll still have plenty to spare, but still.

Pulling out the next piece, his heart stopped. It was a hair ornament, but one very different from the others. Ty and Lizzy were still dickering, but it had seemed to fade away. He was holding a large rose hairpin, made of colored crystal. Fabio must have spent a long time on it, because each petal was thin but well-formed. The edges of the petals and the leaves that framed the open blossom were edged in a pale gold, and actual, finely cut gemstones were scattered about, defining things like ‘dew
droplets’ and anther's.

It would look very, very nice in Ty's hair.

Batting thru the box again, Julian found a few more floral hair pins made in a similar way. One was a poppy, the other a chrysanthemum, a third a carnation. He found more and more, all in shades of red or pink or purple. Then he found more in blues and greens.

All of them would look good in Ty's hair, his unique rainbow obsidian curls letting him get away with many different color combinations.

He wants to buy them all so badly...

He jolted as Ty scooched his chair back, asking if he could use Lizzy's bathroom. Soon, he was trotting away, leaving just the two others alone.

“So, I see you have an eye for those, eh?” Julian jumped. “They always were my favorite ones. Arthur loved twisting my hair up with them. Called me his ‘mountain flower’. It's a shame that I can't really wear them anymore,” she smoothed gnarled fingers thru thin strands, her hair just going past her ears in airy waves. “They're just going to waste in that box.”

“Do you not have, uh, children? Not that it's not any of my business,” he sheepishly asked.

“Bah,” she waved his concern off. “They moved away as soon as they could, only returning for their father's funeral and they haven't been back since. I...I only get a few letters a year.” She stroked the petals of a fire Lily with a wistful sigh. “These all would look wonderful in your husband's hair.”

Julian started nodding before his brain registered the word 'husband'. “Wa-wait! Ty! He's uh, he's not my-”

“You're fine! It's fine! We're alllll fine!” Ty was nearly bouncing in his chair as he pulled a still-hunched Julian into his side. “Now! Let's talk money!"

The final tally for the pieces they would buy was approximately twelve thousand, eight hundred and three gold, four silvers, and one copper. They would be walking away with about forty pieces, with Ty asking her if he would like to notify others in the caravan that she's selling.

Julian had a heart attack. Or at least, it felt like one. The moment Ty finished his tally and announced the amount, Julian swears he slid sideways into another dimension, or astral projected into the atmosphere. He knows he blacked-out for a few moments before Ty shook him back to awareness. He was getting ready to sputter about the cost before Ty distracted him with the leaf brooch from earlier.

“Okay, Dizzy Mizz Lizzy,” Ty drawled, “I'll head back to get the rest of the coin. I should only be about, eh, twenty minutes? Anything I should bring to wrap them up in?”
She shoo'd him away. “I've got plenty of napkins to wrap them in. Julian and I can get started on that while you're away. Go on now, get!” Huffing as Ty finally started to amble away, she turned to Julian. “Now, about those pieces you were eyeing, let's have a chat as we wrap.”

Being a good boy, Julian did as he was told. All in all, he had found about a dozen things he wanted for Ty that weren't included in Ty's offer. Guessing that he wanted to surprise the other, she offered to let him come back later today and purchase them.

Then the dickering began.

By the time Ty came back, it was to the sight of what was quickly becoming the most important person to him and a sweet little old lady shouting prices at each other as each studiously folded precious things into soft linen napkins.

“Uhhhhhhh, babe?”

Squawking like Malak getting de-perched, Julian nearly threw out a window a half-wrapped pendant in his startlement. “Good heaven's, Ty! Warn a man, will you!?” He clutched his heart for dramatic effect, ‘slumping’ to the side in a swoon, eye wide as Lizzy snickered.

“Oooooookaaaaayyyyyy... anyways, I has the coin,” he shook a very heavy money bag for emphasis, the clinking of metal on metal ringing throughout the room.

It wasn't much longer before everything was wrapped and placed into a Bag of Holding. As Lizzy counted her earnings, Ty and Julian sat on her porch, watching as Mazel and Tov played tag with a few lambs. One of which had decided to get comfortable next to Julian's feet, and was nosing the leather of his boot, lipping occasionally at his laces.

“Hey, now! We agreed on the twelve thousand and change! Why do I have fourteen-”

“Kay, nice doing business with ya, have a nice day!” Leaping to his feet, Ty dashed back inside, swiped the goods, and hauled Julian behind him as he booked it down the trail. Mazel and Tov galloped behind them, barking in excitement as they dodged around sheep. One ram, startled at the commotion, nearly headbutted Julian off his feet in their mad dash.

“It wasn't much longer before everything was wrapped and placed into a Bag of Holding. As Lizzy counted her earnings, Ty and Julian sat on her porch, watching as Mazel and Tov played tag with a few lambs. One of which had decided to get comfortable next to Julian's feet, and was nosing the leather of his boot, lipping occasionally at his laces.

“Not that I'm complaining,” Julian panted, “but what did you do!” If Ty stole from a little old lady-

“YOU BOY'S GET BACK HERE! I DON'T NEED NO CHARITY! HEY!”

Oh.

Cackling, Ty jerked Julian closer, swinging him over and around his shoulders. With a grunt, Julian soon had a front-row seat to Ty's amazing glute's as they expanded and contracted as his legs pumped. Resisting and then changing his mind, a chortling Julian soon had both hands over Ty's rear.

“What-”

“Just keep running *snicker*.”

***

“Okay, I have to ask,” Julian huffed.
“About…?” Both men were back in their wagon, lounging about after dinner. The evening was warm, but a cool breeze blew by occasionally, bringing some relief, but it was still humid enough that too much cuddling could quickly turn bothersome. Currently, Ty was reading while on his stomach, and Julian had been dozing on his back before getting caught-up in the possible physics of Ty's ass.

“Just, how? How!? How did you get your rear so, so big? And firm?” Julian reached out and covered one half of Ty's bubble butt with his not-small hand and squeezed. Underneath a thin layer of fat was hard muscle, making for a most slappable ass. “It's so thick, and juicy, like I should be able to bite into it!” Like a rump roast.

Ty looked at him over his shoulder, an eyebrow arched up high. He gave Julian a very pointed, knowing look.

“What?”

“...you tryna tell me smthing?”

“Noooooo…” Julian trailed off, rolling over onto his side. “I'm just jealous.” He doesn't have much of a butt, so seeing the absolute beast hanging onto Ty makes him feel a bit, inadequate.

“Yeah, but you got some great legs. Something's gotta give and frankly, I'm happy anytime they get applied around my ears.”

Julian grumbled more. “Yeah, well, what do you need all that ass for, anyway? Thick thighs, thick ass, what does it all need to be there for?”

“Counterweights,” Ty shot back.

“Counter...weights? What for- oh! Oh Ty, that's nasty!” Julian swatted at a snickering Ty, not even bothering to contain himself as well.

“Hey, ya know what they say: big ass, big di-” Ty ducked the pillow thrown at him. “Besides, you do have one!”

“One what?”

“A booty!”

“...?” Is Ty blind?

“A little one. But, it's there!”

“...”

“A very little one. Microscopic, really.”

“......”

“Well, it's more of a ‘boo’ than a 'booty', I'll admit.”

“What on Earth does that mean!??”

“It's a ghost. And ghost's go ‘boo’! Your butt is so tiny, it's less of a butt and more of a Shade of a Butt. So, a ‘boo’-ty.”
“...you're sleeping on the floor. With the dogs. Forever.”
Of Beings and Brothers

It was very, very early the next morning when Julian was roused by Ty. Snorting, he rolled over with a grunt as Ty gently shook him. After a minute or so, he was left alone. Sighing, he started to drift off when two heavy weights thumped onto the bed. A few snorls and whines were heard before a wet nose started sniffing about his head and ears. Going to push the dog away, he grunted as a heavy set of paws settled on his butt, the weight of a fully grown Principia Standing Hound pressing him down. Before he could say anything, Julian squawked as someone decided his head would be a wonderful perch and sat on it.

Ty just laughed. Mazel was standing on Julian's butt while her sister decided to plonk her rear on the back of his head. Julian wiggled a bit, but soon just gave a sigh of resignation. “Ya might wanna get up. The girls ate quite a bit last night, and pork happens to give them a case of the toot’s.” Nearly breaking the sound barrier, Julian launched out of bed, sputtering as he tripped in the sheets and landed face first on the floor. As he struggled to free himself, Ty snickered. By the time Julian was up, Ty had a plate with a stuffed omelette and a cup of coffee ready and presented.

“After you eat, we gotta suit up. We're meeting with Bella and Jean today, remember? After, I was thinking we could use the bath's at one of the inn's and maybe do a bit of sightseeing. I heard the mountain has a viewing platform.”

***

“Whosa good girl!? Hm? Whosa good girl!? Is it you!? Oh, yes you are! You're both good girls! Ojaboujабouja!”

 Watching Bella baby-talk and fuss over the dogs was giving Julian another case of anxiety. The talk of Matches yesterday had floated to the back of his mind, but seeing her fuss over the girls as they danced and whimpered made him think of just HOW good she and Ty would be.

 Watching the tall and athletically slim woman chat with an exuberant Ty, Julian jumped when Jean came up behind him. Both women were dressed similar to Ty's leather outfit, with only a few minor differences. However, Jean's was dyed a red color, making her stand out. Out of the four, Julian's deluxe Plague Doctor's uniform was the least suited to any combat.

“You okay?”

“Hm? Oh, me? Oh, yes I'm fine. Just perfect! Peachy keen, even!” The look she gave him called him out on his bullshit. He sighed. “No. Not really.”

“Let me guess? How they act so alike with the dogs? Seem to have similar occupations? Are chatting like the best of friends?”

“Yes. To all of it. And the fact that they may Match back up. I mean, I can't give Ty children, for obvious reasons, and-”

“Just chill. You have literally NOTHING to worry about.”

He snorted. “Easy for you to say. You'll be getting kids from him, too. Two beautiful women, AND a bevy of babe's? It'll be, hard, to compete with that.”

“Has Ty explained Matching to you? In depth?”
“...not really. We've, um, spoken here or there about, uh, things. But, still-”

“I'll fill you in more as we walk. Then, you can ask Serafina or Tony more about it, if you don't trust me. It may be easier for you if you learn it from multiple sources.”

***

Julian's brain hurt.

Walking out of town, the group of four (plus two dogs) took one of the minor roads out of Neptunia, passing the various farms quickly and soon being surrounded by green, rolling fields. The temple in question was located a few miles outside of the city, at what used to be the town's outer limits before people started moving away. The random wood beam or collapsed chimney were the only markers of what used to be a more bustling, industrial town.

Julian and Jean hung back, with Jean taking the time to explain what Matching really is, down at its core. Which boiled down to preventing incest while ensuring bloodlines continued, whilst also still allowing for Love Matches, while also ensuring Umbrian independence.

“What does Umbrian independence have to do with Matching?” And was incest really such an issue at one point?

“It has to do with the birthrate of the sexes. Overall, women outnumber men nearly ten to one. It's closer to nine-point-five to one, now though, because of the efforts of the central Office of Genealogical Affairs. While Umbrian lands aren't really geographically separated from the other populations, cultural, magical, and ideological clashes make it hard for us to bring in new blood. Throw in the disparity between the sexes, and we had a real possibility of breeding ourselves to extinction.”

Julian winced. Too much consanguinity could actually do that. When he was younger, he had actually gone to a village with his mentor and seen the effects first hand of what too much inbreeding could do. Literally everybody had been kin to themselves, a result of the tight hold the ultra-patrical village elders had on it. His mentor literally started a fight with several men who thought it was okay to marry their twelve-year old nieces and essentially breed them to death, and then blame them on the unhealthy babe's brought into the world.

Suffice to say, but Julian quickly learned how to end fights, and do so quickly.

“And Umbrian independence is affected, how?”

“Husbands.” Seeing Julian's confused mou, Jean continued. “While we, for the most part, didn't get into the habit of ‘Groom Theft’, it was still an issue. The nations closest to our borders didn't like the fact that so many of their men were leaving and coming to us. In some areas, it got so bad that entire villages had no adult males.

On top of that, a lot of them came to us with big ego's, acting like they were doing US a favor by marrying three, four, even five women and producing children. The amount of those assholes getting whacked became a large enough problem that their home countries were threatening war.”

“...because the men were being put down for being assholes? Why would their nations care? It sounds like a plus in my book.”

“To save face. After all, you don't want to be painted as being uncaring of your citizens safety when their outside of your borders. That's how land grabs start.”
“Ahhhhh. And Matching comes in, how?”

“Basically, a contract is drawn up between the two parties with stipulations about things like how many kids, who gets what, if monetary compensation is involved, and so on. It's usually done between two Umbra, but has also been done between an Umbra and non-Umbra, usually someone of some sort of import. Marriage is not required.” Best not to mention that any common Umbra who desired children just needed to take a 'vacation'. Jean has the feeling that Julian would jump to an unnecessary (and really fucking wrong) conclusion.

“Like, Ty's Ma and the Jarl.” Or, well, the Jarl's brother, but he really doesn't want to bring up that mess.

“Bingo.”

“So, Matching is more of a necessary business arrangement. One that the Office of Genealogical Affairs HAS to sign off on, in order to ensure a stable population and national independence.”

“Yep,” Jean popped the last syllable as she spoke.

“...but what if he leaves me?” Belladonna is so beautiful. And nice. And good with dogs. And she and Ty have been talking so animatedly. And-

“Honey, the entire time we've been talking, Ty's been looking back constantly. At you. And only you.”

Seconds after she spoke, Ty twisted to look back. As his braid whipped about, his dark eyes locked onto Julian. Seeing the other looking at him, he flashed a bright and full grin before turning back around, hands flying as he went back to their conversation.

“Oh.”

“Yes. ‘Oh’.”

***

“Anyway, as I was saying. She had me on my back, knee's to the headboard-”

“- tits bouncing-”

“- all over, and I'm just having the time of my life. Ty, I'm telling you, if you and Julian are ever out near Bulovia, you have GOT to go to that shop. The strap-on Jean bought from them is amazing! But, whatever, back to the story. So, we're doing our thing when the door knocks. We're like 'pfft, whatever, they'll go away soon' and keep going. Seconds later, it gets busted open. Guess who's on the other side?”

“The brigands?”

“The brigands! And guess what else?” Bella leaned in close, “they were roommates!”

“Oh god they were roommates.”

***

Tybalt was going to kill Belial. The thirteen-year old had been running up and down the deck all morning, getting under everyone's feet. He'd been especially clingy as well, koala-ing onto Tybalt
when he got picked-up for the impromptu ‘vacation’.

Whyyyyyy does Uncle Gemmy need them in Vesuvia? It smacks of a reward, after that letter he and Bel sent Rus. He'd been expecting to get their asses torn apart, and instead they're actually coming in?

It's a trap.

“Tibbles?”

Wanting to kill Rus for giving him that nickname (and encouraging Bel to use it!), Tybalt looked at his younger brother with a sigh. “What do ya want, pipsqueak?”

Belial pouted. “’m not a pipsqueak. When will we be docking? I miss Ty!”

“*sigh* Soon.”

“Hmph, not soon enough.”

“Oh, quit whining. And stop running about, your getting in the way.” The shiphands have enough on their plate without having to deal with an energized teenager. “C’mon, I don't think we finished wrapping the gifts. I don't want to make a bad impression, and I suck at wrapping.” Slinging his younger brother over his shoulders with a grunt, the tanned young man started to make his way below deck, Belial chattering all the way. Making a note for them to tidy themselves up soon, he dragged out the gifts he purchased before they left Serenissima. “Okay, now,” he dumped a squealing Bel onto their bed. “Which one do you think Cousin Nadia would like best?”

***

“So, this is it? Is’nah so bad,” Ty cocked his hip as he stood, looking at the ruined statue. On either side of it were low, stone offering benches. It was just enough to be classified as a temple.

“Yeah, well. Nobody knows who it belongs to. And that's the problem,” Belladonna walked a few steps closer, pulling on nullified leather gloves. She squatted a few feet away from the statue base, a pile of rubble in front of it most likely coming from the now-decayed torso. All that was left were part of the legs, the base, and a few unidentifiable outcrops.

“So, uh, do we know when it, ah, woke up?”

“A couple of years ago, but it wasn't as active as it is now. We think that a traveler who actually knows who the deity is paid Homage as they passed by. Usually, that's all it takes. Lately though, we've gotten more reports about other statues or temples 'waking up', and they have no idea why.”

“Ah. Do we have any idea on who it could be?” Julian doesn't have much knowledge about any spirits or gods, aside from a few mentions he ran into during his time with Mazelinka and her crew. Unlike his family, he doesn't have one he pray's to. It's hard to believe in higher beings and creator gods when you've seen the worst that humanity has to offer.

“Too many to choose from,” Jean chimed in. “Neptunia is pretty old. It's grown and shrunk over the centuries, and while it has largely been independent, it has been under other nations control.”

“Is there a theme? Like, fertility, or protection?”

As Julian and Jean went back and forth (with Bella chiming in), Ty just kept looking at the statue. Something kept niggling at the back of his mind, and he felt like he was getting laughed at.
He scratched at the small of his back, grumbling about the comfort charms of his leather uniform not working right as Julian came closer. The redhead was looking at the ground intently, eye casing the area. The field they were in only had a thin walking path. Everything else was lush, green hills and a riot of flowers. Scattered among the open blooms of lavender, marigold, thistles and more were ones that were closed. Possibly Moonflowers.

Weirdly enough, the largest congregation of flowers were around the statue. Not only were there the flowers he mentioned, but a few rose vines could be seen.

But, their buds were closed as well? Strange.

"Hmmm. This may be a fertility one. Do you mind if I, uh, test some samples?"

"Ooh! Babe, are ya doing science! I wanna watch," Ty bounced on his toes like an excited child, getting looks from Jean and Bella. "What?"

"T, you literally wrote the book on Summoning."

"And fought a dragon."

"With a BROOMSTICK. And one of your best friends is an Incubus."

"...so? I want to see my sweetheart do the science."

Julian blushed before fumbling for one of the packs on his belt. "Okay! *cough!* So, um, first! I scoop some soil into a phial! Liiiiiiike so." He scooped about a quarter-teaspoon amount of soil into a clear phial, the dark and loamy material standing out in stark relief. "Now," he brandished a small, clear flask, "I tip a few drops of this solution inside before dipping in a strip of reactive parchment."

Ty's hand shot up.

"Yes, Darling? What do you need?"

"What does the paper do?"

"Excellent question, my love! Depending on the color, it will tell me the ph levels of the soil. Fertile soil needs to be between two different levels. Then, we just need to cross-reference produce yields to the time of activation of the statue!"

"...but, we still won't know who the statue belongs to." Julian drooped.

"It's still better than nothing," Ty piped up. "And frankly, this may be the best way to do this. Already, I've got over a dozen beings floating about in my head, but particulars are pretty fuzzy." Turning towards Julian, he raised a brow. "Should we take more samples? It couldn't hurt."

Passing out phial's, along with scraps of spare parchment and graphite pencils (to note where the samples came from), the rest of the group spread out. Julian thinks that proximity to the statue may have an affect on the soil, but he wanted to be sure. If they can prove that this was a fertility deity, that really narrows down the scope.

Sitting on a bench, he pulled out a little booklet, grabbing a spare lead to take notes. He could hear the others shout to each other as they worked, and the dogs were having fun stalking each other thru the undergrowth.

Feeling something bat at his back, he ignored it. It was breezy today, and the flowers by this bench
were tall. Of course they would thump into him.

*Miauw* More batting, this time more insistent. *Wong!*

Happy to hear a friendly kitty (and oh, but Pepi was such a good kitty!), Julian turned around, ready to give pet's when he jumped with a gasp, lading in the dirt on his rear.

That...was a big cat! A very, VERY big cat! If Julian was a betting man (which he is, but ignore that for now), he would have thought he was looking at a Lesser Mountain Snow Cat! The coloring was all wrong, and the features were a little too domestic, but size?

Yeah, there was no way this kitty was someone's escaped house-pet! Not even the Nordic Faerie Cat is this big.

Seeing it now had his attention, the cat *mia'd* at him again before picking up a dead rabbit. Easily hopping onto the bench, it then jumped onto the statue's base before putting the rabbit down. It then sat on its haunches, licking a paw as an ear flicked. Julian could see it looking at him as it cleaned itself.

"You okay babe- *OOF!*" Ty soon had an armful of cat, the creature having leapt into his arms. "Hey buddy," he scratched under its chin, barely able to hear himself as it started purring up a storm. "How'd you get out here? And just WHAT are you, hm?" He cradled it like a baby, and snaked his free hand between big, upturned paws to rub a fuzzy tummy.

"Uh, Ty?"

"Yeah, babe?" More petting.

"The, uh, the bunny the cat dropped disappeared. And the flowers got bigger?"

"The flowers were already big, lovely. And the carcass probably rolled away." Oh, whosa good kitty!

"...there are feathers, here? Now? Where the bunny was?"

"Well. That's not normal. HEY BEA, JEANIE! C'MERE!" Soon, everybody was huddled around the statue. "I think this might be an altar to Hedonism. Or at least, one of his kids." Passing the purring monstrosity over the Julian (who's hair started to get groomed), Ty picked up a feather. Twisting it in the light, he could make out faint patterns of black-on-black, but little more. "Hmmmm, no idea who it could be, and I don't like that."

"How so?" Bella was next to hold the cat, who was busy bussing it's head over her chest and shoulders.

"I got help from an Incubus a while ago. One we couldn't identify. Cordelia thought it could be a youngster, but I don't think so. And that has me worried."

Julian had plucked a long strand of grass and was currently teasing the cat with it. "And these feathers are different, yes?"

"Eyep. Different Incubus. Now the question is, why do we have so many Old Ones faffing about? It's starting to get me a little nervous."

Jean sighed. "Be that as it may, we have no power over them, and they could be a fickle bunch. They are just as likely to be bored and looking for entertainment as they are to be taking care of
business." She ruffled the cat's ears, "as it is, it looks like we found who activated the shrine. I'll let the Mayor know, with instructions for offerings. It looks like Hedonism paying attention here, both now and in the past, may be one of the reasons for such good crop yields." The cat caught her hand with a furry paw, bringing it to its mouth to lick it. "Hey, Queen Bea? You want to adopt a cat?"

***

Leaving Bella and Jean with their new furbaby (now named The Good King Snugglewumps), Ty and Julian decided to change and hit-up the mountain trail before having a bath.

Mt. Bathurst, while a now inactive volcano, can still be a tricky climb. Luckily for the locals, time and wind have eroded a few walking paths up the mountain. There were three total, with the safest (and most scenic) being the one starting just outside the village.

Downing a quick lunch, clothes were changed and bags were packed. With a whistle and cluck of the tongue, the two men and dogs were off.

"So, ah, the dogs? Will it be safe for them?" While his Brundle had been a good girl, she had been a curious dog. He wouldn't have felt safe bringing her on such a hike.

"They'll have a better time of it than we will. They got large, rough toe pads. They're perfect for this type of terrain. If necessary, they can scale sheer cliff faces." As Ty spoke, the girls were rushing ahead before running back, tails wagging and muzzles panting in their excitement. They had been cooped up for too long, and now all that energy needs to come out.

Once halfway between town and the mountains base, the fields became a bit taller and wilder. Scattered boulders rose above the green waves, and Mazel and Tov would take turns running up them just to hurl themselves into empty space. Their antics sent the local birds and other wildlife into a frenzy. At one point, one of them found a large tree branch, and soon the sisters were running around with it in their mouth. When they went too far, Ty whistled, and the men were treated to the sight of two massive dogs trying to run and carry their stick at the same time. It went as well as expected, and they ended up tripping over their paws.

At the base of the trail, boots were checked, climbing picks were readied, and blades were kept close. They would only be going up about a thousand feet, but the trail was long and winding, with many switchbacks and short scaling walls. It could well take them a few hours, depending on the footing.

Taking point, Ty started up. The beginning of the trail was nice and smooth, the stone being hewn flat or into steps where applicable. The rock itself was a mottled grey, with stretches of coal black and charcoal. Lichen and stubborn flowers peaked up between cracks, and a few types of pine tree could be seen. The rock gave off a bit of heat, the direct sunlight they had been blasted with warming them.

Between the two were the dogs, and occasionally one would whine about being kept back. Tov was used to taking point, and didn't like that Daddy wasn't letting her go ahead. Mazel was happy to hang out with Julian, and was loving the ear scritches she was getting as a result.

The trail widened significantly when they got higher, allowing for four people to walk abreast easily. The corners also gentled as well, and the girls took great advantage of that.

As they got higher, the wind got faster and colder. At certain points, little benches and alcoves were placed. Stopping at one, light sweaters were donned and water was drank. Julian may have snuck the girls a few treats, as well.
Shortly after, the first wall to scale was encountered. There was a path around it, but it involved hugging a sheer rock face and tiptoeing along an edge only two-inches wide. That was something neither dog would be able to do.

"Watch this." Pulling out a grappling hook and line, after a few swings he quickly launched it. Once he saw it clear the edge (nearly forty feet high), he gave it a tug before scaling. With his muscled arms and legs working, he quickly made it to the edge. "MAZEL! *WHISTLE!* HERE GIRL!"

It was a good thing Julian had stood to the side. With a bark, Mazel shot off back down the path. Julian was wondering if she was okay when a furry missile blasted past him and...started running up the wall?!

The dry sounds of claws on stone scratched out as Mazel ran, jumped, and scaled the rock-face. As she got higher, the white streaks left behind by her long, thick claws got longer and deeper. She started to lose momentum as she got near the top, but Ty reached over to give her a helping hand. "Whosa good girl!? You're a good girl! Yes, yesyesyes!" As Ty gave her rubs and scratches, she left kisses all over his face.

"TOV!"

Second verse, same as the first. Tov ran off, double backed, and scaled the wall. Unlike her sister, she didn't need Ty to help her over the edge. Soon after, a big ol' lovefest was carrying on, and Julian was feeling a bit left out.

Getting his own hook ready, Julian spun it a few times before launching it. It sailed high and gracefully thru the air, and Julian was quite proud of himself.

Too bad for him that his toss fell well short of his goal. By a lot.

Yes Ty, he knows he did bad. You don't need to laugh at him.

Two more failed attempts later, and Julian was finally ready to climb. With a hop, he started pulling himself up. He had his feet walking up the rock-face, the balls of his foot pushing firmly to gain traction. As he worked, he got a closer look at the claw marks left behind, startled at just how deep they were. These weren't just surface scratches: they were gouges.

Just how strong are Mazel and Tov? Is this just them, or a breed thing? This is some hard rock, not granite or sandstone. A human would be unable to do the same without tools.

"Ye-ouch!" Lost in thought, one of Julian's feet lost traction, causing him to slam face-first into the rock-face. Eyes watering, he snorted and coughed.

"You okay?"

"What? Oh, uh, yes! I'm fine, I'm fine! Just, just dandy!" Pulling himself up, he quickly got his feet into position again, just for them to slip (again). This time, his side and shoulder hit the rock, bouncing him into a spin. "Uuhhh, Ty? A little help, here? OOF!"

Slightly concerned, Ty started pulling up Julian's line. As soon as he stopped spinning, Julian got his feet back under him and helped out. To keep grip, he eventually wound up with his legs spread, feet plated in a wide stance and his butt sticking out. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, big guy," he chided a laughing Ty. As soon as Ty pulled him close enough to the edge, Julian scrambled for it. Swinging a leg up and over, he rolled over the edge and starfished on his back, panting before breaking out into
belly laughs as the dogs whined and whimpered kisses all over his face and neck. "Pft. Pff-ff-ffft! Argh! Off!"

Once the reunion was over, the journey continued. A few more walls were climbed (though not as tall as the first), and soon it was snack-time. The viewing platform was only about twenty-feet above them, and with a final push, they were there.

The viewing platform was set on a naturally flat crag of the mountain. A wooden platform with a safety railing jutted out, and nestled into a side of the mountain was a covered shelter, with one open wall and a few benches. Next to that was a small, trickling waterfall, splashing down into a natural bowl worn into the stone over the years.

Panting, the girls dashed over to it, lapping at the water. They kept shoving each other, trying to get at the cool, refreshing liquid. Ty, meanwhile, had wandered over to the lean-to, dropping his pack before going thru it. Julian had skipped over to the platform, bouncing in place as he took in the view.

"Darling! Come here! It's gorgeous over here!"

Setting a smaller pack of simple travel foods aside, Ty ambled on over. Squeezing next to Julian (regardless of how the platform was empty, and thus no need to do so), he dropped a kiss onto a sweaty brow before taking in the sight.

On the far, far left, the very last vestiges of Neptunia could be seen, if you craned your neck. The rest was lazy, rolling hills and fields. Far in the distance, the edge of a forest could be seen, and what looked to be a herd of elk was grazing on the sweet-smelling grasses and flowers. Stone jutted up at random, creating ledges in the fields. To the right, a lazy creek cut thru the landscape, the occasional fish jumping out of it.

This place would be the perfect spot for sunset watching. If it was this nice during a bright and sunny day, what would evening bring?

"Looking good, babe. We'll need to stop by here again, some time.

In the meantime, let's eat. The girls have been sniffing around my pack. I think they know I have dried chicken in there."

***

Getting back down the mountain was just as adventurous as going up. The trail itself was easy. Nicely worn in, it was rarely smaller than a cart track.

Getting the dogs down the shear walls was the issue. Or so Julian thought, until he saw Ty tie rope harnesses around them and clip the girls to his back before going down.

What the fuck, Ty? Just how strong are you!?  

The rope harnesses he constructed crisscrossed around their back and shoulders, and their haunches as well, to distribute their weight. After, heavy-duty clips tied just behind furry shoulders was attached to a rope harness Ty did around his own back and shoulders. Soon, to big doggies were hanging from either shoulder, tongues hanging and tail's tick-tocking as they hung literally feet from the ground. Each dog is nearly two-hundred pounds, and Ty was walking around unbothered, like a society woman at market with a large purse!

"What were you fed growing up!? Just, just how!?!"
"One of the qualifiers to having a Standing Hound," Ty stated as he sunk a hook into a ledge, "is that you have to be able to carry your pups a long distance with little effort or lost speed." Testing that the hook would hold, he checked the line attached to it for safety. "If they're willing to fight to the death for you, than you have to be strong enough to shoulder their weight, no matter the circumstances," he looked up at Julian, squarely meeting his gaze, "to have on of these dogs is both a great honor and responsibility. Hounds that fall in battle are given the same funerary honors a Warlord or Warlady does, and even achieve ranks. They're smart, strong, dependable, and can make their own decisions. Anyone who can't, or won't make the same sacrifices that they would is undeserving of them as a partner."

***

Once back in town, bath's were had. While the volcano known as Mt. Bathurst is no longer considered active, there is still plenty of geothermic activity in the area. All of Neptunia has built-in hot water as a result, and some of the inn's have small bath houses attached.

They didn't spend long inside the baths, what with it being close to dinner. Many visitors and travelers were also desiring a hot bath, and it would be rude to spend too long taking up space. From the moment they entered to the moment they left, it was roughly forty-five minutes, and most of that time was dedicated to caring for Ty's hair.

Keeping it twisted up until they got back to their wagon, Ty got the girls fed as Julian wandered over to the food carts, the cooks getting swarmed as caravaner and local alike descended on them for some good, filling food. Wandering back with two large, shallow bowls of creamy mashed potatoes smothered in a savory lamb stew, the two men parked themselves on the wagon steps as they ate.

The sun had just started setting, and Julian agrees with Ty: the sunset from the viewing platform would look amazing. The sky had started getting a little cloudy as they came back into town, and now the way the reds, yellows, and oranges of the sun bounced off grey clouds looked like something inside of a painting.

Leaning back, Julian slotted between Ty's legs. One hand came up to rub along the top of a muscled thigh absentmindedly as they looked up. Craning his head back more, Julian eventually rested it against a firm stomach.

"Pft! Tbhpt! Pftbhpt!" As perfumed hair smacked his face, Julian sputtered. Ty just quietly chuckled, fingers carding thru his rainbow obsidian locks to help them air dry. Pulling over a wide-toothed comb, he started to gently run it thru the thick strands.

Remembering the stash of hair ornaments he had snuck-off to purchase last night, Julian perked up. While all of them would look lovely, the sunset reminded him about a matching set he got. Large, flaming spider lilies on a series of combs and pins. Each piece was actually three separate combs/pins connected by a short length of golden chain. Lizzy had mentioned that her hair had been much longer and thicker in her youth, and so needed more heavy-duty hair hardware. Julian was so lucky she had a set of two of these.

Noticing Julian watch him brush his hair, Ty offered him the comb. "You wanna?"

Julian went scarlet. He's never brushed Ty's hair outside of the bath's before. Not even when he was laid up after the Worm Incident. Ty's also pretty much always had his hair up in a braid, as well. Especially outside of the wagon.

This smacks just this side of scandalous!
"He'd be stupid to say no."

"Yes! I, uh," he coughed, ignoring Ty's snicker. "Just, uh, let me get something?"

Ty smirked, knowing Julian wants to play with some of the sparkles Ty bought from Lizzy yesterday. "Go for it." He snickered again as long legs scrambled, Julian crawling over him in his haste. A few thuds could be heard, along with some rattling. Scooting down a few steps, it wasn't long after that Julian was back. As he sat, he plopped something into Ty's hold.

Cracking his knuckles, it was now time for Julian to put his long-unused hair skills to the test. He got lot's of practice when he was younger with Mama and Pasha's hair, and he wants to know if he's still got it.

Oh goodness but he's so excited! He's wanted to do this for soooo loooong!

Parting Ty's hair down the middle, he smoothed the locks before starting to make big, fat dutch braids. Starting at the forehead, he came down and around, picking up more hair as he went. Getting Ty to hold the end in place, he quickly did the same for the other side. Braiding the ends together, he then pulled the rest of the uncaptured locks into a loose fishtail braid. Spying some pins Ty must have pulled out earlier, he gathered the rest of the braid into a loose spiral over the dutch braids junction before securing it with some pins. Gently tugging, he pulled the braid open into what could be considered a rose. Picking up the hair ornaments, he secured them along the dutch braids, weaving them back and forth over the strands so that the spider lilies would frame the crown.

All in all, something so complex looking only took him twenty minutes. He's quite proud of his work.

And from how Ty was daintily patting his hair, the man's also pretty impressed.

Getting up, said man wandered inside, trying to see everything he could in the small mirror hanging up near the bed. He pranced back over, dropping kisses to either of Julian's cheeks before plopping back down, nearly purring in satisfaction.

It wasn't until now that he noticed, but Julian saw quite a few Principia staring at them. A few looked quite scandalized, like someone tried to strip them nude. One woman was even clutching her necklace and blushed, looking away when Julian caught her gaze.

"Um, Ty? Why is, why is everyone looking at us like we, uh-"

"Did something wildly inappropriate?"

"Hm, yes."

"Because I let you, an unmarried man, style my, another unmarried man's, hair. In public. Where anybody could watch."

"But why would-, oh. OH! Oh my, Ty!" Ty could feel Julian's blush. "No wonder they're looking at us like we're a bunch of harlots!"

"Let them. I don't care what they think. They could look all they want and I'll let you DO IT AGAIN! HA!" Shocked murmurs rang out at Ty's proclamation. One Principia even tugged her child away from Mazel, muttering something as the child whined.

Well, there goes what little good reputation Julian had. And Ty's cackling wasn't helping.
Disembarking the ship, a cloaked Tybalt pushed thru the crowd, keeping a tight grip on his younger (and smaller) brother. While not nearly of the same height and stature of Rus, Tybalt was still taller than average, and he used that to his advantage.

As they walked, he and Bel got quite a few double takes. Tybalt, while he shares a few features with Rus (and thus their Ma), looks a lot more like his father. Samont Ghupta had the thin nose and angular features that are characteristic of the Prakran and Muharan peoples, along with the dark skin and heavy brows. Tybalt's were a bit softer, but more pronounced at the same time. High, forward cheekbones, a squared-off chin, thin nose...he's seen portrait's of cousin Nadia, and can admit that he shares quite a few features with her. It wouldn't surprise him if people are thinking that he's her brother or very close kin.

Some of the looks Bel's been getting, though, made him keep his hand close to his dagger. He won't hesitate to cut a bitch.

Entering the city proper, he took a few moments to gather his bearings. Bel nattered on in his sweet voice, asking if they can explore and shop later. Absentmindedly assuring Bel that yes, shopping will be had (and cursing Rus for infecting Bel with the Shopping Bug), they slowly started to make their way towards the palace. Eventually, they made their way up a flight of steps, stopping at a closed gate. Rifling thru his messenger bag for their Letter of Invitation, Tybalt didn't even get to present it before they were waived thru, the guards pale and sweating.

Shrugging, they went past, himself noting the looks of near horror Bel was getting. He was happy the other didn't notice, busy bubbling about how pretty the Palace was (‘but not as pretty as the one at Home!’). Bel would be heartbroken to know people were scared of him.

As they walked down carpeted hallways, Bel got even more looks from the servants and staff. It wasn't long before the youngster caught on, and he quickly piped down, staying close to Tybalt's side.

Soon, they made it to the Receiving Room. An usher, also looking at Bel with a combination of horror and disbelief, rushed in to announce them. Being shown in, Tybalt could see Nadia along with a full retinue of Courtiers. Two were over by a table of food, exuberantly eating as they talked. Another, one who made Tybalt's skin crawl, looked at him with clinical detachment before lighting up upon seeing Bel. Another was talking at an exasperated, wine-holding man and an aggravated Nadia about worms of all things.

The only one to actually notice them was a handmaiden. The full-figured redhead nearly dropped her tray with a squeak. As she sputtered, everyone else turned to look at them. Soon, gasps of astonishment rang out, with the wine-holding man dropping his full glass with a shatter and Nadia's eyes bugging out. Everyone went silent.

Noticing everyone looking at them, Belial hid behind his big brother, wishing his even bigger brother was here. He hid his face behind his loose, dark waves, pale face pinking in embarrassment.

“Is there something wrong?” Tybalt's voice rang out. He's far outnumbered. While no slouch with a blade, he's more of a scholar than a fighter. If it comes down to it, he'll hold them off long enough for Bell to find Gemmy or Cordie.

An excited squeal rang out. One of the courtiers, a short woman with a fogged eye, hopped in place with her hands under her chin. “Oh! Oh Vulgie! Look at him! He looks so much like Lucio!” She trotted over, bending over slightly in front of Tybalt, craning her neck to get a closer look at the
shy Belial. “Oh, please! Come out! I promise not to eat you, despite how sweet you look!”

Seeing the earnest smile on her face (and trusting his gut), Belial peaked out. She cooed at him again, and encouraged, he stepped away from his brother completely. “Um, hello?”

“Oooooooh,” the courtier bounced in place before scooping Bel up in a hug, giving a spin. She plopped him down in front of her, facing the court. “He looks so much like our Count! Just look! And so sweet, too!” Belial just blinked his big, pale eyes before blushing.

"Uuhhhhh…" Tybalt was confused. So Bel looks like the Cunty Count. Congratulations? Tybalt's been compared to random people when it comes to looks. That doesn't mean he's related to them.

Seeing Nadia's eyes glued onto something behind him, Tybalt turned. It took him a few moments to locate the painting she was looking at. "Well *fuck.*"

Damnit, Ma.
Of Storms and Surprises

They left Neptunia at what could be seen as dawn, if not for the rain that had moved in. Fat, lazy drops of water fell from churning clouds, only to hit wagon roof's with a firm *splat!*.

It was...quite nice. There was very little wind to disturb the downward trajectory of the drops, and the drumming on wood they produced was soothing, lulling even. It was the perfect soundtrack for staying in bed.

Julian has always loved the rain. Any type of rain, really. Everything from lazy Sunday showers to gale-force winds that strip the shutters from your home. He remembers with great fondness the Great Storm that came thru Nevivon when he was a young boy and Pasha was only a yearling. The whole house shook and railed, and he remembers a tree being torn from the roots. Papa had to dive for him, his curiosity causing him to get too close to a window.

Currently, he was burritoed under the covers, warm and snug against the sudden temperature drop. Ty was still snoozing away beside him, one dog wedged between them while the other laid across their feet. Julian had only left the bed long enough to make a pot of coffee, put together a bread and jam plate, and to push back the curtains over their little windows.

He was going to wake Ty, in retribution for not telling him that they had coffee, but he decided against it. He had re-braided Ty's hair before bed, and the other had fisted the end of it, holding it tightly like a child with their stuffed animal. On the kitchen counter, Ty had already laid out the hair clips and combs he wanted for the next day. He had hopped like an excited bunny when Julian presented him with the sparklies he had sneakily bought.

Humming, he sipped his piping hot beverage. The next few days are going to be slow and lazy. Once they hit Saturnalia, it'll be go, go, go. No more days of naps and pleasure shopping, or just having fun for the sake of fun.

He kind of wishes he had a chance to meet Ty's brothers before all this. It would be nice to bring them back some presents.

***

The migraine that Nadia had only shook-off the day previous was back with a vengeance. And it was all Germanius's fault.

How DARE he drop such an issue into her lap with no warning! A child!? Lucio's!? Despite the boy being from a dalliance that took place before they had even met, he still presents an issue to the line of Vesuvian succession. The countship may not be traditionally hereditary, but it still takes precedence. Before Lucio, the previous Count died childless and unmarried, but the one before him was the third to hold the title in his family. Belial, just by being Lucio's child, may have a more legitimate connection to the Vesuvian throne than she does, despite being his lady-wife.

Not for lack of trying. They stopped after the third, and her last, miscarriage.

She, hasn't had much time with the young man. Volta and some lesser members of the court have monopolized him. Volta specifically seems to have taken a shine to him, judging from the way she keeps shoving food at him.

Contrary to Lucio, young Belial seems to have better manners and decorum. After being nearly
dragged to a small table and getting fussed at by an excited Procurator, he always said please and thank-you, and ate everything he was given. The older brother, Tybalt, somehow got into a civil conversation with Pontifex Vulgora. The fact the man was having what sounded like a very in-depth discussion with the other, and there was no raised voices, was nothing less than amazing.

Regardless, the two have thrown the whole Court into disarray. Valerius had looked hard at the two, especially Belial. The man is slothful, but cunning. She's always thought he had a hidden agenda, what with how close he kept to Lucio. Lucky for Vesuvia, Lucio was good at hoarding his power. It would take a lot for him to give any up, and there would have to be a great reward for doing so.

*She's not blind for why he chose to marry her. He can say otherwise all he wants, but snagging her opened trade between Vesuvia and Prakra.*

Once she rails at Germanius for his folly, she'll have Portia prepare rooms for the two new 'guests'. She'll need to keep them close and play her cards right if she wants to keep this from blowing up in her face.

She just knows Germanius is laughing at her.

***

Well, fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Tybalt sipped his tea, his plate of breakfast nibbles untouched. In the garden, he could hear Belial shouting in glee as he chased what was undoubtedly something hoppy and slimy. Tybalt doesn't know nor care what it is, so long as it doesn't end up in his bed.

Shouldn't Bel have outgrown this phase ages ago? What the hell.

*click* *click* *click*

Walking down a set of marble steps, two sighthounds entered the garden. White, fluffy, and long-legged, he would peg them as being some sort of Borzoi crossbreed. If he remembers right, didn't the late Count own a pair? They were pretty nasty, if he recalls-

Wait.

Shit.

He shot up from his chair, nearly tipping the table in his haste. "Bel! Don't pet those dogs!"

Belial looked up from his squat near a little man-made pond. He had his hands inside, fingers spread as tadpoles bumped the tips of his fingers, curious about the new thing in their home. He blinked big, pale blue eyes in confusion. "Dogs? What dogs?!"

"'T hoes dogs, right over-, fuck," Tybalt took a deep breath. The dogs, in their curiosity, had padded closer. Ears cocked forward, one of them stretched out their neck, black nose wriggling as they sniffed this newest visitor.

*Please don't bite him, please don't bite him, please don't bite him-

Tybalt could see the moment the hound got confused. He (or was it she?) gave a quizzical huff. It chuffed, sneezing before poking it's muzzle into Bel's armpit, making him laugh. It's tail started going crazy and it started giving a whimpering cry, legs dancing as they sniffed Bel all over. Soon after,
the other one joined in, and in their excitement they tipped Bel into the little pond.

Tybalt sighed in relief as the two whining dogs pushed themselves under a giggling Bel's arms, scrunching up as best they could for maximum cuddling. The little guy had been missing Mazel and Tov something fierce. Hopefully, they'll be able to distract him during their visit.

***

Portia had scolded the dogs, Mercedes and Melchior, when she came to show the brothers to their rooms. The dogs had the audacity to look unabashed, and had pranced beside Bel down the hall.

While the brothers were presented with separate rooms, they were joined by a full bath. Tybalt knows Bel is going to spend most of his time in his room, his brother known for being a major cuddle bug. More often than not, the youngest of the three likes to sneak into either his or Rus's bed.

Little shit's declared Rus as being the best cuddler in the house. Tybalt APPARENTLY is too skinny and bony for proper cuddles. Preposterous!

Getting Bel cleaned up and changed (and getting joined by the dogs, soaking the entire bathroom in the process), they had just enough time to meet up with Germanius and Cordelia for lunch.

As the group sat on the Great Porch, Portia serving up a delicately perfumed rice dish and generous bowls of fruit salad, they were approached by Nadia. "Hello. May I join you? I believe that last night was a bit too, exciting, for a proper meeting."

"Of course. Here, let me retrieve an extra chair," Germanius set his napkin down, starting to push himself up from his seat before Belial pipped up.

"I have an idea!" Popping up, Bel slid his setting over towards Germanius's before plonking himself down on a sturdy knee. The boy beamed as Germanius stared at him with a flat look, snorting before resigning himself to the fact that he is now a chair. He could hear Cordelia snort in amusement.

"Bratling."

As Nadia sat, she took a good look at Belial. The boy is Lucio's son, there is no question of that. While he still has plenty of puppy fat clinging to his cheeks, it's already starting to melt away into the sharp features of his father. Oh, she can see what must have been donated to him by who can only be his mother, like the brow ridge, the dark and loose curls brushing his shoulders, and his hairline looks like it would be a different shape, but it's hard to tell with how his hair is all over the place.

But the eyes? Their shape and color? Or his jaw and cheekbones? That was all Lucio. This child will be devastating when he grows into his features. As it was, he looks like an adorable, if awkward looking, young teenager.

Out of the High Court, Volta has already adopted the boy, and Vulgora seems interested in the young man as well. Vlastomil and Valdemar seem ambivalent to the youngster, but Valerius…

She needs to keep a close eye on him. After getting over his shock, he had looked a little too interested in Belial.

***

Cordelia was taking a few moments to himself. After everything that's happened over the last few days, he thinks a day to unwind is more than called for.
Besides, he wants to introduce his littlest favorite grandnephew to chemistry! The little squeaker's been getting more curious about what goes on in his lab. It's the perfect time to start shaping and molding the youngsters mind. Who knows, perhaps little Bel will gain an interest in the sciences?

Although...yes, he seems to be out of potassium. Nothing to get the science juices going like a good, old-fashioned explosion! Everybody likes explosions, right?!

If he remembers correctly, Quaestor Valdemar still has a fully functional lab from the Plague. Any good researcher worth their salt would have on hand a wide variety of minerals and extracts. Perhaps he can purchase a small amount.

***

"So," Nadia began as Cordelia and the two new visitors peeled away from the lunch table. She motioned for Portia to leave as well, fixing her own cup of tea instead. "When where you going to tell me about Lucio's…"

"Lovechild?" She hummed at Germanius's answer. "Most likely never, if things hadn't gone the way they did. It will have no impact on the governance of Vesuvia."

Nadia snorted derisively into her tea as she sipped. She gave a sardonic chuckle as she pulled back. "No impact? Please, Germanius! Don't treat me like a fool. My observation about House Principia still stands. There is little to no reason for you to NOT slide Belial into my place and take control of Vesuvia."

Sighing gustily, Germanius rolled his eye. "And as I have stated before, Vesuvia has nothing we want. Why would we desire such an armpit of a city when even our smallest of hamlets are vastly superior? Taking land just for the sake of having it just spells disaster."

"I would think it would be obvious. Trade." The 'duh' tone in her voice was thick enough to write on.

"Pft. Why walk on land when you can fly over it?" Germanius cackled gleefully at the look of incredulity Nadia sported. "Magic is infused into every aspect of our lives, woman! We can bend space and time to our very whim, make the sun rise in the west, and make rain 'fall' from lakes and rivers up into the sky." Selecting a slice of what looks to be some sort of cornbread, Germanius slathered a gob of whipped honey butter on it. Biting into it with great gusto, he groaned in foodie pleasure before picking back up. "If we want to trade, we just have to hop into one of aerial galleon's and flutter on over to where we want to go."

Nadia just looked at him, dumbfounded. "You have ships...that can fly!?"

"...didn't I JUST say that?"

"And they're not like the airships that are being developed over in Alba? The things that are like balloons with propellers?"

"No-pe, not in the least. They are actual ships, or boats, for people transport and the like, that have a complex system of runes and charms worked onto them to enable levitation and the like. The rudder is a bit more pronounced and there are two horizontal planes akin to wings on the sides for stability, but aside from that, they look like any ship you'd see in your harbor." He cackled again as Nadia slumped, the implications of such a thing hitting her. "So, as you can see, we have no need for your harbor, let alone for your trade routes!"

Dear Empress, but Nadia really doesn't know how to process this new information. Being able to
fly where you wanted, to trade with who you wanted, is an amazing game changer.

She didn't miss the other implication of flight, as well. One that can have an even bigger impact than trade;

The ability to go to war with anybody, at any time, and be able to dominate.

***

Ty started stirring shortly after midday. At some point, he ended up slithering over to Julian, curling into the other's side and cuddling him like a child with a stuffed animal.

Coming back to reality with a jaw-cracking yawn, he spied the other curled up, a pen in hand as he scratched into his journal. Julian had the book resting against raised knees, his feet tucked under Mazel. Ty barked in surprise as Tov shoved her nose into his ear, the cold and wet nub causing shivers to go up his spine as she snuffled him. "Tov! Git!"

Julian looked up, a crooked grin on his lips. "Good morning, sleepyhead! Or should I say, good afternoon?" The rain hadn't let up at all, actually coming down harder. A few faint rumbles of thunder sounded out, but nothing too disturbing. The wind, on the other hand, had gotten stronger. The caravan actually came to a stop, over worries of the weather.

"...whut time izzit?" Ty's voice was deep and scratchy, the last vestiges of sleep doing their best to cling to him.

"Oh, uh," Julian faffed a bit, Ty's voice making many parts of him sit up and take notice. "It's shortly after noon. Lunch is yet to be served, though." He placed a bookmark before shutting his journal. "But, how would they serve food in such weather?" It wouldn't be safe for the cooks to walk from their wagon to the 'kitchens'.

Ty rolled onto his back, sprawling. His right hand reached out, the backs of his fingers running absentmindedly up and down Julian's hip in a soft and lazy manner. "Their quarters are inside the kitchen wagons. Remember, the wagons can be made up to seven times larger on the inside compared to the outside." Mazel whined. "I know, I know. You're hungry, girl. Food she be here right about-" a large, covered tray popped into existence on the stove grille -"now. Grubs on!"

Quickly getting the girls settled with their bowls of meat scraps, the two men returned to the bed. Sitting up against the pillows, they placed large bowls of a rich and thick beef stew between their folded legs. The tray was a few inches from their knees, and Julian went cross eyed every time he looks too closely at it.

Kind of like when they met that Incubus.

"Eh, Ty," he spoke around a bite of biscuit sopped in stew gravy. He moaned at the taste, a rich wine was used in the sauce. "'hy do I have tru'uble seein' shtuff?" Oh, but Mama would smack him if she saw how he was eating.

"Eh?" Ty was busy shoveling spoonfuls of the beef bourguignon into his mouth. It's been a long time since he had an actual, good one. Too many places skimp on the bacon and bay.

Heretics.

Julian swallowed. "The tray. And the Incubus. When I try to look at them, my eyes have, well, issues focusing on them." He frowned. "It's annoying."
"It's your brain trying to protect you."

A blink. Followed by another. "What."

"Your brain. It's trying to both see something, but also keep you from seeing it, at the same time."

"...what the fu-"

"It has to do with space-time."

"Ty, Darling, the greatest, most amazing love of my life," gesticulating like a frustrated professor teaching a dim student, Julian didn't notice Ty lighting up, "can you just explain to me, in one breath, WHAT exactly you mean instead of making me pull it out of you like a dentist with teeth?"

Ty so badly wanted to smother Julian with adoration at being called 'love', but he's pretty sure the other doesn't realize he said it. And frankly, he's also pretty certain Julian would deny he said it if confronted. The meltdown the other had those weeks back is still pretty fresh in his mind.

Instead, he mentally wrapped that utterance in gauze, taking careful measure to imprint the tone, the verbal caress, the movement of soft lips and the breath of strong lungs and the twist of a clever tongue saying such a wondrous thing and stashed it in the back of his mind. Then, he took a deep breath, steeled himself, and-

"House Principia has the ability to bend space and time in different, brain-breaking ways, and we use that ability to shatter the Rules of the Universe because rules are for chumps."

"Soooo...the tray has been augmented in such a way so as to carry more than what its appearance states it should, without sacrificing the space that it actually does take up?"

"Yep. It's a bit of a twist on Godel's Theorem. We're very proud of ourselves."

"...and because the tray is both taking up more space AND not, my eyes are trying to see something that is both there and not? And are trying to NOT see what they see so that I, what? Not have an aneurysm by trying to see something that should be impossible?"

Ty nodded vigorously. "Uh-huh. It's actually pretty similar to how your eyes always see your nose, but your brain just ignores it."

They went back to eating, with Ty getting back up to clear away the dog's bowls when Mazel started pushing it along the floor with her nose, trying to lick it beyond clean. Julian served himself more stew from the pot that was both on the tray and not before refilling Ty's bowl. His brain was still doing cartwheels, trying to process the information. But, he's still trying to figure out how exactly this applies to the Incubus.

"What's up, babe? You're thinking pretty hard, there."

Julian chewed contemplatively, trying to figure out the best way to word his issue. Swallowing, he just tossed it out there. "How was the Incubus able to do it? To, like, transform? The tray is understandable; you attach runes or charms to it. You can't really do that with a living being." He paused.

"Could you?"

"Oh, that's actually pretty easy! He's just bending and refracting light around him in a very specific matrix configuration, while also moving parts of himself in time and reality to compensate
for his own size and, uh, shape."

*Yes, because just anyone can do stuff like that,* Julian thought in derision. *But, how!?*

"Well," Ty scratched his head. *"The whole light thing is pretty easy. An Incubus doesn't really transform, per se. You can't add or subtract matter out of existence. So, instead, you bend light waves in a very, very specific manner to make it look like you are different. A whole lot of appearance-altering charms are based on the same principle. When someone's magic'd their hair from, say, black to blond," he tugged a strand of his own hair, and Julian's eyes went wide as the strands went from their rainbow black to a reflective gold, "all that has actually happened is that the way the light is hitting the hair has had its angle changed." He dropped the strands before holding out his hand, focusing intently on it.

Again, change happened. But, instead of changing color, Ty's hand got longer and slimmer. Soon, what had been a broad, long-fingered hand, now looked more like the hand of the Baba Yaga.

Incredulous, Julian grabbed it in both hands, twisting it about as Ty chuckled in amusement. *"But, but how!? Sight is one thing, but this!? I'm able to both touch and see!"* Head darting up, Julian narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. *"You're a witch."

"Pft. Naw, babe. I'm just moving my own matter from the past or future, and stacking it along my current matter. It's not that hard." Julian released him with a grumble, muttering under his breath about the audacity of Ty's House just casually breaking the fundamentals of existence like it was No Big Thing. Eventually, they settled back to eating.

"Wait. That pretty much makes your entire House physicists!"

"Quantum physicist's, actually," Ty said with a snort. *"Don't lump us in with the rest of the pleb's."

***

Tybalt was going to *kill* Cordelia.

After lunch, Cordelia wrangled the two into helping him gather some ingredients from the forest outside of the palace. Bel had been buzzing about on a sugar high, so Tybalt agreed, thinking that doing the activity would be a great way to tucker the youngster out.

Instead, it led to Bel dashing about the trees, whipping his basket about as Mercedes and Melchior chased after him, tongues and eyes rolling as he played fetch.

As it was, very little was being gathered. Belial was running about with the dogs, and Tybalt was running about after them. He's pretty sure Cordelia was just distracting them so he could gather what was needed without an over-excited, young teenager getting under foot.

"Awwwwwww, man!"

Looking up, Tybalt could see three disappointed faces looking into a dark thicket, a bush inside it still shaking from what he assumes was the fetch stick going thru it. He winced in sympathy; that bush looked prickly. *"You can just get another stick."*

"I mean, I guess," Bel deflated. *"But, that one was really good for throwing!"

"Well then, go get it. Just be careful, those pickers look long, and I don't think you want to ruin the shirt Rus got you."
"He likes to go by 'Ty', now," Belial muttered under his breath.

"Hm?"

"Nothing! Hey, c'mon guys! Let's get our stick!" Putting his empty basket down, Bel waded his way into the thicket, two dogs worming in behind him. A few steps later, and he couldn't be seen, only the sounds of rustling branches and crunching steps signaling he was there.

A slight rumble sounded from the sky. Looking up, Tybalt could see dark, fat clouds.

He'll need to get them started back pretty soon. He doesn't need a sick brother on top of all the drama currently going on.

***

The wagon shook and shuddered as the winds picked up, and the gentle drumming of the rain had turned into a torrential downpour. Bright flashes of lightning were closely followed by loud claps of thunder.

Julian's feet were drumming against the bed; he loves storms! Big ones, little ones, loud ones, or quiet ones; if its a storm, he thinks its the best one since the last. He had his hands wrapped around a large mug, grinning gleefully every time a loud, earth-shattering *BOOM!* rang out.

Of course, he would give a comforting pet to Tov, at each one. The poor girl is scared stiff of thunderstorms, and at the first loud clap, had turned into a whimpering mess. In short order she had wormed her way under the covers between the two men. Not wanting to leave her sister, Mazel climbed on top of her, flopping.

*BOOM!*

"Well, some one likes storms," Ty smiled as Julian gave a little bounce. He scratched under Tov's muzzle as she whined.

"Have since I was a child. There is nothing more amazing, more awe-inspiring, than Nature in all her splendor just, WREAKING havoc!"

"This area is known for its tornado's. We may be lucky enough to get one!"

Indeed, the stretch of land between Neptunia and the Gates of Saturnalia is pretty flat, prairie-type land. Prime farming real estate. But, due to the amount of severe storms that kick-up during the regions Rainy Season, it's just not safe to settle and plant crops.

Julian stopped bouncing, face torn between ecstasy and sheer terror. "Wh-what," he whispered.

"Tornado's. We may get to see one."

"Um, but, is that safe!?"

"Oh yeah, we just throw up a space-distortion bubble around us. It, like, phases us outside of reality, allowing us to both be here but not."

"...what?"

"Yeah, it's a pretty nifty little thing. It uses the resonance of a couple of different crystals to, I guess 'thin' the fabric of space-time, allowing us to-"
"ARE YOU SAYING THAT I CAN LITERALLY BE IN THE HEART OF A TORNADO!?"

Ty threw Julian a slightly suspicious look of suspicion. The redhead looked like had just been shocked. His hair was on end, he was flushed, and looked poleaxed. The man had literally done a full-body twitch and jump, flinging his long limbs everywhere.

"Uh...yeah?"

Julian flung himself across the bed at a startled Ty, wrapping his arms around heavy shoulders like an octopus. "When will the bubble go up!? Can we watch from the steps!? How long does it-"

Pushing an over-excited doctor away by a hand on his face, Ty laughed. "Looks like someone really likes storms. Even more than I thought!" Tov whined at all the extra weight squishing her, making the two men back off. "We can actually watch from the caravan roof! Bring some blankets and pillows, and we can nest as we watch one of the most destructive forces of nature to exist, pick up and throw shit."

Rolling from the bed onto the floor with a loud *thud!*, Julian started scrambling through their bags, pulling on random articles of clothing (including a pink, daisy-patterned eye-patch). "When will the bubble go up!? And do we have more pillows!? Can the girls come up!? How-" a quiet *ching!* interrupted his babbling.

"In about ten minutes," Ty said laughingly. He, too, started pulling on some clothes, although he made a slight effort to be a bit more put together than Julian. Pulling on a sleeveless tunic, he went to pull up some pants, just to learn that they were a pair of Julian's when they got caught at his thighs. Yeahhhhh, there's no way that those are going over his ass. His butt would destroy them. "OW! What the fuck!?"

Rubbing his now-stinging left buttock, Ty glared over his shoulder at Julian, who was waving his hand about, sucking air between his teeth. "T-, Ty! What is your derriere made of? Stone!? I think I, no, I know I broke my hand!?" Indeed, a faint green glow was seen at his throat, confirming his suspicions.

"That's what you get for being nasty." Pulling up a pair of his soft comfy pants, Ty tied the drawstring closed. Gathering up several pillows and a few blankets, he slipped on some sandals. "C'mon, get a move on. We've got five minutes."

Once outside, Ty looked about. Part of the space-distortion bubble was already up, the crystals mounted on the fore of each wagon humming along gently as they shielded them from the rain. Nodding, he tossed his bounty up, pushing the soft items onto their wagons roof. Grasping the roof edge, he planted a foot onto a wheel, pushing and pulling himself up. Once up top, he could hear a *whump!* *WOOSH!*, followed by an echoing clap. Looking up, he saw strands of honey-gold light twist up into columns before blossoming, spreading thin and merging with other golden pools, creating a honeycombed dome. As the light came down, sound and feeling became muffled, only returning to normal when the edge of the dome merged with the ground. His ears popped as pressure equalized and they...shifted.

Popping his head up, a beaming Julian scrambled onto the roof. Getting on his knees, he helped Ty spread out the blankets before making a mound of pillows to rest on. The entire time, his fingers danced, his feet drummed, and his head bobbed. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see other caraveran's doing the same, entire families camping out on roofs.
A few miles off, a dark, twisting mass of clouds formed. It was a stark contrast to the sickly-green sky, and many people were pointing excitedly. A large, loud, and close bolt of lightning flashed, the sound of thunder following instantly. A bunch of 'wow!' and 'ohh!'s were heard. A babe or two cried, their parent(s) shushing them.

"Ty? The girls?" Poor Tov must be losing her mind.

"I gave them some sleepy biscuits. It'll leave them nice and calm."

Getting comfy, they watched the mass get bigger and bigger, Julian whooping with the others as they saw a hook form, followed minutes later by a short, v-shaped funnel. "Oh my stars, it's happening," he hissed excitedly, bouncing on his criss-crossed legs. He drummed his hands on his bent knees, bopping his head in time to a tune only he could hear. Throw in a deranged grin with his sloppy outfit (Ty's red tunic, green canvas trousers, and two different colored socks), and the man looked mad.

He's so fucking cute, Ty thought with a snort.

"Ty! Look! Looklooklook!" Julian smacked a lounging-Ty's shoulder, quickly and repeatedly. The funnel had made contact with the earth, getting darker as it picked up sediments, grass, and stripped leaves from the few trees present.

It got wider, and started growling. In the few short minutes the tornado was on the ground, it had quadrupled in size, turning from a skinny rope into a fat wedge.

Julian was bouncing so much, it took him a few moments to realize that the monster was moving.

Right...at them.

"Um, Ty?" A worried lavender eye darted between a lazy Ty and the vortex of destruction rolling towards them. Fingers started drumming on a taught thigh.

"M'yeah?" Julian was getting antsy. Ty was just, just sitting there! Eating!

Wait, where did that little bun come from!?

"Sooo, uh. The tornado? It's, like, moving? Towards us?"

"Umhmm..."

"Is that, safe?"

"Normally, no. But remember, we've got the Dome."

"Do we need to do anything? At all?" Julian admits that, until recently, he's had a death wish, and that he could easily see his end on this trip. He's had many brushes with Death, and is no stranger to her dark caress.

He just doesn't want to meet Her because he was doing something stupid.

"C'mere." Opening his arms, Ty pulled Julian into a cuddle. Reshuffling the pillows, he soon was in an upright recline, Julian between his legs and pillowed on his chest. Seeing long, graceful fingers still twitching in nervousness, he captured soft yet calloused hands in his own, squeezing them in reassurance. "The first times always the most memorable."

"Like virginity?" Julian's chuckle reverberated from his chest to Ty's.
"Y-ep."

By this point, the tornado filled their point of view. It was showing up to be a truly MASSIVE thing, a fine example of such weather phenomena. The growl had ramped up into a grumbling, sawmill-like sound. It sounded like a thousand lumber mills were sawing through the largest Ironwood trees to be found, all at the same time. Ty dropped a kiss to tousled curls as the leading edge of the vortex met the edge of the dome.

It was... weird. There were no other words Julian could think of to describe what happened. The tornado was still picking up and flinging things from the environment, the wind was still shrieking, and the thunder was still rolling. Logically, he should be able to feel the wind blow past, or feel what it was carrying impact him.

But, there was none of that. No wind ruffling his curls or clothes, and when he held his hand out, he felt nothing blow past, but he saw things hit the dome. A large boulder had been picked up, and was tossed. It should have hit the dome on his left. Instead, it vanished, reappearing as a missile shooting out of the dome on the right.

'Bending space and time', his foot. House Principia has utterly broken how the Universe should work. They grabbed the fabric of Reality, laughed, and made a dress out of it, one that they wear and twirl in as they pleased, with no regard to the mortals around them who rely on these principles to govern themselves.

"Here we go." Wiggling a bit, Ty settled in. The outer wall is going to hit…

...now.

"Oh my stars, Ty!" The tornadic wall was thick. Thicker than Julian thought. He's always thought such a thing was thin, only so fierce and destructive due to the wind speed and bend. That such a storm could be stopped if you just interrupted enough of the windwall.

Oh, but that was a foolish thought. Looking to the side, head on to what should have been a thin slice of death, he could only stare in awe as he saw that the wall was thick. Several wagons, lined end to end, could be contained within this swirling mass, and still not be close to the center. He watched as debris sailed on past, either being eaten and then spat out by the dome, or just phasing through reality. Grasses that should have cut him to ribbons passed through him harmlessly. Laying down just showed him the swirling mass above him. Watching things go round and round in circles was...mesmerizing.

"And in one...two...three...ta-dahhhhh."


Julian knew, logically, that a tornado, much like a hurricane, had to have an eyewall and a center of calm. Both systems are composed of fast moving, circular rotations. His days with the pirates found him riding out such storms, and he saw first hand what the center of a vile tempest looked like.

But, no one's seen the inside of a tornado, and lived to tell the tale.

Well, no one outside of House Principia, apparently.

All too soon did the center pass, and they were tossed back into Hell. Screaming, shrieking terror made physical tore thru the caravan-that-was-not, ripping up a huge trough in the moist earth. It wasn't until now that Julian realized that the rain had stopped, most likely unable to form in the high-
pressure micro system that the funnel created.

And then it was over. As everyone twisted to watch, the tornadic supercell that tore thru reality for nearly ten miles, dispersed with a whimper. The return of silence was deafening, a foreign sound after these last twenty minutes. Everyone watched with bated breath as wisps of air melted from the tornado like mists rising from a pond, and it shrunk in size until it was too small to support itself.

A loud cheer went up, people laughing and clapping and hooting. It was the type of ovation that one would hear at the end of a grand opera, not the devastating end to a superstorm.

That doesn't mean Julian didn't join in. In fact, he was one of the loudest, bombarding Ty with a near blow-by-blow account of what just happened. His excitement was infectious, with the younger children of several nearby families feeding off of him.

"And that boulder!? I've never thought wind could do such a thing! It could have easily taken out our wagon! Like, it would be all 'boom!' 'crash!'" hands waving about, Julian nearly smacked Ty in the face. "Oh, shit! Ty, I'm so--" "Sweetheart, your fine." As the dome was withdrawn, a gentle, lazy shower appeared. "Let's just get this all back inside before it gets wet."

Quickly gathering up their nest, they slogged thru thick mud. Picking up each foot was a struggle, the thick slurry sucking at each step. Throwing the bedding inside, they sat on the back steps, stripping their shoes off.

Several kids were running about, high off the energy that the storm had brought. Several were already covered in mud from slips and falls. One girl that Ty recognized as Antigone was stood at the base of her family's wagon, proselytizing about not getting dirty before a boy slugged a mudball at her. Her gobsmacked expression was comical, before she gave a warcry and leapt, knocking the culprit to the ground and grinding his face in the mud.

Resigned to the fact that muddy feet are now unavoidable, Ty heaved himself to his feet. Diffusing the fight, he went to set a spitting Antigone down when-

*SPLAT!* 

Eye twitching, Ty slowly turned. Mud started walking down the back of his head as he stared at an unabashed Julian. A Julian who was quickly making another mudball. "This. Means war."

"Ha haa, you'll have to catch me fir- *SQUAWK!*" With a loud splat, Ty tackled Julian onto his back, kicking up a mud wave. The redhead laughed as he tried to wiggle his way out, getting dirtier and dirtier in the process.

This seems to have set something off, for the caravan exploded into activity. A mass mud wrestling fight broke out. There were no teams, no friends, just foes. Husbands tossed wives into the mud, wives tossed their children, and children tried to tackle fathers.

An absolute, utter free-for-all.

Serafina stood, hands on her hips as she surveyed the chaos. As it was, only she and her Antonius were still clean. She looked at the cause of the fight, and smirked as she watched Julian sweep Ty's feet out from under him, egging on a bunch of kids who clambered on top of the large man. "I should be pissed off. This is going to set us back."

"But you're not," her husband chuckled.
"But I'm not. And so long as I don't get dragged into-" *SPLAT!*

Tony grinned as his wife shrieked in anger. "Too late."

"ANTONIUS ZEPHYRUS PRINCIPIA, I AM YOUR WIFE! HOW DARE-" she screeched as Tony hauled her up, swinging her before letting her fly. He grinned in satisfaction as she landed in a puddle.

"I 'dare' because I can! So there!" He stuck his tongue out.

As the married couple soon devolved into squabbling and mud slinging, an epic wrestling match was going on. Nigh on twenty adults had been stripped down to their trousers or skivvies, all picking up or tangling with each other in a mass. Ty and Julian were in the thick of it, caked from head-to-toe in mud. Screams and hoots were heard as people got suplexed into the ground, and others got their random opponent into a Nelson. Ty started struggling his way out, a random child under his arm. Multiple people tried to tackle him, and soon he had several pairs of arms wrapped around his arms, legs, shoulders, middle, and thighs. Leaning forward hard, he dragged a rope of bodies behind him, many of whole tried to get their feet under them to try and stop him.

One by one, peoples grips slipped away, soon just leaving a few hangers on. The child, a little eight-year old boy, was squealing in glee. Two other children were being dragged along by their grip on Ty's ankles, and Julian was clinging to a muscled waist.

A grip that was quickly being lost.

Being determined to be the winner of this unnamed game with unnamed rules, his fingers scrambled to keep purchase, soon twisting into the soiled fabric of Ty's pants.

Pushing forward, Ty could feel his pants go. His free hand darted out to his waistband, struggling to keep his dignity even as he knows his bare ass has been revealed to all and sundry. Waddling forward, he tried to pull his pants back up amongst all of the appreciative hollers he got. He set the child down, losing control of the 'ball' that was soon scooped up by another 'player'. Yanking up, he could hear the culprit of his near-pantsing squawk and the little hands on his ankles melt away.

Now the game was 'Pull off Ty's pants'. The players? Ty and Julian. The prize? Bragging rights and the glow of sweet victory.

A game that was quickly decided when Ty snatched at Julian, tossing the laughing redhead over his shoulder to land face-first into the mud. As the offended party flipped over, scraping mud from his joyous face, Ty leaned over to give the other a gritty kiss, soon just kneeling to be closer to the other.

Between wrestling with his wife and some random kids, Tony looked up and saw two idiots, covered in mud, kissing in the rain. He smiled.

Then shoved a handful of mud down his wife's front, booking it as she shrieked in fury.

***

Belial shivered, wet and cold. Beside him, Mercedes and Melchior sneezed and whimpered, one of them shaking to rid themselves of the excess clinging to their fur. Bel sniffled, wrapping his arms around himself in a futile attempt to keep warm.

Going to retrieve the stick he had inadvertently thrown into the thicket was a bad idea. He had gotten lost in the dark cloister of trees and bushes, and had been unable to find his way back out.
Shouting for Tybalt was useless, he had gone too far in, and everything had grown too closely together for his pleas to go far.

Stumbling about, it was a few hours later that he emerged onto a dirt path. Not knowing where north was, he had no way of knowing which direction to take. As the rain came down harder, he picked one at random, remembering Ty mention that all roads lead to somewhere.

Slogging through mud and stumbling over ruts, the path cut back into the forest. As they went deeper, Bel thought that maybe he should turn around. Going on for another five minutes, he was about to do so when a turn revealed a little hut. It was built into the roots of a large tree, and looked a little run down.

Fairly certain that it was abandoned, he trotted over to it, the dogs chuffing in excitement. Going to knock, the door swung open. Peeking inside showed that the place was _indeed_ inhabited, for there was a banked fire in the fireplace and a few dishes in a wooden tub. Not wanting to intrude but not really having a choice, Bel walked in.

Building the fire back up and hanging his rung-out clothes on a line in front of it, he bundled himself up in a blanket from the bed. Not wanting to be a total freeloader, he scrubbed the dirty dishes with a few handfuls of sand before brushing them clean, stacking them with the others he found on a shelf. Catching sight of a soup cauldron, he filled it with water from the water barrel right outside the door. Scrounging about, he found a few handfuls of herbs, some onions and mushrooms, salt, pepper, and jerky.

He's so glad that Uncle Gemmy and Ty taught him how to make a simple soup with forageables. Looks like jerky-and-herb stew is on the menu tonight!

As it bubbled away, he heard a few peeps. Looking out the window, he saw a chicken coop. An egg as a thickening agent, along with some flour would be nice, but he doesn't know if these are egg chickens or breeding chickens.

That, and he doesn't want to get cussed-out by an angry hen. He's still got the scars from his first run-in with Kitchen Matron Lorias' hen, Bippy.

Once satisfied with how cooked everything was, he mixed a flour slurry and added it. Giving it a few stirs, he let it cook for a few minutes more. As it did so, he fed a piece of jerky to the dogs, not wanting to be unfair about him having food while they didn't. After, he pulled out his money pouch, digging out a few silvers to leave so that the owner could replace the foodstuffs he used.

As he ate a bowl of his simple stew, he heard a few splashing footsteps before a grunt. A growl sounded out before the door was thrown open. A frightened Bel looked up.

"...!"
Choo-choo! All aboard the Plot train! We have plot advancement AND resolution, all in one trip!
(And as a heads up, there will be a bit of body horror at the end. Sorry not sorry.)

The Palace was in an uproar. Servants and guards dashed to and fro, along with a few of the minor nobles. Valora had to use herself as a bulwark to get herself and the elder Devorak's through the stream of activity.

Getting to Germanius's room, her heart leapt into high gear. The Warlord was busy comforting a sobbing Tybalt (since when did he get here?), the younger man's cheeks painted with his anguish. The last time she saw him like this was when he broke his arm falling from a tree when he was a child.

"Gem? What's going on," she rushed over, her charges following closely after closing the door.

"Valora? Great timing! I called Tibbles and Bel to me. Last night they went exploring and, well-"

"I LOST BEL! I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE IS," Tybalt sobbed. He looked horrid, face blotchy and nose running, despite the multitude of handkerchief's he held.

"What do we know?" If anyone hurt the young boy, Valora was going to do far worse than choke a bitch.

"I took them to the woods, on the northwest side of the city," Cordelia interjected. The man was bent over a map. "Bel was getting antsy, so I figured it would be good, harmless exercise for him to help me gather specimens," he marked a spot on the map. "Lucio's hounds took a liking to him, and they were playing around. Fetch, according to Tibbles. He went to retrieve his stick, and never came back." Tybalt keened.

"Fuck."

"Not only that, but he's also the late Count's child." At any other time, Valora knows Germanius would be saying that with a mixture of glee and frustration. Right now, though, he just sounded...worn.

"I'll pass on my 'guests' to you, then, and get looking." Turning back to the Devorak's, she inclined her head slightly. "I normally wouldn't leave my charges like this, but-"

"Aye, go on an' find the wee bairn. Lady knows he'll be more scar'ed than a tiny kit'ten frum tha storm."

As Valora checked herself, mentally plotting where to look first as she made sure she was armed, the door slammed open. Striding in dressed in an elaborate, military-esque outfit with a sword at her side, was Nadia.

"Germanius, one of the guards made mention of a minor gully near where Belial dissa-" she
stopped, eyes zeroed in on Julian's parents. The family resemblance is too strong to ignore, and all three Principia know that the shit's about to hit.

"Tell me, Warlord Germanius," she purred lowly, "just, when were you going to tell me that you had somehow acquired the parents of Lucio's murderer?"

"We just got here, ma'am." Ivan dipped into a shallow bow, elbow digging into his wife's side as she seemingly entered a stare down with the Countess. "Mishka!"

"I don' like you."

"Rest assured, Mrs. Devorak, that feeling seems to be entirely mutual." Taking a few slow steps forward, Nadia hummed. "It would seem that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Guards, apprehend-"

*CRACK!* 

Leaping back, Nadia looked down at where she originally stood. Where her feet were just a few short moments ago was a thick, heavy cleaver. Looking back up, she stared incredulously at Valora. The other woman had drawn her scimitar, and held in her other hand something that looked like the bastard lovechild of a dagger and a meat cleaver. Valora had taken up a protective position in front of the Devorak's, feet spread and slightly crouched, her shoulders set. She was doing an excellent job of covering the new guests.

Itching for a fight herself, Nadia started to draw her blade just to get rushed. Trying to awkwardly sidestep Valora, she was still caught in a shoulder check due to her position. Skidding on one foot, she regained her footing and finished her draw just in time to block Valora's blow. "Attacking before your foe could even draw," she grit between her teeth, shoulders and arms straining against the larger woman. "I thought you belonged to a House of honor!" She grunted as a foot planted itself in her stomach. Going with the force of the blow, she danced back a few steps.

Swinging the cleaver up in an undercut, Valora bared her teeth. "Your acting that combat has rules shows just how very different your life is. You have an enemy? Put them in the fucking ground before they do the same for you!" A whistle heralded the incoming blow from the scimitar, and sparks flew as two different blades clashed. More pushing and straining was had, knees bending and chests heaving-

*BAM!* "ENOUGH!"

Both women rolled and tumbled as Germanius plowed between them, throwing his hips and shoulders. Twisting and catching the locked blades with two long stilettos he pulled out of seemingly nowhere, the now-useless swords flew through the air, landing with a harsh metallic shriek before skidding. As the two combatants tried to catch their breath, he glared at them both (admittedly more at Nadia than Valora, although she was not spared his ire).

"BOTH OF YOU, CEASE THIS FUCKERY AT ONCE," he bellowed. "HOUSE PRINCIPIA IS IN CHARGE OF THIS INVESTIGATION! THE COURT OF VESUVIA, IN ACCORDANCE TO THE STELLARIAN CODE OF JUDICIAL CONDUCT, SECTION 14-R, SUBSECTION 3.2 A, CANNOT INTERFERE WITH THE ONGOING INVESTIGATION, LEST THEY BE BROUGHT UP ON CHARGES OF PERJURY AND OBSTRUCTION! PUNISHMENT CAN LEAD UP TO, AND INCLUDE, A STRIPPING OF TITLE OR EXECUTION!"

Watching from the side were the Devoraks, Tybalt, and Cordelia. Tybalt had dried his face as
best he could, and both he and Cordelia had drawn weapons and placed themselves in front of Julian and Portia's parents as Germanius continued his bellowing. While it is supremely doubtful that Nadia can take on Germanius and win, no one was taking any chances.

Turning back, Cordelia's eyes bugged. It seems his worries about being able to protect his (temporary) charges were for naught. Ivan had a large warhammer resting on his broad shoulders, and Siobhan had a double-bladed axe in her hands.

Where the fuck did they come from!?

Hearing Germanius finish tearing the two hot-headed women apart, Cordelia right-faced. Little Gemmy looked pissed, his face flushed a deep red. "Now, Nadia, where is this gully located?" The chastised woman showed them the location on Cordelia's map, before excusing herself and stiffly walking away.

"We need to get her cleansed," Cordelia muttered. "Ever since that botch ritual, she's gotten more paranoid." She's swinging hard between what she was described as before her disappearance from the public eye, to this person full of arrogance and paranoia. Some thing has its claws hooked into her, and won't let her go without a fight.

Germanius grunted. "As it is, we need to put that aside for now. Now, this spot here," he tapped the area Nadia had indicated, "is there anyone available who can check it out?"

"Asra was the one who suggested my original foraging spot. And this is only a few short miles away. Let's ask him. In the meantime, I'll take care of Tibbles and our guests."

***

It was late in the morning when the caravan started moving again. The storm from yesterday greatly slowed them down, and the after-twister mud wrestling extravaganza certainly did them no favors. Add in the time needed for everyone to get clean, that left the caravan nearly a full-day behind.

While Serafina and Antonius had factored in extra time, they were coming to an area that is always problematic: the Saturnalian plateau.

Also known as 'The Gates of Saturnalia', the Saturnalian plateau is a large shelf of rock jutting up at an angle. The land leading up to it, while flat, is weirdly geographically active. A few researchers think that old lava caves from the Ravenrock mountains are responsible for some of the unusual formations and sinkholes that open up at random, but no one is really sure.

Hopefully, nothing new has formed. Back in Neptunia, a few other travelers marked new things that had popped up, but the roads should still be intact.

Sighing, Serafina set her maps aside. Regardless of the road conditions, she should send someone out to scout when they get closer. If they need to take a detour, they'll need to know as soon as possible. If they detour too late, it could put their stop at Murl way behind, and that little town depends on the food that her caravan brings them from Neptunia to get through their dry season.

Hearing shuffling, she looked over from her desk towards her husband. Tony was pulling on some socks, a pair of heavy work trousers on the bed next to him. She groaned in disappointment when a great set of legs were hidden behind thick canvass.

"You're insatiable."
"No, you're just a hot piece of ass," she slapped his butt as he walked past, both letting out chuckles. "What's up?"

"Just wanting to do a final check on Julian's boo-boo." Serafina snorted. Boo-boo was an understatement; nearly a fifth of the skin of his back had to be removed. "Hey, now. This is the perfect time to make sure everything's hunky-dory. It would suck if the skin was weak and split while they were, I dunno, snake wrestling."

"Is that what the kids are callin' it these days? Besides, I'm pretty sure they already did that. Multiple times," she chortled.

"I'm leaving now," he snorted as she laughed even more. Putting on his boots, he hopped off the back of the moving wagon, trotting down the line. Getting to the one he desired, it only took a bunny-hop to get on the back. Rapping his knuckles against hardwood, it was only a matter of moments before Julian himself answered. "Ah, just the man I wanted to see!"

***

Getting the Devorak's settled somewhere was a bit of a challenge. Originally, Germanius was going to have them installed between his and Valora's rooms in the Palace, but with the swings in Nadia's personality, he doesn't think that'll be the best course of action.

As of right now, he's keeping them right by his side. Once Belial is found, he'll ask Asra if he knows of anywhere that would be safe for them. It would make sense for Tubor to house them, but somethings gotten the Necromancers AND Lucille's girls all in a tizzy.

Right now, he's asked Julian's parents to look through everything he's compiled about the so-called 'murderer'. Something just isn't adding up, and he hopes that they can shed some light on the situation.

"Wait. Our boy is a Doctor?"

"Don' be pulling me leg! If 'es a Doctor, why is 'e up for murder? Dinnae the Count die of t'plague?"

"That's the thing," Germanius muttered. "Supposedly, Julian was the primary care physician for the Count. The man in question had the plague for the longest of all its victims, and it was Julian's job to find out just why Lucio's case was different, and to find a cure."

"Where was the research done? And were there any other doctors?" Standing up from the desk he had been hunched over, Ivan stretched his back until it popped, humming in pleasure as he did so. Siobhan continued flipping through papers, muttering to herself at random.

"Unfortunately, many of them died during their research. A hazard of their work. As it is, while there were no new cases of plague after Lucio died, it does have a one-hundred percent mortality rate. I think somewhere around ninety-percent of the doctors and other medical personnel ended up dying from the thing they were trying to stop." Cordelia was able to snag a few living 'specimens' during the height of the epidemic, and it was only through sheer, dumb luck that none of his fellow researchers got sick. When no new cases came about, the man had been seriously thinking of exposing someone to a sample so he can get more information.

Lucky for everyone else (except Cordelia), it seems the pathogen can't live long outside of a living host. The serial rapist Cordelia had injected with tainted blood ended up living, severely disappointing the man. Germanius is just relieved that he doesn't have to worry about containment
"Breeches.

"Aye," Siobhan tapped a page with her finger. "It says 'ere that mos' of th' research was done 'ere. Cannae get into tae dungeons?"

"We need permission from either at least two people, including Quaestor Valdemar, to go in. Protocols from the plague are still up, and were never rescinded. Nadia already gave the go ahead, but we never ran into Valdemar, and Valerius is a slippery one. At this point, I'm thinking of writing the Stellarian Emperor and getting a Universal Edict."

Ivan whistled. That would be...not good. For Vesuvia, at least. Getting one of those opens the door for His Imperial Majesty's Office of Governing Affairs to step in, and getting a visit from one of them means much more than a simple inspection. Getting a visit from an Imperial Inspector turns into cleaning house. The last time one of those guys went sniffing, Plutonia ended up losing nearly all of its ruling class and fell under direct Imperial Rule.

"I'd do it, anyway," Siobhan snorted. "Ye got too much on th' plate, and not enough hands on deck."

"I agree, but I'm also trying not to go too extreme. Right now, I'm thinking of just getting an Official Edict of Investigation. It looks better for the city, gives me the power needed, AND won't drag His Majesty's eye over."

While the Umbra Nation is its own, independently governed people/nation, it's a hard-won peace between the High Queen and the Emperor. Doing too much to rock the boat could be used as fodder to stir-up trouble, with many vocal groups for either side not happy with the current arrangement.

"Well, ye sound very well fooked."

Germanius grunted. Couldn't have said it better himself.

***

"Um, Mr. Muriel-

"Just Muriel."

Belial scrunched up his nose. "Okay, Muriel. Can I brush Ianna? I already brushed the other two, and I don't want her to feel left out."

Muriel sighed. Ever since he found the child squatting in his house, it's been question after question. Are all children this talkative!? "...sure. If she'll let you." Giving a little cheer, Belial picked up the grooming brush, trying his best to coax the leery Ianna over.

Finding the mini-Lucio in his home had been quite, upsetting. Muriel had stepped out to hunt down a deer, needing to replenish his larder. He had been looking forward to smoking his leftover meat after making a stew, possibly whittling a figurine. He hadn't expected to find a little ragamuffin curled up in his blanket and eating his food!

And seeing Lucio staring back at him.

He...wasn't proud of how he had first reacted. Snarling much like an angry Ianna, it hit Muriel like a fist to the gut when the boy had burst into tears. He had felt horrible, awkwardly apologizing to the literal child he had shouted at. He felt even worse when he found out Belial didn't know who his father was.
Much like Lucio, a simple apology seemed to be enough to right the wrong done. Minutes after drying his tears, the youngster became a chatterbox. Asking Muriel question after question, the boy also had a deft hand, quickly breaking down the large stag after skinning it. Politely asking Muriel for a skillet yielded more meat for the simple stew, and the boy made sure he himself was well fed.

Bizarre how a child could be so different from his father.

***

Ty passed his GiGi on the way back to his wagon from the 'kitchens'. The other man seemed a bit preoccupied, but Ty didn't think too much on it. He knows the weather from yesterday set them back, and for a caravan, time is money.

Pushing open the door with his hip, Ty called out a 'hello'. "Okay, babe! Grubs on! I got us some pilaf, sauteed veggies, and a nice berry cake for afters!" Not hearing Julian, he looked over at the other in curiosity.

Julian was sprawled on the bed, laying on his side furthest from Ty. Was he asleep?

"Hey, babe," Ty leaned over, giving the other a gentle shake. Julian jumped with a gasp. "Are you alright?"


Ty didn't believe him. "You don't look 'fine'. What-"

"I said I'm FINE." Seeing the hurt look on the others face, Julian sighed. "Sorry. Um, Tony gave a final look over of my, uh, injury."

"You're okay, right?"

Oh, but Julian wanted to both kiss him and deck him. "Yeah. Just, he told me how bad it could have gotten, and that I was, uh, lucky to still be alive."

His heart shouldn't have felt lighter at Ty's relief. "Oh, good! Preatoria Vulgaris poisoning can have long lasting effects, so I'm glad to hear that all is good!" Turning back around, he set the kettle before grabbing a few dishes. "So, either tomorrow or the day after, we'll be splitting from the caravan. Then, we travel on foot to Saturnalia before heading further east. We'll have to travel through a branch of mountains, but the tram should get us over it in a few hours." Spooning up some plates, he then poured two large mugs of tea. "So, we should start packing up today."

Julian hummed, accepting his plate. They ate in silence, Ty's comfortable while Julian's was troubled. Once finished, Ty gathered everything back up. Dropping a kiss to a distracted cheek, he left back for the kitchens, giving the other a cheery goodbye.

"The...treatment that was prescribed cannot be easily replicated," Tony murmured as he palpated the new skin on Julian's back.

"Why? If Preatoria Vulgaris poisoning is as devastating as you say, surely any sort of treatment would be a boon!"

Tony sighed. Pulling back, he smoothed Julian's shirt back into place before sitting forward. He hunched over his knees, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's, it's not that simple. Ty may be the only person alive currently who could do what he did."
Julian gapped. "HOW!? To my knowledge, he has no in-depth medical training! And as you stated, such poison has a nearly 90% mortality rate!"

Grabbing Julian's nearest hand, Tony squeezed it, petting it with his other one as he tried to collect himself.

"Tony? What's wrong?"

He sniffed. "Oh, uh, I really shouldn't be the one to be telling you this. It should be Ty. Hell, he should have told you a while ago but, shit-"

"What is it?" Julian leaned close, heart tight. Did Ty have someone else? A wife? Kids? What!?

"Fuck. Okay. Julian, whatever I may say, please, just, just know that Ty had NO. CHOICE. Don't. Don't attack or hate him for doing what he did out of love for you or-"

"Tony, your scaring me!"

"Hedonism damnit. Serafina should be having this conversation with you. Better yet, Ty!" Taking a few deep breaths to calm himself, Tony slowly exhaled. He then turned towards a worried Julian, holding both of the others hands.

"Hedonism bade Ty to 'eat of the tainted flesh', and so he did."

***

"Mr. Muriel, when will we be back at Vesuvia?"

Muriel sighed, not bothering to correct Belial about his name again. "When we get back." He whistled, getting Lucio's hounds attention as they started to wander. The trail they walked on, while well-worn, was small, with thick foliage on either side. It would be very easy to get lost if one wandered too far from the path.

He was EXTREMELY leery around the two white dogs. Ianna can handle herself just fine, but the two ill-tempered beasts have a reputation, and one not entirely undeserved. As it is, he is surprised that they have acted as well-behaved as they have. He can only imagine that Belial, being his father's son, must smell similar enough that the two dogs have taken to him.

Ianna also seems to have taken a slight liking to him, as well. She is a very cautious, aloof creature, and much like him, she doesn't trust easily. It had surprised him when she allowed the boy to brush her. Belial actually knowing how to properly brush out a dog without pulling at their skin or fur was a great help.

~Big friend! Little hatching!~

Like a shot, Faust burst out of the undergrowth. She slithered in twists and turns around Belial and Muriel, happily hissing random words. She only stopped when Mercedes and Melchior sniffed her curiously, causing her to rear up and cock her head.

A few noisy footsteps heralded the appearance of both Asra and Portia. Seeing Belial unharmed, Portia scooped the boy up into a hug, him having quickly earned a small patch of her heart in the short time he's been here. "Oh, Bel! Are you okay!? We've been worried sick!"

"Sorry Miss Portia," he mumbled.
"Thank you for finding him, Muriel," Asra quietly told the other. "It must have been hard for you." When he heard that Bel was Lucio's child, he wanted to smack himself for not connecting the dots earlier. It must have been *so hard* for Muriel to care for the child of his tormentor.

"...he wasn't that bad." Muriel blushed. It certainly helps that the boy has softer features and better manners. And that Ianna was cool with him.

He jumped, feeling a small hand gently touch his wrist. He blushed deeper when the short redhead looked up at him with a smile.

"Thank you so much for helping him! His elder brother has been a mess since he went missing! What can I do to repay you?" If Mama found out she didn't do everything she could to thank this gentleman, Portia wouldn't be able to sit for a week!

Besides, he looks adorable when he blushes.

"...there's no need."

"I must insist! Here, c'mon," she tugged his large hand, pulling him along behind her as she steered the group back towards Vesuvia proper. "At the very least, let me get you some jams from my garden! My pantry is fit to burst, and you'll be doing me more of a favor taking some jars than you'll be doing me by not!"

"*Her strawberry-rhubarb jam is really good,*" Bel stage whispered at Muriel. "*Especially on some of Bern's honey wheat.*"

Bern *does* make a really good bread. Especially his pumpkin variety. And it *has* been a while since he had something as sweet as a fruit jam. "Okay."

Asra trailed behind the group, face smug as thoughts of matchmaking tumbled through his head. He'll need to see if Faust will be an accomplice with some of his more elaborate ideas.

***

Slipping out of Germanius's room, Siobhan skulked about. Her son, a murderer? Bah! Her boy has always been a sweet troublemaker. He'd cry when she'd squish a beetle, so him being the one to met out the demise of a *Count* is bullshit.

*She is decidedly ignoring the fact that she hasn't seen or heard from him for over ten years. Her boy may have changed, but not *THAT* much.*

Germanius and Cordelia mentioning their need to get into the labs in the dungeons gave her an idea: wander about, run into this 'Consul Valerius', and get visitation. If she runs into Valdemar, all the better.

Also seeing the architecture of the Palace is a plus. While Vesuvia has so far left a bad taste in her mouth, that doesn't mean she can't enjoy the sights. Many of the large, decorative windows were fine specimens of stained-glass workmanship, of a caliber that is rarely seen. Add in the fine details etched into the decorative stonework and the Palace is a fine example of masonry.

"Hello. I was unaware that we had additional guests."

Turning, Siobhan met the gaze of a tall, lurid individual. Slim and androgynous, their skin had a pale, near greenish hue. A horned headdress and physicians robes in white were finished off with sturdy black boots and gloves. To top it off, they gazed out at the world through large, glassy scarlet
eyes set in a face of sharp, exacting features.

"'ello, there. Dinnae mean to disturb ye, jus' havin' a wander."

The 'being', because if they were human Siobhan would eat her smalls, cocked their head at a very precise angle. "Oh, it is no bother. I rarely leave my lab, so meeting new people is always a new adventure." Their head realigned with a near-audible snap. The movements reminded Siobhan of a snake or bird: quick and jerky.

"Would ye happen t'be th' one known as Valdemar?"

The others smile was sharp and quick, showing teeth that were definitely not human. "Ah, I see my reputation is known even outside these walls. That I am."

Deciding to throw caution to the wind, Siobhan took a few steps closer, hand out for a shake. "T'names Siobhan Devorak nee Foghladh."

Valdemar's grin, if possible, grew in size as they shook her hand. "Ah, yes, I could see the resemblance, but did not want to jump to conclusions. Coming to a decision without all of the facts is most unbecoming of a medical professional. Dr. 069 takes very much after you."

"Thank ye. Now, what can you tell me 'bout his time here?" If her son has been charged with murder erroneously, she's going to give the Court hell at every turn.

Valdemar's head cocked again, hands coming up in an arch, everything in perfect symmetry. "He resided here for a few years, upon request for his insights in Epidemiology and Virology. When not hung up on such concepts like 'ethics' and 'morality', he provided indispensable work."

"Sounds like her boy, alright. "How do ye mean?"

Valdemar sighed disappointingly. "While a gifted man, he was also a bit flighty. We also were dealing with a devastating plague, one which, through necessity, required us to put aside such concepts like empathy. In any other circumstance, it would be a boon. After all, specimens respond quite well to a kind and caring bedside manner. His insistence upon following codes of Ethics and the treatment of bodies was irritating." They blinked before giving a hollow smile. "While I understand that you hu-, average people hold such things highly, when one is researching such a deadly virus, unfortunately, such things must be set aside."

Her heart sank. While a soft and caring boy who liked getting into scuffles, Siobhan would not be surprised if being immersed in such an environment changed Ilya. She would not blame him for cracking under the pressure, being surrounded by people pleading for help with their literal last dying breath. She knows she herself would have gone insane, and she worships the Morrigan.

"Do ye think," she quietly asked, "that he truly killed th' Count?"

Valdemar stayed quiet, and Siobhan's heart got heavy. "No." Her head snapped up, unaware that she had drifted to looking at the ground. "While he was many things, Dr. 069 had a spine of steel. He objected to many of our protocols at every turn, using a genius blend of malicious compliance and outright disobedience to make his opinion known, while still delivering on his work." Valdemar frowned, "if it wasn't so annoying, I would find it awe inspiring." They sounded begrudgingly impressed.

"Then why is he wanted?" If Valdemar themselves, her Ilya's superior, stated that he couldn't have done it, then why is he considered guilty?
That sharp grin was back. “I'm afraid you will need to ask the good Consul about that. As stated in his report, he is the one who saw Dr. 069 start the fire that would later claim the Counts life.” Straightening their gloves, they turned, striding back down the hall. “Oh, and please, tell Cordelia he is welcome to visit my labs. It is not often that I can 'talk shop' with someone of his caliber. The staff will lead him down there.”

Listening to boots click away, Siobhan felt a little bit lighter.

***

Coming back to their wagon with their dinner, Ty whistled a few snatches of song. He had spent nearly all day in the kitchen cart, helping to restock and record the food stores between cooking batches of goodies. Right now, he just wanted to eat himself stupid and cuddle his Sweetheart.

Oooooh, they could have a cuddle puddle on the bed! The girls would LOVE that!

"Hey, babe! Sorry for being out all day. I just wanted to help get the kitchens in order before we leave! The Matrons said we're welcome back any time." Setting down the platter, he bounced on his toes. He had managed to get that one pork loin recipe from the spa in Shepherd's Stop before they left, and he was able to get permission to try it out, so long as he also helped with the actual caravan dinner.

He can't WAIT for the look on Julian's face!

Speaking of, Sweetheart hasn't said anything. Is he okay? "Jules?"

Julian was sitting on the end of the bed, looking hard at Ty. It was a look that didn't suit him, and left Ty feeling very uneasy. "M'luv?"

"So," Julian drawled, "I had a very... interesting, talk with Tony today." One of his feet started tapping the ground. "When he came to examine me."

"You, you are okay, right?" Ty doesn't know what he'd do with himself if something permanent happened to Julian. He had very nearly torn out Octavius's throat when the other had stabbed him. If Julian had been left with some sort of handicap-

"When were you going to tell me?"

"...tell you what?"

"The treatment," Julian stressed. His stomach flip flopped in both anger and betrayal. "How it involved you eating me."

"O-oh. That." Ty started wringing his hands, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He really doesn't want to talk, let alone think about, what he did.

"Yesssss. That. Communication and consent in a relationship is IMPORTANT, Ty, and-"

"Do not speak to me about consent, Julian!" The hiss Ty let out was hair raising, reminding Julian that the man before him is not entirely human. "Such a concept is held so highly amongst us Hedonists, it is the closest to 'holy' you can get from us."

"YOU FUCKING ATE ME, TY!"

"AND WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE ME DO, HUH!? SIT THERE AND WATCH YOU
DIE WHEN I COULD HAVE SAVED YOU!? YOU WOULD ASK ME TO DO THAT!?” Ty had stepped closer to the end of their bed, chest heaving as he bellowed, anger turning to anguish.

Julian was taken aback, the flame of anger in his chest getting snuffed out at the sight of genuine tears rolling down Ty's face. "How did that save me!? How did your eating me like I was a slab of baby back ribs keep me from dying!? What do you think this SOUNDS like to me!?!"

Ty sniffed hard, one hand messily wiping away his tears. "And how do you think I felt? I watched as your face swelled, eyes and tongue bulging like a drowning victim. You-, you couldn't breathe," a choked sob struggled out from his chest. He collapsed to his knees, burying his face into Julian's lap. "The wound, it wouldn't drain! And it went too deep! Octavius, the limp-wristed fuck, he got you too good! He, he ensured your death!"

"...but my seal-"

"Forget your fucking seal it didn't work!" Ty shoved his face directly into Julian's, "nothing, nada, zip, zilch! It did NOTHING until I ate half of the infected flesh! Which I took no delight in!"

"THEN WHY DID YOU DO IT!? WHAT GAVE YOU SUCH AN IDEA!?"

"HEDONISM! HE WHISPERS TO ME, MORE TIMES THAN OTHERS! HE, HE TOLD ME TO DEVOUR YOU TO SAVE YOU!"

Julian leaned away from Ty, his face a mix of horrified and incredulous. "Do you have any idea of how UNHINGED you sound!? 'A voice in my head told me to eat you to cure you!' Ty, that's something someone suffering from schizophrenia would say!"

"I'm, I'm not crazy. I swear I'm not!"

"Ty...they all say that-"

"No! I'm not! It's, it's how Hedonism chooses his Priests and Priestesses! I, I was supposed to be one, the one who replaced Ma, but, but Home doesn't want me," choking again, he slumped back into Julian's lap. "No one wants me. I'm too dangerous to live, but too favored to die. I, I have no one but a god who talks to me…” he let out a keen. "The people I should be leading fear me, but Hedonism refuses to Choose anyone else, so they CAN'T kill me! And, and I feel so alone."

The utter self-loathing in that last statement was like a punch to Julian's gut. Ty genuinely hates what he had to do, even if Julian thinks the whole 'a god told me to do it' is bunk. "But, how are you not, dead?!"

Sitting back, Ty plucked up Julian's feet. He cradled firm heels in his palms, squeezing gently, having an irresistible urge to hold something of the other, to remind himself that Julian is alive. "The ones Chosen by Hedonism, his Priests and Priestesses, are granted some of His talents. We don't know how, but, it is almost like He slides a bit into us. My, my eating you, while going inside MY stomach, He was the one devouring the poison." Which was true. When he had to next pass his waste, nothing had been tinted the purple color that is a trademark of Praetoria Vulgaris poisoning. A quick and dirty blood test also showed no trace in his system.

Julian...had to think. While he believes in no gods (his being a Doctor making it hard to believe when you watch even the most fervent of believers die despite their prayers), what he has seen and experienced so far gives him no choice but to acknowledge that there is something out there. Magic exists, even if he doesn't trust it.
But...he trusts Ty.

Ty has never deliberately hurt him, or made him feel stupid. He's never turned away from him during his low points, and done his best to give comfort and succor.

How can Julian turn away from him, when he's needed most? How can he repay the other for his emotional generosity by turning his back?

Ty sounds...so broken and lonely. Julian knows the other is hurt by being rejected by his home, but this? This is something altogether different. This is spite. His own people, hell, his own Family, would see him dead, if not for the actions of their god.

And, as a medical professional, can Julian really lecture Ty on consent? Ty had a decision to make during a time of duress, one where dithering for a minute more could have meant he was holding a corpse instead of his lover. He had to make a decision that Julian himself has had to make, the determination of what to do to keep his patient alive, using possibly questionable methods, without being able to ask said patient. He's had to make the difficult decision to stop treatment, and to use untried methods to save others.

It is never an easy thing to choose.

"I would rather have you alive and hating me, than dead but loving me."

"...I, I forgive you."

Ty's relieved smile lit up the room. Eyes still glassy and wet, he bent over, kissing the tops of Julian's feet in an act of humility not shown to many others outside of the High Queen. "Oh thank you. Thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

Bringing the other up, Julian's face was covered in butterfly kisses, ones that only stopped when he pressed his lips to warm, slightly chapped ones. "Let's just, let's just eat, and forget that this happened."

***

Nadia was sitting on the balcony of her baths, lounging on a soft and plush chair. The sunset over the harbor was as spectacular as always, the daystar that gives her people life giving one last hurrah before retiring.

She felt torn. Spiritually, more than mentally. She feels like a being of mist and fog, a sensation that has been with her since the ritual that faltered.

She needs answers, and she needs them now. Whatever being has dug its claws into her is endangering not just herself, but all of Vesuvia. A leader must be clear headed and un-compromised, and to do everything in their power to ensure the safety and well-being of their people.

In her current state, she is clearly unable to do that.

She is reluctant to retry the ritual, uncertain if another failure will worsen her mental state. Her actions earlier are utterly mortifying, and if that was bad, how much worse can she become?

Sighing, she stood. A now all-too-familiar pounding took up residence in her temples, causing her eyes to throb. Thinking a nice cup of tea and some sleep will do her good, she started down the corridor. As she walked towards her bedrooms, nausea started to swish around her stomach. The pounding in her head turned into sledgehammer strikes, and she went cross eyed as her vision swam.
Stumbling into a wall, she gagged.

*It felt like something was crawling up her throat…*

Gagging again, she sunk to her knees. Thick gobs of spit escaped the corners of her lips as saliva filled her mouth, signaling her imminent vomiting. Mortified, she tried to get back up, not wanting to be found in a pile of her own expulsion by the staff.

Getting to one knee, she knew it was too late. A large, **hard** bubble of **something** pushed its way up, her throat being stretched as her mouth went wide, her air being cut off. Her eyes watered as a solid, stretchy mass pushed out, her nose running. A thick and heavy *plop!* signaled its escape, and she breathed deeply, spitting to rid her mouth of the thick, tacky metallic taste left behind as she tried to get oxygen. Looking down, she recoiled in horror.

On the soft carpet was a ball off mucous, about the size of her two closed fists. It wiggled as something scarlet inside swam around, frantic. She stumbled back, a hoarse shout escaping her damaged throat. Her arms and legs swam as she tried to push herself as far back from this **thing** as she could, not getting far as she slipped on her silken robe.

*What in the world is that!?*

With a sickly sucking sound, a large red beetle pushed out of the ball. Chittering, its jaws snapped open and closed as it spun in agitation. It looked up at her, chittering more.

Rearing, it opened its wings, looking like it was getting ready to fly at her. Before it could achieve lift-off, a large booted foot crushed it.

Looking up, Nadia has never felt more relief seeing Germanius as she does now. The man was looking down at his foot, glaring at a faint red mist floating up from the ground. Snapping his fingers, the mist was gathered-up and enclosed in a bubble. Holding the new construct between thumb and forefinger, he looked at Nadia.

"Well now, that explains a lot."
Of Mortality and Mafia

Chapter Notes

Just a quick heads up, but there will be some disturbing, body-horror scenes.

Martel was too old for this shit.

At five-fucking-twenty-one this morning, both Asra and Lucille (scantily clad and smelling of bodily fluids) crashed thru his homes front door, utterly scaring the pants off his dear wife and nearly causing him to decapitate them with a hastily-thrown charm. Luckily, Asra has good reflexes and was able to get them both out of the way, but still.

Five.
Twenty.
One.

After realizing just who it was, Martel got ready to start bellowing when Lucille blubbered out just why they were there, stopping Martel cold.

Marchessa is missing, and Tubor tracked her path to That House.

After reassuring his poor wife (with whom he should be enjoying his retirement with, and not putting up with any more of this BULLSHIT!), he called an emergency meeting. Within twenty-seven minutes of being awoken, he, along with the visiting Principia, Asra, Lucille, the elder Devorak's, and Portia, were gathered in a sitting room at the Palace

"So, what do we know?" Martel thanked Portia as she passed over a large mug of extra-strong brewed coffee. He was cursing internally, wishing Nadia was here, but the woman was still recovering from her 'expulsion' from last night.

Cordelia grunted. "While it wasn't reported until this morning, Marchessa has been missing since seven last evening. Possibly longer than that, but that's what we have. Lucille upbraided her girls and called Asra, and Asra called Tubor."

"Tubor managed to track her down, and her trail ends on the same street as the suspected Worm house," Germanius grunted. "A witness, that same wino from earlier, said he saw a woman supported by two others get dragged in." Many hissed out, and Lucille was livid that not just one, but TWO people got past her.

"She'll need two new girls when everything is said and done."

"Fuck," rubbing his forehead, Martel cursed. The casing of Aoife's house is only a third complete, but what HAS been charted is not pretty. In addition to several types of anti-theft and security charms, one of the youngsters surveying thinks she found the start of some pretty nasty stuff.

Tiberius should be the one tackling this shit, not him. He should be retired after training the gifted young man, and only bothered when additional consultation was needed. After all this is sorted, he's
going to lean **hard** on Asra. The magician not knowing what happened to Ty those years ago *reeks* of lies.

"So, with no time to be had, we need to hit hard, and hit fast. Lucille, do any of your or Tubor's people have any sort of combat abilities? My people are spread too thin to handle this on our own." It also doesn't help that his own superiors ended up disbanding Ty's own group after everything went down. Their replacements haven't been trained up to snuff, yet, and that has left Vesuvia vulnerable. While many other members of the local Circle have stepped up their game, it is a situation that cannot go on for much longer.

*Especially* if this Worm issue continues, and Martel has a sneaking suspicion that things are going to get hellacious before they get better.

"Tubor has several combat-class Necromages, and a few of my girls are no slouch when it comes to magic." Pulling over a piece of parchment and a pen, Lucille started making up a list. "Unfortunately, us followers of Behau are more healers and fortune tellers. The ones that can truly fight learned before coming into my employ."

"Um, Gisella?" Asra's eyebrow disappeared into his hairline. Lucille went pink. "Ah, *ahem*, political intrigue and clandestine assassination are **markedly** different to actual combat. And you should know that by now, Azzy!"

Before the two could continue squabbling, Germanius clapped his hands. "Can we get back on topic?" After getting muttered apologies, he turned to the Devorak's. "Siobhan, is there anything you may know about Aoife, or her house? Possibly how the wards are anchored?"

"Hmmmnnnmm, Mama ne'er really spoke much 'bout th' house. Let me think." Trailing off into her mother tongue, she started absentmindedly doodling on a spare parchment. One of her knees jogged, and she would gesticulate to herself as she spoke.

"From what I've picked up during our marriage," Ivan eyed his wife as she got up and started pacing. "Her family only ever settled in a few places. And their homes were guarded viciously. It may be possible that how Aoife protected her boodle will be vastly different from Siobhan or her mother, Gwenifar."

"Yea, but we ne' a ward anchor-, WAIT I GOT IT!" With a running leap, Siobhan belly flopped onto the table, letting out a loud 'FUCK!' as she slid across it, falling over the other side.

"So that's where Julian gets it from," Cordelia muttered under his breath as Portia clucked over her excitedly-scribbling mother. "AHEM! Well, looks like there's no two ways about it! Martel, you ready to fuck some shut up?"

"It's either the house or someone's face. Let's do this."

***

"So," Martel muttered as he watched several people get into position along the dirty street, looking quite small from their vantage point. The two men were currently waiting on the roof of the building across the street from Aoife's house, just waiting for their signal. "I've always pegged you for the academic type. Rampant buffoonery and wide-scale property damage doesn't seem like your thing."

Cordelia *tsked* him. "Please, Marty,-" "*-Don't call me Marty-*!" "*-everyone needs a hobby.*"
"And your 'hobby' is?" Martel threw the older man next to him a wicked side-eye as he let out a dark and demented chuckle. "Wow, way to show that you're a totally sane, fully-functioning human being, 'Delia."

"As fast as you may be, you'll never catch me!"

"The hell are you- CORDELIA!?!" Goggling like a gormless twat, Martel could only watch in dumbfounded astonishment as the scientist hurled himself bodily over the edge, launching himself into a leap upon landing on crooked stones two-story's down and taking out Aoife's front door with his shoulder. Screams and streaks of light sounded out before a few faint, rolling rumbles of something echoed along the street.

"Shit." After an afterthought check of his personal protection charms, Martel bounced his way down. Running through the door, the man tripped over the newly-created corpse just inside the building. Going to step over it, his eyes bugged at the amount of damage Cordelia was able to create in less than a minute.

The first floor must have been used as either a drug den, a whore house, or both. Several people, both male and female, and in various states of dress (and positions) were laid out. It looked like an abattoir, and his stomach churned at the severed limbs and lone heads scattered throughout the room. Blood coated the walls and floor, with one headless corpse still twitching as blood spurted from the stump its head used to be on. The stink of sex, drugs, and the final expulsions of the dead got stuck in his nose.

He's going to need a shower and a hug by the time this is over. This is why he specializes in Creatures...

A loud thud from above shook him from his stupor. Spying a set of rickety stairs, Martel dashed up them, stopping with a shout as something clicking, rubbery, and hissing shot out at him. Bringing an arm up, he grunted as a Grub clamped its mandibles around his forearm, whipping its pale, rubbery body behind it as it tried to gnaw his arm off. It let out a shriek as a long, thin blade buried itself in the nest of eyes crowning its head.

Tossing the still-spasaming body aside, Martel cursed. Only a few short feet from him was a swarm of Grubs. The entire floor moved and writhed as dozens (hundreds!) of Grubs slithered towards him, their combined clicking and chittering so loud, he couldn't hear himself think, let alone breath. More poured out of the rooms going down the hallway, and he cursed Cordelia for leaving him alone.

*THUD!* *THUD!* *THUD!* *

Squishing the smaller Grubs under its weight, a larger Grub flopped into one of the bedroom doorways down the hall. It let out a deep, heavy sound, similar to a person dry-heaving, before letting out a guttural moan. It then started slithering in Martel's direction, mandibles clacking as long ropes of acidic drool stretched to the floor, the wood hissing as it dissolved.

Plunging his hand into one of his supply pouches, Martel pulled a bottle of Atreian Fire out. Lighting the twisted bit of cloth poking out of the cork, he chucked it directly into the Greater Grub's face. The Fell thing shrieked, rearing back as its head and the first few squishy segments after it were carpeted in blue-green flames.

As it whipped its head back and forth, Martel pulled out a few more objects. One was a ball of fabric with spikes poking out, and it shifted with a metallic sound when gripped. Another was a dark flask. Dumping out the flask on the ball, Martel lit that as well before flicking it at the floor before the
sea of Grubs. As it flew, the cloth unfurled, spraying flaming shrapnel as it did so.

Popping sounds, like grease over a fire, rang out as the smaller Grubs not crushed under the Greater one exploded into goop. When one burst, the others got covered in its burning innards, them exploding shortly after as well.

That...was not supposed to happen. Taking a few steps back to avoid the caustic insides of Grub explosively ripping apart the thin membranes they call skin, Martel readied another flask of Atreian Fire. Tossing it at the back end of the now-rolling Greater Grub, the popcorn-tempo of Lesser Grub explosions started to die down as there were less of them to feed the domino effect.

Hearing a new, high-pitched hissing sound, Martel dove into one of the rooms as the Greater Grub violently exploded, flinging chunks of insect meat and liquefied innards up and down the hall. He waited until no more popping sounds could be heard, poking his head around the doorway. He wrinkled his nose at what he saw.

Scorch marks and chunks of seared plaster littered the hall, along with the desiccated remains of Grub. Cracks ran up and down the walls, and the floor was carpeted with tissue-thin membrane and the ooey, gooey remains of putrescence.

Martel only had a moment to duck back into the room before the ceiling crumbled. Rubble rained down as part of the roof caved in. Once the dust cleared, he came back out with a sigh.

He may as well start looking for the wardstone.

***

How the FUCK was the Worm Cult able to do what they did!? Did anybody report this!? Holy fucking shit!

Wiping a spray of blood from his face, Cordelia spat as he tugged his machete from the newest corpse left in his wake, grumbling like the old man he is as he did so. He could hear one of the downed Cultist cough, and he stabbed his blade through their head absentmindedly as he walked over them.

Aoife's house is supposed to be three floors; the ground floor, an upstairs, and then a basement. When it was first built, it was only a basement and ground floor, and then about twenty years after she died, the second story was added. Aside from repairs and rooms being subdivided/combined, nothing major has been done to the building.

FALSE!

Three additional basements were dug in at some point. Even with the destitute location that the house resides in, some body should have reported something. New floors don't just appear from the ether. Earth has to be excavated and removed, and there would have been a lot of it.

Cordelia smells a rat. And he fuckin' HATES rats. He's going to tell Gemmy to do some housekeeping, stat.

Sighing, he walked to what he thinks is the door leading down. Currently, he was on the floor immediately below the basement. Lucky for him, the basement only had a few Cultist in it, and he had caught them going through their food stores. The last one told him about the additional floors before he killed them, and the cackle they let out as they died told him that this was not going to be a fun day.
Sub-basement one seemed to be the Cults actual living quarters. Several beds were scattered about the large, open space, with simple dressers separating each spot. In one corner stood a few bookshelves, groaning under their own weight. On the far opposite end of the room was another doorway, with stairs leading down. At this time, the room had about a dozen people in it, either still asleep or getting ready to.

So far, Cordelia's been lucky. Despite taking out nearly 30 people, he has nary a scratch. Either this place houses only new Initiates, or these are primarily magic users. He scoffed; just because you can do magic, doesn't mean you can't learn weaponry! Marchessa is living proof of that.

...but possibly, not for long.

Clearing out this room was easy. Stupidly so. Either he's just ridiculously overpowered (which, considering his lineage, is most likely), or these Cultist just suck.

Just to be safe, he left one alive, if unconscious. Regardless of what happens here, he's going to need more info.

And it's always good to keep up his interrogation tactics.

Sub-basement two was...empty. There was nothing inside it. At all. It was bare, without even a coating of dust. In one of the opposing corners was a set of barred wooden doors, and he could just make out runes etched into the stone doorway. Taking a few steps into the room, he looked on the ground, trying to see if there were etchings there. He twisted and turned, feet shuffling as his head bobbed.

Leaning back on a heel, he froze. It felt like something slimy crawled up his spine, and the hair on his head tried to stand up under the layers of blood it was plastered under. Going down to one knee, he conjured a ball of Mage Light, tossing it aloft. In the steady glow, a few smudges could be seen.

He pulled out a pair of ornate spectacles, each eyepiece holding host to a variety of colored lenses on wingbars. Popping them on, he flicked through a few sets of colored glass before something worked. He grunted in morbid satisfaction.

Blood.

This looks like this may be a Summoning chamber, and they used blood as their Diagramma medium. Which is...not good. Whatever being they've Contracted with, is a dark being. Blood is only used in either the most dire of circumstances, or if the Summon is a most Fell thing.

Standing back up, he shuffled back into a corner, pulling down another set of lenses. The room blazed in contrast, with runes and diagrams lighting up brightly while everything else faded to a charcoal. Not just the floor, but the walls and ceiling, too, were covered in the echoes of rituals from time past. The faintest of scrawlings looked to be even older than him, with the brightest looking to have been done within the last week.

A LOT of the brightest seems to have been done recently. Like, within the last few months, a year, tops.

Pushing his glasses up, he blinked as his eyes adjusted. Pulling a crystal orb from a pouch, he flicked it towards the center of the room. It hung, floating in the air before it let out a few quiet chimes. On the last one, a wave of blue light shot out, mapping the room. After it made several passes, the orb flashed again before lazily floating back towards him. With great care, he replaced it in his pouch.
He’ll need to get use of a ritual room. There was a LOT of stuff that he recorded, and it may take him a few weeks to untangle all of that history. Hopefully, Nadia will be up and about by the time he gets back, and he can see about using an empty space in the Palace from her.

***

Oh shit.

Fuck. Piss. Shit. Mother fucker!

This was not good. Like, really, REALLY not good!

The house will have to be destroyed. There is no way around it. The amount of Fell activity that occurred to get to this point of infestation just cannot be Cleansed. Nothing but the pure absolution of fire can get rid of this.

And the situation is more dire than Cordelia thought, if the Cult could do this. They must have had years-worth of a head-start.

Standing in the doorway to the final sub-basement, Cordelia started praying. This room was much bigger than the other floors, stretching into the ground under the houses next to Aoife's.

And...there were Worms everywhere.

All over the walls and in corners, between clusters of sickly growing mushrooms, were the larval pods of developing Grubs. Each was the size of an adult man curled up on his side, and they pulsed in sickly time to the still-developing Grub's heartbeats, wet-sounding noises echoing throughout the room. The surfaces not covered in pods were wet and moist, with spots of a smelly, putrid slime.

It was dark. It was dank. And it was horrifying.

Quietly stepping closer to a pod, Cordelia used the tip of a knife to prod the thing. A low groan sounded, and he jerked back in disgust. The pod writhed, wiggling and shifting in a decidedly living manner as it resettled.

That was a human.

People are being used as hosts.

Grubs are being bred inside of living human hosts.

Dear Hedonism, please don't let Marchessa be in the same state.

Tossing what little discretion he had been using to the wind in favor of expediency, he dashed through the other rooms. Each was the same as the first, poor bastards incubating a literal army of Worms, somehow still alive (possibly conscience) as they were slowly eaten alive by parasites. Even now, a few were aware enough to weakly cry out for help as he passed.

He was the only person in this level. No Cultist were seen or heard. He doesn't know if that's because he killed them all or if they were out grabbing new hosts.

In one room, something reached out and proverbially smacked him in the face. His head felt like it had been used as a gong and his vision swam, leaving him seeing double. As he stumbled, shaking his head, that same something mentally prodded him, insistent, like a child tugging on a parents pant leg.
"Cordelia!? Are you okay?"

Clasping a free hand over the one on his shoulder, Cordelia shook his head clear. "I'm...fine, Martel. Just, rattled by something. Just got smacked upside the face by a bit of magic and it won't leave me be."

"One of the security charms?" Besides rampant horror at the scene, Martel hasn't felt anything magic since stepping inside the house.

"No. Some one wants our attention. We need to-, what the ever-loving fuck!?"

"Delia, what-, the wardstone!" Letting the other man go, Martel jumped up, fingers reaching for a faint glint embedded in the ceiling. "If. I. Could. Just. Reach." Each word was punctuated by a jump, and he cursed as he missed yet again, just to get a handful of slime mold.

"Ummmmm, here?" Cordelia plucked the dirty bauble from the packed earth.

"Fucking tall-ass Principia. Thank you." Placing the lump of whatever into an empty pouch, Martel looked around the room, the pitiful state of these poor, poor people settling like a lump in his gut. "What should we do? We can't just leave them like this?"

"The only thing we can reasonably do is destroy this place, and do it with fire. Where's Ty when you need him," Cordelia sighed. "What do you still have?"

Patting down his sides, Martel did a quick mental tally. "I've got about eight bottles of Atreian Fire, and three flasks of kerosene."

"Shit. Not enough. We'll need-"

"It'll be more than enough. Worm's react very explosively to kerosene."

"...how?"

"The top floor was used as a nursery. Now, the roof is collapsed."

"Okay. Got it. Here, take mine." Cordelia passed over all of his ordinance kit, which also had stores of kerosene and Atreian Fire, along with other flammable things. "There's one last room to check. Figure out what you can do while I check it."

"If Marchessa is in there-"

"Martel." Cordelia put both of his hands on the younger man's shoulders before squarely meeting his eyes. "I can see how this place has you rattled. For me, this is nothing."

Martel pushed off one of Cordelia's hands with a glare. "Marchessa is one of ours. If anything, she deserves to be sent off by one of us."

"And I don't need you to have nightmares for the rest of your life. Marchessa...may not be Marchessa anymore."

"...and what am I supposed to tell her family? Her parents?"

"You lie through your teeth, and tell them that she died before anything terrible happened." Turning away, Cordelia readied his machete. Behind him, he could hear Martel breathe in shakily before the rattle of glass could be heard. "I don't know how long I'll be in there, but be prepared to run." Hearing a quiet 'got it', Cordelia quietly opened the door, sliding in on silent feet before gently
shutting the heavy wood slab.

Oh. Oh no.

Hanging from the ceiling was a fat, bloated Worm. It had two segments, a smaller section that had it's head, and a large, swollen abdomen. It was so full and stretched that certain sections were clear, allowing one to easily see the thousands of grape-sized eggs inside it. The Worm was anchored to the ceiling with large suckers, and the abdomen hung low and fat. What looked like an ovipositor dangled from it's rear.

A quiet sob echoed.

Spying a pale, bloated form on the far side of the room, Cordelia quietly edged around the room. The Broodmaker hanging from the ceiling twitched, its head slowly turning to keep him in sight, beady eyes locked onto him with laser focus, but doing nothing else otherwise.

Reaching his destination, Cordelia's heart skipped a beat. The bloated thing was a nude Marchessa, her gut swollen to the size of a heavily-pregnant woman. Remembering the ovipositor from moments ago, it didn't take much for him to connect the dots.

"Who...are you?"

"I am Cordelia Principia. I, along with Martel, came to rescue you. But now I see that won't be possible." He won't sugarcoat the issue. From what he's heard from others, Marchessa is a smart woman. He won't disrespect her with lies.

She coughed wetly, moaning as her stomach pulsed and swayed with the action. "Don't...let Martel see."

Holding out his hand, Cordelia gripped hers, the smaller hand rough but cold and weak. "I have him puttering about outside. We're blowing this place up."

"Good."

"Can you tell me anything?"

"Not the only house. Not the only city. Worms to the north. Watch the court."

Shit. "Any last words?" She deserves to be heard. He may be no Priest, but everybody, from the highest King to the lowest beggar, has the right to have a Last Statement.

"I...want to light the fire."

Cordelia gave her request a wry smirk. "Wish granted. I regret that we hadn't met earlier, Ms. Marchessa. You would have fit in with our House quite well."

"Tell Ty I said I won."

Nodding, Cordelia got back up. Without fear, he walked right under the Broodmaker, knowing he doesn't have the right parts to fear an attack. Exiting the room, he spied Martel spreading the last of their kerosene. "What have you got left?"

The man jumped, sniffing. He took a few moments to collect himself. "Ah. Pardon. I have the Atreian Fire left. I figured we could toss it on our way out, to light the fires."

"Can you spare a few? Marchessa has a Final Request."
Martel grinned, teeth shining wetly in the sickly glow of the mushrooms, making him look demented. "She can have as much as she wants."

Grabbing a few bottles and a firestarter, Cordelia went back to Marchessa. Helping her up into more of a sitting position, he ignored the wet gush that sounded between her legs. The Broodmaker stirred, her suckered feet echoing as she slowly walked towards them. Helping Marchessa, he placed the bottles in her crossed arms, helping her flick the firestarter.

Getting up, he walked back towards the door, ducking as the ovipositor swayed and readied itself. Once in front of the door, he stopped, quick turned, and gave her a salute. "Ms. Marchessa? It's been an honor."

"You have five."

Nodding, he left. Right as he shut the door, he could hear a series of clicking hisses. "Martel," he barked. Seeing he had the others attention, he continued. "Run, bitch." And with that, they dashed out of the room.

Marchessa watched with both hatred and glee as the Broodmaker got closer. Her swordarm gripped the firestarter as hard as she could, skin tingling from the naked flame at its tip, and anticipation boiled in her blood. Seeing the Broodmaker's abdomen start to swell and flex, she herself shifted, expelling more eggs, making the Broodmaker hiss and crawl over faster.

Watching the ovipositor pull back, Marchessa bared her teeth. "Fuck you, bitch!" Flame met fuse, and Marchessa laughed.

***

The thump of fire and flames exploding caused the two men to stumble, and Martel to actually fall. Cordelia, knowing what that meant, picked up the other and slung him over his shoulder, legs pumping as he ran up the stairs. The fire ignited right when they got to the stairs for sub-basement two. They still have to clear that, sub-basement one, the basement, and get out of the first floor.

Clearing the steps for sub-basement two, more Cultist showed up. Some were already bloodied, showing they had fought their way in. Having no time, Cordelia dashed and nipped between them and streaks of spellfire. He could feel Martel return his own spells, and Cordelia heard the think *thump!* of a limb hitting the floor.

*RROOOOOOAARRRRR!* A woody explosion announced the journey of the flames. A few Cultist shrieked, turning to flee as well as the room became hotter. A few slipped, the kerosene that Martel had spread around the house earlier making things slick.

Sub-basement one. So close. Cordelia could hear screams behind him.

The basement. It was packed with people fleeing. He swung his machete, trying to make room. He nearly tripped and lost grip on Martel as he walked over a trampled body. Climbing the steps, he could feel heat.

The ground floor. More Worms and Cultist. A few other Citadelian's and Necromages were seen fighting. "RUN!"

*WHOMP!* **BOOOOOOOOOOOM!**

Just making it out of the doomed house, those fleeing were caught in the shockwave pushing out,
getting thrown far. Like a crack of thunder, stone and wood shattered, the new shrapnel creating lethal missiles. Cordelia and Martel bodily hit the wall of the house they had started out on, Martel shouting in pain as his hip snapped with a wet sound. Untangling themselves, Cordelia pushed Martel onto his back before looking up, heart stopping at the sight.

A massive, flaming mushroom cloud stood where Aoife's house used to stand. It was so bright, so hot, Cordelia could feel his skin tighten and his eyes water as they lost moisture. The houses around Aoife's were gone as well, including a few more up the road, the deep sub-basements getting destroyed taking them out as well. Debris rained down around everybody, and he could see a few bodies strewn about, some whole, others not. A few wet thumps were heard as unidentifiable meat chunks plummeted back to earth. The sickly scent of burning flesh and charred Worm was stomach churning.

"STOP!"

Looking over, Cordelia spied Tubor, the Necromancer running towards a cloaked group: Worm Cultist who managed to escape the explosion. Cordelia struggled to get up, ribs burning.

"Get the fuck over here!" Reaching out, Tubor snagged the hood of one of the Cultist, making her shriek. Gripping hard, he pulled her towards him, her screams of pain getting louder as one of her companions tried to pull her back by her arm. "You fucking cunt! How dare- shit!" Tripping as she was tugged, Tubor landed on his hands and knees. Getting back up, his jaw dropped as he saw who was fleeing. "PREW!?"

The newly-revealed blonde woman glared at him, spitting. She opened her mouth, getting ready to say something before her companion tugged her away. Frowning, she pulled her hood back up, turning to run with her fellow Cultist.

Tubor landed heavily on his rear as he watched them turn a corner. A few of his Necromancers and some Citadelians ran past, giving chase, but he doubts they will be able to catch up.

"Shit."

***

"So," Germanius pinched the bridge of his nose. He sat at a desk, with his Uncle, Asra, Lucille, and Tubor across from him. "Marchessa is deceased, Martel has a broken hip, countless other Vesuvians had died, and at LEAST one of Vesuvia's own is in thick with the Cult." A few murmured 'yes's' rang out. Germanius grunted, pulling over a pen and paper as he started listing things. "Do we have an estimate on the dead?"

"We cleared out the whole street before the operation started," Tubor sipped his wine as he spoke. He was already on his third glass, the revelation of Prew rattling him to the core. "We sustained no casualties. Only the poor bastards that were abducted, and the Cultist. Martel will be laid-up for a while, and his was the most serious of the injuries."

"Count Marchessa amongst our losses."

Everybody turned towards Cordelia. The man had been quiet up until now.

"How so?" Germanius needs to keep the records as accurate as possible. If Marchessa died before this event, it needs to be recorded as such.

"She was alive, and helped us destroy the house. She deserves to be acknowledged for her
Lucille gapped. "Wait, if she was alive, why didn't you bring her out?" She hissed, Asra trying to pull her back as she rose from her seat. "Azzy, let me go! Where is she-"

"She was the latest incubator for the Grubs. There was no way to save her. Please, do not let her be unremembered."

"Oh." Lucille sunk back into her seat. "Oh. Oh, oh, oh." She sucked in air, her hand covering her mouth as she let out a sob.

Germanius jotted Cordelia's recommendation down, making a mental note to ensure Marchessa's next-of-kin would receive a proper stipend. He would also see about having her listed as a Friend of the House.

What she did took balls. It would be disrespectful to NOT give her such a title, even if she'll never see it.

"So, who the fuck is 'Prew', and where does she live." Germanius poured himself a cup of wine, topping up Tubor's glass as well. He's got murder on his mind, but duty calls.

Asra sighed. "Prew is...Prew. She's one of the city's more well-known socialites, and is a bit of a user. She's been interested-" "-obsessed," interjected Lucille- "-obsessed," Asra corrected, "with Ty for, well, years."

Germanius groaned. "And, pray tell, just WHY is she obsessed with Rus?"

"She wants the best of the best, and will do anything she can to get it," Tubor murmured over the rim of his glass. "She gets her wealth from others, attaching herself to wealthy men as their 'kept woman', moving on when somebody better comes around." Setting his glass down, he leaned back, feeling queasy. "If a man has power, wealth, and influence, she wants him. And Ty? He has all that AND looks in spades. His rejection of her was probably like a smack in the face."

"Surly Rus wasn't the only one? You said it yourself: she went after anyone who met those requirements." Really, Germanius finds this hard to believe.

"Gemmy, do you remember Haggon?"

"What does he have to do with anything?" Where is Cordelia going with this?

"Then you'll remember that he betrayed his ENTIRE Family to House Galetia for money and an empty title. It isn't hard to imagine another doing the same."

"...but fucking WORMS!? To the Worms, 'Deli!?!"

"Hey," Cordelia held out his hands, "I'm just saying, maybe the money was running out. People have betrayed their cities over less."

"It also doesn't help that lately, many have turned away from her," Asra broke in. "Before Ty and Julian left, I ran into her. Rebuffing her seemed to have set her off. She sounded a little mad when she cursed me out. And several Nobles have been unhappy with her, as well, as of late."

"Do we know why," Germanius asked.

Asra shrugged. "Couldn't tell you. We should see her grandmother, Gilda, in the market. She may
know."

***

The market was abuzz with excitement, talk of the massive explosion that occurred this morning on everybody's lips. Bern's stall was seeing big business, with many people placing orders for later, not wanting to be out late. As it was, one of his nephews was helping him sling dough, and his sister was taking care of orders. At this rate, he'll need to ask a few more relatives to come by.

But if he thought his stall was crazy, it has NOTHING on Gilda's. The poor old crone was hobbling as quick as she could, she too having to call on her family for help. She had an army of grandchildren helping her, with two just creating the tea mixes to be sold.

"Gilda! GILDA! OI GILDA!"

Bern snorted as he heard Gilda growl. "HEY, I'M RIGHT FUCKING HERE! THE FUCK YOU WANT? ASSHOLE!"

Cordelia blinked, getting ready to insult her back when Asra cut him off. Pushing to the front of the crowd, he sat down. "Gilda! We need to speak to you! Can you spare a moment?"

"Boy, are you stupid? Look around you! But, I can spare a minute for the man next to ya. Hey there, ya fine piece if dick!" She winked at an unimpressed Cordelia.

"Not interested," he deadpanned.

She snorted. "Why are all the good ones gay or taken," she sighed, ignoring her grandchildren's admonished 'Nanna!' as she set about making a fresh pot. "Okay, Fluff'n'Stuff, what do ya want?"

"Er, can we talk elsewhere?" This is not the type of conversation that Asra wants to have in public.

"Are ya blind!? Look-"

"Ma'am." Cordelia leaned close, getting only a few short inches away from her face. "Prew was involved with the group responsible for the explosion," he whispered. "We need to talk."

"Fuck. Okay. OI! BERYL! YOUR JOHNNY ON THE SPOT!" Getting a 'yes, Nanna,' from one of her granddaughters, Gilda pushed out and away from her counter. Slotting between the two visitors, they walked towards one of the market edges. Secluding themselves in a dark alleyway, she leaned against the wall opposite the two. "Alright. Hit me."

Asra sighed, not looking forward to this. He opened his mouth- "Prew is a member of the Worm Cult, the same group who were housed in the exploded house, and they may have more bases." Asra blinked.

Well, at least he didn't have to explain it. Thank you, Cordelia.

"...what?"

"I said, Prew-," Gilda cut him off with a chop of her hand.

"I heard ya the first time. I just, uuuuuuuugh." She face-palmed, pulling her hand down her face, stopping when it was over her mouth. "Fuck. I never thought she would do this. But, it wouldn't be too out of character. Shit." She huffed, crossing her arms as she started cursing under her breath.
"Not out of character, how?"

"She probably got pissed off that the local social scene wanted nothing to do with her. She became persona non grata. Lady Schroll fanned the flames at one of her dinner parties, and things went down even further."

"How long ago did this start?" This could be the explanation Cordelia needs.

"I'd say a week or so, but it's been a long time comin'."

Cordelia sighed. "That is, much to recent."

Gilda blinked. "Ya think she's been a Cultist for longer!?"

"Considering how long ago the first Worm incident was, I'd have to say so."

Gilda was quiet for a long time, long enough for Asra and Cordelia to think she was done with them.

Imagine their surprise when she grabbed both of them by a hand, dragging them behind her. Pushing back to Bern's stall, she barked "BERN! Gimmie the Sunday Special!"

"But...it's Wednesday," Asra whispered. Cordelia was about to agree with him when Bern pushed towards them a bottle of sambuca and a coffee bean.

What is...no WAY.

Having a good suspicion as to what he was witnessing, Cordelia followed the crone as she hobbled away with her bounty, Asra trotting to keep up. They exited the market, and she led them further and further south, bypassing neighborhoods and businesses.

Entering the docks, she took them to the northernmost port wall, going down a set of stone steps. Passing several doors and metal grilles, she stopped at an unmarked door. Rapping her knuckles twice, then five times, then once, a little slat opened, a set of bushy brows and dark eyes peering out.

"The fuck y'all want?"

Gilda held out her goods. "Just a special delivery for mah boy's. Now let me the fuck in, Maul."

The man snorted, shutting the peephole before the sounds of metal on metal could be heard. Behind the door was a well-muscled man. "You got it, Boss," he grinned.

"I'm too old for this shit." He chuckled at her remark, shooting her two companions a Look.

Leading the way over and under stone passages, each one taking them deeper and deeper under the city, Gilda stopped at a final door. Pulling out a key, she unlocked the door with a flourish. "Welcome, boys, to the Undercity if Vesuvia!"

"Wait," Cordelia breathed.

"You're in the Mob!?" Gilda just cackled at Asra.
Chapter Notes

Please note that Ty goes utterly HAM near the end of the chapter, and, uh, bashes someone's skull in. Oh, and a tad bit of medical horror, because Julian just HAD to be extra.

Julian woke before the sun, and with Ty using him as a cuddle aid. He was boiling hot despite the cool night air, and he felt uncomfortably sticky. It took him a few minutes to extricate himself from the seeming amount of tentacles Ty calls arms before he could go and have a sit down on the wagons back steps.

He puffed away on a stale cigarette, deep in thought. His conversation with Ty last night was very much an eye-opener. Not only had his perception about his...whatever they are...changed, but a new vector has been introduced into their relationship.

Religion.

Religion has always been a thorny subject for him. His Papa had always been extremely lax in his veneration of whatever deity he follows (to the point that Julian himself has no idea just WHO the man worships), but Mama...Mama has always, ALWAYS, had a shrine to the Morrigan in the home, and tended to it somehow daily. Wednesday's were her holy days, and every day some sort of offering would be left.

One would think that having a mother so attentive to her Patron, he would know more, but Mama has always been secretive about it. Julian can remember asking her numerous times about it, just for her to brush him off. Even during his travels, he's learned little about it, the only new thing is that it is Aieric in origin and Old.

Ty, on the other hand, seems more intimately tied to his Patron, even if his worship is even laxer than his father's. Dating(?) someone who's god likes to pop into his head for a quick 'hello' or what have you is completely uncharted territory.

And, what does Ty mean by being 'Chosen'? Is it a hereditary thing, or just random? And what exactly does being the High Priest of Hedonism entail?

Feet restless, Julian popped back inside long enough to slip on some sandals and a shirt. At some point, Ty had rolled over, cuddling Tov in Julian's absence. Mazel lay on her back, paws up and twitching as she dreamed.

Stepping back out, Julian decided a bit of a walk would do him some good. Very few were up and stirring, outside of the night watch. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he shuffled down the line of wagons, eyes casting about. His right one felt tight, swollen. He fought not to rub it, knowing it wouldn't help.

"Hey, Julie."

Jumping in fright and nearly losing his footing, Julian looked up. Serafina had had similar
thoughts to him and was sat on her wagons steps. She had a simple nightgown on, with a thick wool shawl pulled tight around her shoulders. "Care for some company?" She patted the stairs next to her.

"Sure." Sprawling, he sighed.

"Got a lot on yer mind?"

Julian ran a hand down his face, nearly dislodging his cancer stick. "That's, putting it lightly."

"Tony said he spoke to you about what Ty did. Is everything alright?" Her voice sounded worried.

"Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I'm still a bit, uh, cheesed off, but I don't really have a lot of room to criticize."

She hummed, and even though he couldn't see it, he could feel her smirk. "It just means you've been deeper inside him than anyone else has."

"Oh GODS! SERAFINA!" She chuckled at his incredulous shout, and the way his voice broke while saying her name. "I mean, yes, that's true, and I have literally been wrist-deep-" she started cackling. "Oh no, not like that! I mean, uh, oh I'm not helping myself, am I?" As he deflated, hiding his blazing cheeks behind his hands, she just continued laughing. "Can I die?"

"Naw, ya can't. Ty ain't done with you, yet."

After a few minutes, they went quiet again. The sky had started lightening, and the local birds had started chirping.

"Hey, Serafina?"

"Hm?" Julian's voice had sounded so quiet and small.

"What does...what does this mean? For us? Culturally speaking?" Are he and Ty too different to make something that lasts? Julian would be lying to himself if he said that he didn't want something more with Ty. It would be nice to build a life together, but would Julian actually be able to accept all of Ty? And vice versa?

"You'll have to talk with bubby about that. But I can say he's over the moon about you. The fact that the two of you have had not one, but TWO fights, is all the proof I need."

Ooooooookay? "While I know many couples have their fights, why do you view our squabbles in a positive light?"

She hummed. "It means he's emotionally invested. Years ago, before he died-"

"Wait! HE DIED!?" When the fuck did that happen? And how is he standing in front of them now?

Yes, he knows Ty is still sleeping. He's being metaphoric in his verbal faffing!

"SHHHH! Pipe down," she smothered his mouth with her hand, before leaning in close. "I'm a caravan queen, and that means I hear things. Ionith, Ty's Ma,...my daughter, she," Serafina paused. "She knew the moment Ty died. The Priesthood of Hedonism is connected to itself. Until the next High Priestess takes over, the current one has a sort of bond to them. Not from birth, no, but from the moment Hedonism Chooses."
Oh. Oh NO. No. "So, Ty's mother, she -"

"Knew when her son died? Yeah." Serafina leaned back, suddenly looking old. "Our people, we
have a complex relationship between State and Religion. The two are separate but equal, with a bit
of crossover. We can't have one without the other. Ionith told the High Queen and had Ty stricken
from the books. Then, the waiting game started all over again."

Julian felt like he had just been punched in the gut. "How long did it take before everybody
knew?" It's bound to have been public knowledge that Ty was next in succession.

"A good, long time." Julian blinked. "The public finds out who the next head of the Priesthood is
when the current one stands down. Many thought Ty would be a part of it, just because of who his
mother was, but we've never had a High Priest, just High Priestesses."

The more Julian learns about Ty, the more inadequate he starts to feel. "So, how? How did the
word get out?"

"It didn't." Serafina snorted. "It was more like a conspiracy theory that got a lot of traction. Ionith
was in her late forties. By then, it had been known that a new High Priestess was being trained for
quite some time. But, Ionith never stepped down. Then, people started talking. Ty had always been
very much in the public eye, was practically raised in the limelight. Not too long after his death was a
lunar eclipse, which is when the handover usually happens. Obviously, that never happened."

Wow. WOW. Okay, then. "So, how much of an effect is this going to have? On our mission?"
On our relationship...

"Thankfully, most layman Umbra and Principia consider the theory just that: a theory. But,
enough people in positions of power and knowledge know that it's true, along with Ty just," Serafina
flung her hand out, "reappearing." She growled. "And it's THAT that caused everything to go
downhill."

Julian can understand where she is coming from. Someone who was heir to a powerful position
dies, then 'supposedly' comes back to life. Even outside of religious reasons, that can throw a major
monkey wrench into things. "Does he, know?"

"No. And neither does anyone else, including Tony. It CAN'T get out, either. It's why he's
Ostracized. It was the only way for the High Queen to protect him. If word got out that Ty came
back from the dead, the Umbra as a whole would riot and destroy him."

Shit. "And why are you telling me?" She is taking a very big risk on him.

"Because you look at him like I look at Tony."

***

Midday saw the caravan at a crossroads. They had entered the outer limits of Saturnalia's lands
only a few short hours ago, and the environment was very different from that of Neptunia.

It was...flat. But pockmarked. It looked like a god of yore took a meat tenderizer and hammered
the earth with it. The plant life in the area was mostly composed of scrub, low, deciduous bushes,
and moss. One can easily see shadows in the land signaling some sort of sinkhole, and if one took
the time to sniff, a slightly sour odor drifted on the breeze. Far off in the distance, the shadow of the
famed Saturnalian Plateau could be seen.

When they crossed the border, Serafina sent riders out. It was important to find out the conditions
of the roads; if they ended up doubling back, that could put a real crimp in their time. If they lose too much time during the season, there was a real possibility that they wouldn't be able to finish their circuit before winter set in. And that means some towns could die out. Serafina and Tony were one of the only caravans that went to some pretty remote places. Yerbansk had nearly 220,000 people living there, and they can only get their medical supplies via Serafina. A heavily industrialized mining city, located just outside of the southern pole, running out of medicine?

Perish the thought.

As they waited for the riders to come back, Ty took the time to repack and re-spell everything. As he waited for the last of their laundry to be returned, he took the opportunity to finish carving storage and size runes on two simple trunks. His idea was to sort their things, trunk them, then enable the trunks to be shrunk or expanded. Tony can't afford them horses, and physically carrying all of their gear would slow them down. Having two mini-trunks, each the size of a thimble, hanging around their necks on a cord was a good compromise.

Now if only the rune array would fucking WORK!

"Derrrrrf, c'mon you little shit, just- SON OF A WHORE!" He sucked his thumb, the etching awl he was carving with slipping and catching him. "Phuck 'ou!" A furry snout poked over his shoulder, Tov growling at the nick. "I'll be fine, girl." He leaned back against the foot of the bed with a sigh before picking back up where he left off, repositioning the heavy trunk in front of him.

Julian returned with the last of their laundry, eyebrows rising into his hairline as he saw Ty cursing up a storm and Tov barking at a carving implement. "Is, everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Just, nicked myself a few times."

Setting the basket down, Julian leaned in, spying a few small trails of blood. Ty's fingers were a bit red and swollen, and he could see a few open cuts. "Ah, let me take care of that!" Sitting down on crossed legs, he gently grabbed both of Ty's hands, bringing them close to his face and over the top of the closed trunk. "Mwah! Mwah!" He kissed both palms, transferring the shallow wounds to his own hands before they winked out of existence with a green glow. "There! You're cured!"

"Yaaaaaaaay," Ty deadpanned, causing Julian to snicker. "Anyway, GiGi and YaYa told me that they'll most likely need to detour. I'm just magicking up something for us right now.""Hmmmm," Julian peered into the trunk. Carved into the wooden bottom and sides were a variety of runes and Diagramma, but he had no idea how to read them. "What all are you, uh, doing?"

Ty grunted before blowing away a few wood shavings. "This," he pointed at a rune circle carved into the side of the trunk with his awl, "is for stability. And this," he pointed to a different section, "is for compression and expansion. And THIS," he pointed to the bottom of the trunk, "makes it bigger on the inside."

Julian went quiet. "Pull the other one, it's got bells on it." There is no way. The trunk literally looks the same and isn't doing that weird shifting thing that the breakfast tray was doing a few days ago.

"Oh yea of little faith," Ty muttered under his breath. "Watch this. Tov! Kip!" With a ruff, the pooch in question jumped off the bed, diving into the trunk. With a heavy *thump!*, she barked, sticking the tip of her nose out. Ty must have done something different to the trunk than what was done to that tray because Tov is definitely taller than the trunk, but all that can now be seen was the tip of her dark nose.
"Aaaaaaand I stand corrected! Let me jump in!" Once Tov jumped out, Julian hopped in place a few times before jumping up and plunging feet first inside, body beanpole straight. "Weeeeee argh!" A few heavy thumps and crashes floated up as the gangly man must have landed ass-first.

Ty peered inside. "You okay, Sweetheart?"

A long arm thrust up, the hand attached to it curled into a thumbs up. "I'M O-KAY!"

"Riiiiiiiiight." A quiet 'owww…' floated up, along with a whimper and a few shuffling sounds. "Today's going to be a long day."

***

Swerving around the crowd, Ty hoisted a large food basket above his head. YaYa just confirmed that the caravan was going to need to detour, the riders having returned just a short while ago. While the road itself is untouched, enough sinkholes have opened up near enough to said roads that it's possible the road wouldn't be able to support a few wagons going over it, let alone a 100+ wagon train.

Ty figures that he and Julian can have lunch, finish packing their food, and head out before the caravan. They'll be able to make better time than the train, and Ty can highlight any areas of concern. There is one more fork in the road before it goes straight towards Saturnalia, and he may possibly be able to magically reinforce the packed dirt of the road. If he can help them shave off a half-day, he'll do it.

Spying his pups lounging outside of their wagon, he treated them to some biscuits that Kitchen Matron Aria made for them. Hearing them happily crunch away on them, he pushed the door open with his hip. He reminded himself to give Julian a tonic, as he had spied the other rubbing his bad eye earlier.

"Hey babe, got us some food and I may have a potion stashed away that can help your-, uh, what's all this, then?"

Julian froze, a cotton ball and the end of a needle-tipped tube in his hands. His wide eyes scooted between the medical paraphernalia scattered over the little breakfast nook and Ty, panic clear on his face. "Ah! Um! I-, that is, I can explain?"

"That would be nice," Ty drawled as he sat the overflowing basket down, letting the door swing closed behind him. "Sooooo, I knew that there was more to your eye than just some sort of," he made a vague gesture with one hand, "catastrophic injury. What are you doing?"

"Um, well. You're not wrong. My eye is, uh, injured. It's just that, as a result, it sometimes swells with fluid." Julian put a palm over the red orb, brow furrowing as the pressure spiked with pain in beat to his heart. "I can see out of it fine, but, with how it looks-" Please buy my bullshit, please buy my bullshit, PLEASE BUY MY BULLSHIT!

"You keep it covered to not panic people. Got it." Ty wandered over, sitting on the bed. "Not that you've really worn your eyepatch consistently for the last few weeks." He picked up the other end of the long rubber tube, a nipple-like attachment stuck to the end. "And I take it that you need to drain the eye, yes?"

Julian nodded rapidly. "Yes! While I may be able to heal, if not regrow my eye if it did burst, I still haven't put that to the test- wait what!?"
"Hm?"

"My eye! You said I haven't worn my patch 'consistently' for a few weeks!? Why did nobody tell me!?" How has he not been lynched!? One of his most vivid memories of his time in Vesuvia during his research was seeing a mob descend upon and destroy someone in the market because they had red eyes. Just, the sheer amount of fear that had surrounded the crowd was deafening. He, along with two others, had retrieved what was left for testing. He was horrified to discover that the poor man only had a bad case of conjunctivitis.

"Uh, should we have?" Ty was confused. Aside from the eyes unfortunate color, Julian was fine. Plague victims aren't asymptomatic, you either have it or you don't. Throw in the short lifecycle and high mortality rate of those infected, and it is literally impossible for Julian to have the...whatever the Plague is. "You just have a fucked up eye. That's it. No other symptoms of either the Plague or anything else. For all we know, you were a dumbass kid who got a lot of black eyes, and now have a permanently broken blood vessel."

Julian deflated, slumping forward and slamming his head onto the table. "You, I, just, uuuuuugh. How you all haven't died from, like, *yersinia pestis* or something is beyond me!"

"Nah, we're careful. You just don't smell like death. An excellent indicator of infection," Ty said brightly.

"...I can't even," Julian huffed into the table. Abruptly he shot back up, ignoring Ty's snicker at the red mark on his forehead. "Anyway! I need to drain my eye of fluid before we get too far." He hunched slightly, looking down. "It can, uh, look a little disturbing. Do you, want to leave?"

Ty snorted. "Babe, you've been fist-deep in me," he raised a brow as Julian choked. "I'll be fine."

"Kay! Okay! Just, uh, don't say I didn't warn you!" Julian shook his head, trying to shake off a very different visual than what Ty was probably thinking. Picking back up the rubber tube, he finished wiping the needle down. He pulled over a clean woven towel, flicking it open. Setting the tube down on it, he also set a squat, clear glass bottle, a rubber stopper, some cotton balls, a few odds and ends, and another bottle of antiseptic.

Picking up the end of the tube with the nipple, he slid a circular cage over the end, before snapping that over the empty bottle. Inspecting the other end, he held the short needle up to the light, eyes squinting. It was a very short needle, only a millimeter or so long. A flat disk attached it to the hose. Happy with what he saw, Julian wiped it down one last time with an antiseptic-soaked cotton ball.

Straightening, he looked straight ahead, and, coincidentally, right at Ty. He took a few deep breaths, eyes widening, before sticking the needle into the SIDE of his eye!

**WHAT THE F**CK!? "BABE! What-!"

Julian shushed him, hands grazing the table as he felt about for something. Finding the glass bottle, his fingers did something near the connection before he sighed. His shoulders relaxed, and Ty could see a faint shadow start draining down the tube. A few seconds later, Julian leaned back against the wagon wall, eyes still wide open.

Ty thought it was creepy as *f*uck. "Babe? *What the f*uck...?"

Julian shushed him. "Just, give me a few. I, uh, yeah," he trailed off.
"O-, okay."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Ty noticed the small glass bottle that *everything* was draining into slowly filling up. The weirdly thick-n-thin liquid reminded Ty of unset gelatin or frogspawn. It was mostly clear, with a few 'clouds' and 'veins' of red and green.

The entire time, Julian stared straight ahead. Unblinking.

Once the bottle only had a few millimeters of space left, Julian pulled the fucking needle(!) out of his eye, blinking rapidly to remoisten the dried-out membrane. Holding the tube up, he pinched the rubber, pushing the fluid still inside down into the bottle. Once finished, he detached the hose from the bottle, using the rubber stopper to close it. Afterward, he pulled both the needle and nipple attachments off the hose. "Can you get me, um, a bowl? I need to clean my things."

Once he got one, he poured some antiseptic inside. He then submerged the hose and attachments, letting everything soak as he started clearing his space. Once finished, he put the nipple back on, forcing antiseptic down the hose and through the nipple. He repeated the action with the needle tip, making sure everything was clean. Dumping the used antiseptic, he then rinsed with cool, fresh water. Drying everything, he put it all (including the now-full glass jar) away in a hard-sided little case, snapping it shut before sliding it into a bag.

"Sooooo, what did you want to know?"

Ty was quiet for a few moments. "Do I really need to know?"

Julian blinked in confusion. "Wha- I mean, no? Yes? You can-"

"What I mean is, do I HAVE to know? Will you telling me the why and how have an actual impact on our journey? Your health? Anything at all? Or is it just something you have to periodically do?"

"I, that is," Julian floundered. Ty is *literally* the only other person on the *planet* to know, let alone have seen, what he has to do. Logically speaking, Ty should be losing his mind over this. "Um, no. I only have to do this about every four to six months, and I know when it needs to be done when my eye feels...full? Tight?"

"So, my not knowing will not have a negative impact?"

"Um, no."

"Okay then," Ty chirped. Getting up, he went back to the basket. After a bit of fumbling, he passed over a thin flatbread piled high with some sort of stew-y rice dish. "Eat up! We leave as soon as I pack up the food!"

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"Okay, now. You boys be good, yeah?" Serafina stood on her toes to plant big, wet kisses on both of Ty's cheeks, doing the same to a blushy Julian. "I don't want a letter asking me to post your bail!"

"*That only happened once!*" Both men stopped, looking at the other in unison. "Wait! When did you-" Julian pointed at Ty.

"What did you-!" Serafina snickered. "Looks like you boys have some stories to tell, hm?"
Tony picked both youngsters up in a bear hug, Ty wiggling like a cat who wants down while Julian melted at the feel of human contact. "In contrast to my wife, please, ask me for bail. It'll give me something to laugh about."

"Gee, thanks GiGi. I love you, too." Tony cuff ed his grandson about the head before passing over a bag full of coins.

"Now, where's my hug!?" Serafina opened her arms, fingers making 'come here' motions. Accepting a backbreaking one from Ty, she turned to Julian. "Well!?"

"Who am I to say no to a lady?" Hearing a few guffaws, he, too, bent over to pick her up in a hug. After standing for a few seconds, he turned, running away. "Quick, Ty! I have her! Let's flee while we can!" The thumps of two other sets of feet chasing him and Serafina's loud laughter filled his ears. Swiftly being caught, he relinquished his 'hostage', a few more hugs and kisses being passed.

"BYE YAYA! BYE GIGI!" As the two men walked off, waving back, Serafina and Tony waved back.

"Bye boys! Have fun storming the castle!"

"WAIT WHAT!?" Serafina snickered at the mildly panicked look on Ty's face.

"Do you think they'll make it," Tony leaned down, speaking from the side of his mouth as he continued to wave.

"Not a chance, but we should be supportive. BYE, BOYS!"

***

The two quickly left the caravan behind, long legs eating up the ground. The earth was a pale, golden color and beaten down, signaling just how long it’s been used. The ground on either side was either scraggly scrub, open pits, or mossy. Far in the distance, a thick mist floated, obscuring the broken plateau known colloquially as 'The Gates of Saturnalia'.

The girls were having fun, tearing back and forth along the road and having a few play fights. It still shocks Julian just how fast they were, a dog of that size, in his opinion, just shouldn't zoom about like they do.

Every once in awhile, Ty would flick his fingers, tossing his magic into the ground. While most of the sinkholes they've seen have been a decent distance from the road proper, some still are a bit too close for comfort. So far, the road has been spared.

Spying a furry butt sticking up, Ty whistled. "Maz! What ya doin'?" An excited bark prompted him to come closer. Stepping off the road (Julian following close behind), he pushed through the low, scratchy bushes and razor grass to see what's got her so distracted. "Ah! A den!"

"Hm?" Julian peaked over a muscled shoulder. Mazel was nosing about a semi-subterranean den. A fair amount of bones were scattered about it, along with a few scraps of fur and hide. The bones that he could see (and weren't broken for their marrow) were large. "What type of animal do you, ah, think lives here? Or was brought down?"

"Eeeech, I'd say some sort of wolf. And this looks like the remains of an elk." With a quiet 'hup', Ty hopped in, curious. While it smelled musky, it was also cold. "At this time of day, the owner is probably out hunting or walking their territory. For right now, it's safe. Come into my hole."
"Why Ty, really? All you had to do was ask!" Julian laughed at the flat look he got from the other, braying out a 'hawrharhar!' before hopping in.

Bending over, Julian picked up one of the many animal skulls scattered about. Bringing it into the light, he could see it must have been some sort of deer or elk. It was also pretty ‘fresh’, with the jaw still hanging onto the skull.

“Julian...put it down,” Ty muttered.

“I will, I will,” he muttered, twisting and turning the mass of bone. “Just, trying to get a closer look at these scratches, is all.”

“Yeah, well, we don't have all day, Sweetheart.”

Julian sighed. “You're right. It will be, hmmm, difficult to try and figure out anything anyways.”

“...whyyyyyyyyy?” Ty was suspicious. He knows that tone.

“Well, I guess you could say it's because, aside from you,” with a bit of quick fiddling, Julian had his fingers and thumb rearranged, “I have no body,” he moved his fingers, making the deer skull 'speak'.

“...I want a divorce.”

***

After a few more hours of walking, the mist hanging in the air broke, giving Julian his first, awe-inspiring look at the famed Gates of Saturnalia. The plateau jutted up into the air, the sheer rocky face hurling straight up for hundreds, if not thousands of feet. On either side of the road, the cliff stretched, quickly disappearing over the horizon. The road ran through a naturally-occurring chasm, and at some point (far in the past) the stone on either side of the chasm entrance had been carved. While greatly weathered away, one could still pick out where the faces were, and that it looked like one of the figures had had their arm raised at one point, possibly in a salute, but the large, broken boulders dancing away from the figure's base were evidence enough of what happened.

Julian felt very small. He didn't even come up to the top of an eroded foot. He can't even imagine how these could have been built in modern times, let alone hundreds, if not thousands of years ago.

"Ty?"

"Hm?" The Citadelian was occupied with their map, for he was certain that there had been a small outpost here at one point. Is he remembering wrong?

"What do you, you know? About this place?" While he was starting to get a crick in his neck, Julian couldn't look away. A loud *CAW!* , followed by the sound of flapping wings, signaled Malak climbing the currents before coasting around the megaliths.

"Not much," Ty closed the map with a *snap!* "Academics think it may have been built by the ancient Tenatic peoples. A few smaller settlements of theirs had been located in the area, but the stone is too weathered to tell if it's their work. Add in the fact that, after they fell, the local Phoretics took over Tenatic lands. For the most part, at least."

Julian whistled. That could put these carvings to being over 8,000-years old. "How do you know so much!?" It was mind-boggling how Ty had so much knowledge about so many different things. At times, it makes Julian feel, well, stupid.
"It was part of my job. Both for the Citadel and as the Warlord son of the High Priestess of Hedonism. Some things...were not fun to learn."

They continued walking, the air temperature dropping as they were swallowed up in the long shadow cast by the Plateau. The chasm was narrower than the road originally was, going from nearly twenty feet wide down to about half of that. It was going to take some time to walk through, seeing that the Plateau had a distinct, stretched incline. It was easily going to be a few miles before they popped back out. Entirely possible that they would end up having to camp either inside the chasm or just outside of it.

The girls were having fun, though. All sorts of new smells to investigate and hidey-hole's to discover. Tov, the more cautious of the two, was carefully sniffing the area around her point of interest before sticking her nose in. Mazel, on the other hand, just dove in face first. She already got a few squeaks and nips for her audacity, including a startled fieldmouse using her muzzle as a launching pad, flying over her head as it squealed.

The sun had started setting by the time they cleared the chasm, and they were treated to a set of beautiful colors stretching across the night sky. Just to their right were a few empty buildings, a stable, and what looked to be a small inn. They looked empty and like they hadn't been used for a few years. But, the roofs were still in shape, and the buildings themselves were untouched, even if a little musty.

"Strange…"

"Hm?" Julian looked up, hands stilling from their work of unbinding his bedroll. They were in the stable, looking to kip in the old (but clean) stalls. It was closer to the road, and they wouldn't have to worry about spiders or rats nibbling on them like they would in the inn.

Ty looked over everything with a critical eye as he set up Wards around their makeshift campsite. "This used to be a fairly busy road. One of the main trade routes between Neptunia and Saturnalia. The fact that this is abandoned is weird."

Julian rolled out his roll next to Ty's. "Maybe, because of the sinkholes, nobody wants to chance it?"

"Maybe."

***

After a simple dinner, the two had pulled their rolls towards the end of the stall they would be using for the night. It was cool, but dry, with an occasional breeze. Further down the road, the faint glow of a city could be seen. Hopefully, they'll be entering Saturnalia by early afternoon tomorrow.

Julian was puttering about the small campfire, hanging a kettle to boil. He was putting together a few cups of tea for Ty and him to unwind with before bed.

Currently, said man was off relieving himself. And confused as fuck. Thisssss...empty road, and inn, were just twigging too many things. Ty knows that Saturnalia would have no problem either replacing or reinforcing the road they used to get here. They have the money to spare, after all, like Vesuvia, Saturnalia is a trade nexus. Not nearly as large as Vesuvia's, but still, Saturnalia is sitting pretty. Throw in that proposed aerodrome, and she would have even more money from airships.

When's that supposed to be done, anyway?

Finished with his business, Ty put himself away before walking back to their little camp. Turning
the corner of the inn, he could hear Julian 'ooch!'-ing and 'ow!'-ing, presumably from burning himself on the kettle. The girls were chewing on biscuits near the fire, and both of their bedrolls were turned down. It was so domestic, Ty was smitten.

"Here," Julian passed over a mug, the scents of chamomile, vanilla, and almond wafting up.

"Thanks." Ty sipped his piping hot tea, watching the play of light on Julian's face as the other went to fuss over Mazel and Tov, petting large heads and rubbing furry bellies as he cooed.

Julian would look nice in Principia Red.

***

It was much cooler, nearly cold when they woke the next morning. Julian was flagging a bit, constantly waffling between wakefulness and sleep. He doesn't know why, he's been sleeping VERY well since…

Ty woke from his Worm attack. And, every night that they're together, he sleeps well, too.

So, why couldn't he sleep?

The points moot, now. Ty wants to get into the city before nightfall, and Julian agrees with him. They had completed one of the more difficult legs of their journey, and Julian knows that the next one will involve going across the sea, and he's as excited as a child on the morning of the Winter Solstice to get back on a ship.

After packing up and resetting their site, they had a walking breakfast; a few slabs of beef jerky, some nuts, and dried fruit.

Yum.

They made good time, the temperature giving them an incentive. They want hot food and a warm bed to crash in.

"So," Julian mumbled around a mouthful of dried meat. "What'r we doing after Saturn'lia?"

"Well, I wanna see if Count Morghauss and his Court have heard anything about the Worm Cult. Usually, if they pop-up in one place, they're in others."

Swallowing, Julian squinted his face as he thought. "But, well, the Emperor's fostered a, uh, 'culture of distrust'," Julian made air quotes, "between the city-states, yeah? Wouldn't they do everything possible to keep word from getting out about such a situation?"

"Yeah. BIG TIME. And after the whole 'Intercity Exchange' debacle, the states are even less inclined to reach out to each other. Toss in some good ol'-fashioned grudges and you have a lot of cities 'not talking to each other'."

Frowning, Julian took a swig from his waterskin. "Hm. And hows the relationship between Vesuvia and Saturnalia?"

"No fucking clue." Julian blinked at Ty's declaration. "Before Lucio got barbequed, it was a weird combo of frenemies. Morghauss is similar to old Lucy-boy in that he's a bit of a fop who likes to party and brag. What Lucio had on him, though, was that he would put his money where his mouth is. Lucio says 'Imma build an AMAZING harbor, like nothing the world has ever seen!'? BAM! The harbor gets overhauled. Lucio says 'The army needs to be better trained and equipped!'?"
WH-BAM! The Vesuvian military can go toe-to-toe with the Imperial army, and even outnumbered nearly 8-to-1, will have a real good chance to hold the fucking line."

Julian blinked, incredulous. "But, but, the sewers!? The infrastructure!? Why is everything garbage, now!?" It makes no sense. If Lucio had poured a lot of money into the city, why is it now falling apart? The harbor itself is fine, but the slums? The Flooded District?

"Couldn't tell ya. Maybe things happened after he ashed, and with Nadia ALSO being down for the count, that left the Courtiers in control and, well, they suck."

"Hmmmm. And, Morghauss? What's he like?"

"Spoiled, stupid, party boy. Saturnalia, unlike Vesuvia, is a traditionally-ruled city. Morghauss has been the ruling family for over 500-years, with each new, MALE, successor, being crowned 'Count Morghauss'. It's lead to a family culture of sloth and indulgence. Most of the effective rulers are the women they marry. From what I remember, the current Count Morghauss married The Manajay, Hildebrandt Von Eckenmeier. She's the only reason the city is still up and running."

"If...if the Morghauss' are that pampered and lazy, leaving their wives to do all the work, then why marry one? A Morghauss, I mean. That sounds like it's more trouble than it's worth."

"Because everybody knows that the wife is the real power behind the throne. While The Morghauss is off galavanting about and being a general waste of space, The Morghauss er is running the joint, making the decisions, and getting shit done." Ty smirked, chuckling. "It's not too unusual for The Morghausser, once she has delivered the next heir, to have The Morghauss whacked, so she doesn't have to put up with his bullshit."

Julian whistled. "One would think that a trend such as that would be noticed."

"Pfffi! That's asking for too much, babe."

***

"Um, Ty?"

"Let me guess, you have a 'bad feeling' about this?"

"...yes."

"Preaching to the choir."

They had made great time, getting to the city before sunset. Tired legs and sore feet were the rewards for such hard work, but the thought of hot baths and warm beds kept them going.

Things were fine until they got within a few miles of the main city gate. Most of this area is residential, packed full of houses, little shops, the occasional garden or farm plot. Places such as this were usually lively, filled with hustle and bustle.

It was...dead. Very few were out, and this was the dinner hour. Where streets should be packed with people hurrying home or heading to the pub, only hunched, cloaked figures could be seen, each skittering about. Windows that should be lit with the dinner fires were dark and cold, and many buildings looked, listless?

What the FUCK happened? "Jules, do you know if the Plague got this far?" It was the only logical explanation he could think of.
"No. I mean, it didn't," Julian peered about under his lashes, and gave a surreptitious sniff. "The Plague was fairly unique to Vesuvia, for reasons I still don't know. And, uh, there doesn't seem to be anything else going on here. The streets don't smell of death."

Continuing on, they eventually made it to the gates, feeling eyes on them the whole time, but no matter where they looked, they couldn't find the source. If it wasn't for the fact that Saturnalia was a hub for rail travel, Ty would have just tried to push through.

The gate guards gave them a horrible case of stink-eye, and Ty was worried for a moment that Julian's forged papers wouldn't be up to snuff, so he had to hold back his sigh of relief when they were let through. The heavy iron-bound door closed with a loud clunk behind them, locking them into a city that looked even emptier than the area outside.

The city was...dead. As Ty looked around him, incredulous to the fact that they couldn't even see a beggar, Julian was on high alert. While possibly not as well-traveled as Ty, he's definitely been to sketchier areas. Right now, he's being heavily reminded of the slums of the Golden City, the capital of Song Wen Bai. The seat of Emperor Jun Sau Ta had a strict curfew, with actual groups of soldiers who enforced it in the poorer areas. These same streets looked and felt the same as those.

Throbbing feet moved quickly, but it was still some time before they could find an inn. Like much of the city that they've seen, it was dark, dank, and tired, and Ty nearly had a coronary at the quoted price for a night in.

"100 fucking gold!? What-"

Julian wrestled a hand over the other's mouth. "We'll take it! C'mon, Ty, pay the man."

Deciding to just go with it, Ty did as he was told. "Our food had better be fresh, or don't bother with it at all," he breathed into the innkeeper's face. He only felt satisfaction when he could smell something acrid, the innkeeper paling at the glare the much taller man shot him.

Minutes later, two men and two dogs were settled in the largest room available, and it wasn't even worth 10 gold. Dust covered everything, cobwebs hung in the corners, and the windows were covered in such a thick layer of grime, you couldn't even see the torch lighting the street right outside. Throw in the rickety nature of the furniture, and Ty was ready to burn the place down on principle.

Tossing his rucksack onto the bed, a large plum of dust exploded, sending Ty hacking. "Fuck this shit." In seconds, he stripped the bed, rolling out his bedroll. "This is fucking bullshit."

"I agree," Julian murmured, untying his bedroll. "Lets just, just go to sleep and get out of here as early as possible."

The innkeeper interrupted, his knocking heralding the arrival of their food. Ty only opened the door long enough to snag the tray, shooting another death glare at the man before slamming the door. Ty sniffed, "at least the food is fresh and plentiful."

"I want to say no," Julian cut a slice of mutton, popping the slightly greasy bit into his mouth. "But, now the question is, is Morghauss still in power? Better yet, has the Worm Cult already dug itself in?"

"No fucking idea, babe. No. Fucking. Idea."
Both men slept horribly, never able to do more than doze. The mattress was also shit, making it hard to get comfortable as is.

Seeing people moving about outside, they decided some exploration was in order. They split up briefly, with Julian offering to restock them while Ty headed to the palace, to try for an Audience.

While there was much more activity in the daylight, it was very hurried. Aside from standard haggling, Julian saw very little socializing. No groups of harried mothers standing on the sidewalks, swapping gossip. No coolies shooting the shit as they ferried their wares on their backs.

No kids running around.

His attempts at chatting up shopkeepers and stall owners yielded him little info. Everyone knew instantly that he wasn’t a local, and clammed up, rudely refusing to dicker on prices no matter how much he schmoozed. Several times, he was told to either buy or fuck-off. Numerous times, he saw members of the local guard eyeing him suspiciously. Julian decided to cut his losses when two started making their way over to him. At some point, he ran into Ty, and the man looked like he had a thunderstorm brewing on his face.

"Darling?"

Ty took a deep breath, holding it briefly before letting it out slowly. "Sorry, babe. Just, really fucking frustrated."

Linking their arms, Julian started steering them back towards their inn. "What's going on?"

"The train that leads out of here, and over the mountain, is down. Something knocked out a section of aerorail, sounds like a possible mine shaft collapse. We'll have to hoof it through an old section of the mines, and that's AFTER climbing up part of the mountain."

Julian winced. "Shit. How long is that going to extend our travel?"

Muttering, Ty dragged a hand down his face. "Should only be a few days. Less than a week. Just, ugh." He shook himself. "It all depends on the state of the mines and caves."

Julian sighed. "Well, there's nothing for it. And, were you able to get an Audience?"

"No. Count Morghauss is out 'touring' the city." The sarcasm in Ty's voice was thick enough to cut and serve with a cup of tea. "I heard him a few streets away. Carrying on like it was a fucking parade."

Indeed, Julian had heard snatches of trumpets and loud announcements, but the markets were just busy enough that it was difficult for him to make anything out. He hopes that the Count was surveying the city, to see how it was doing in such a tough time, but from how Ty had described him, he doubts Morghauss even cares.

"MAKE WAY FOR YOUR COUNT, MORGHAUSS THE MAGNIFICENT!"

'Morghauss the Magnificent?', the two men mouthed to each other before scurrying off to the side. A full contingent of the Saturnalian Palace Guard was marching through the crowd, surrounding a plannquin being borne on the backs of slaves!? Perched atop of the ornately carved, painted, jeweled, and padded monstrosity was a man who, at one time, would have been quite handsome. He was much like Lucio, in that he was blond and blue-eyed, but that was where the
Count Morghauss was not aging well. Only just over 40, the man had indulged in food and drink far too often. His face was the ruddy red of an alcoholic, his nose particularly bulbous with broken blood vessels. Even from their distance, Ty and Julian could also see the cast of jaundice, with his eyes a particularly vivid yellow. Add in a large gut sagging low over his groin, and it was a wonder that the man could even locate his penis for the purpose of relieving himself. And...was his hair bleached!? The strands were a very brassy color, and the hair itself looked fried.

Julian has never seen someone who looked so much, yet so different, to Lucio. It was surreal.

"My people," Morghauss' thin, reedy voice rose above the crowd. "Seeing you all, working so hard, brings a tear to my eye!" Here, the man snorted loudly, the sound of mucus being sucked from his nose and down his throat making both Ty and Julian's stomachs roll. "Oh, if only my dear, dear wife could be here now. BUT REJOICE! FOR A NEW WING TO THE PALACE HAS BEEN ERECTED! NOW, WE MAY.-" Morghauss cut himself off, his eyes glued to the two men who fairly towered over the crowd.

Eyes going wide, Morghauss sat straight up. "You! Principia! GUARDS, SEIZE THEM!"

"FUCK THAT NOISE! Julian, run!" Ty spun, shoving Julian before him.

"What-"

"I'm expensive! Just book it!"

The crowd parted, making it easier for long legs to eat cobbles. While they quickly left the guards behind, more started pouring out of the side streets, sending the common rabble into a panic. The two twisted and spun around swords and spears flung out, trying to stop their escape.

It only took Julian tripping over a stray dog to see their capture. Not able to leave him behind, Ty went back, just to be tackled by several guards. Bellowing, he whipped around, one muscled leg catching and tossing an unlucky guard through the air. Jerking his shoulders, he heaved another over his front.

Hearing a shout, Ty looked up, spying Julian pinned to the ground, on his chest as one guard wrestled his arms to his back, another aiming his blackjack for a head strike.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Bellowing, Ty charged at the guard getting ready to beat Julian's head in, tossing aside several of the guards who were clinging to him. Catching the horrified guard with a shoulder tackle, he sent the smaller man flying. The one who was trying to tie Julian up had slipped, and he scrambled to get up and away from the man-shaped monster with the golden eyes.

Snarling, Ty grabbed a booted foot, yanking back hard, pulling a frightened scream from his prey. Heaving, he flung up and behind him the wailing guard, and amidst the man's sniveling begging flung him down.

With a sound like an egg cracking on the pavement, the guard's head was dashed open on the ground with a hysterical shriek. Grey brain matter and cerebral fluid sprayed the ground, fanning away from the impact site. Slamming the new corpse against the ground a few more times for good measure, Ty then threw the body into a group of its compatriots. They scattered after the now-headless man impacted them, screaming over the fact that Hanny now had no head.
Julian was still face-down on the ground, fingers braided over his head. He could hear the primeval bellow Ty had let out, and the feel of the air around him had become cloying and thick. He knows Ty is standing right over him, and the man is clearly a better brawler than he. He's just going to stay right here and not MOVE.

A fleshy crack, followed by a spray of liquid, made Julian jerk. Someone's waterskin must have torn, and his right side got some of the off spray. More squabbling and shrieking followed.

"EEGHRK!" Fingers had caught his belt, and who he knows to be Ty hauled him up. With a gentle swing and a toss, Julian flew through the air before he landed on his feet, stumbling into a run.

"RUN AND DON'T STOP!" A loud *CRACK!* followed Ty's shout.

Arms and legs pumping, Julian ran. Behind him, he could hear Morghauss and others shouting, the Count in glee and others in horror. Tearing around a corner and down an alleyway, Julian started making plans.
Keeping tight hold of his folders, Germanius walked down the hallway of Nadia's wing. Very few were present aside from several members of the military, and they eyed anyone present with wariness.

He doesn't blame them. Somehow, Nadia had been possessed by something, and nobody knows how. There is no way to know how long she had been being influenced, and with the fully confirmed re-emergence of the Worm Cult, nobody is taking chances.

Approaching her door (that was flanked by four soldiers, including a Sergeant), he knocked. After a few moments, Portia poked her head out. With a slight smile, she let him in.

Shutting and locking the door, Portia led him through the Receiving room and into the Drawing room. "How is everybody?"

Germanius hummed. "As well as can be expected. It's suspected that Martel will need surgery on his hip, but they need to get the swelling down. The Fleshcrafter's from Rus's surgery have been recalled, but Martel may have to retire."

"Oh no." Portia feels sorry for him. Martel has always been polite and kind towards her. "He will be able to walk again, yes?"

"We estimate so, but he may require a cane. His wife was...distraught when she was notified."

Reaching the door to Nadia's bedchamber, Portia motioned for Germanius to stay. Stepping in, he could hear a few murmurs before Portia returned. "She can see you."

Entering, Germanius was surprised to see Siobhan sitting at the Countess's bedside. Nadia was currently lounging against a mound of pillows, and off on a side table was a full tea service. "Countess..."

Nadia looked exhausted, but she still mustered the energy to give a slight smile. "Germanius, it is nice to see you. I just wish it was under better circumstances. Please," she gestured languidly to a spare wing back chair, "sit. I'm sure there is much I need to be updated on."

"Indeed." The large man settled, accepting a hot cup of tea from Siobhan with a quiet 'thanks'. "Much of what has happened is a bit, disturbing. I do not mean to sound rude, but," he turned towards Siobhan, "I have to ask that you leave. Portia as well. The less who know the better. I hope you understand."

"Aye, dinnae ye worry. Me'n Pash'a will be having a sittie in th' next room."

After the door closed behind the two women, Germanius sighed with a curse. "Fuck me, but this is exhausting." He ran his hand over his head, and for once he didn't have his characteristic Mohawk up. Instead, the strip of hair was braided down; he has too much work and has had too little sleep to have the energy needed to primp as he would.

"While I wouldn't be so crass, I agree. What happened?"

It took Germanius a while to explain, and by the end of it, Nadia was breathing heavy, trying to hold back tears of frustration. "So," she choked. "For weeks, possibly months, my citizens have been abducted and used as...hosts," she spat the word, "for the Worm Cult. The house they had been
using is now no more, along with an entire residential block, possibly along with two more. And there may be more bases."

"Yes."

Nadia growled. "And myself? What was that thing that was in me?"

Opening one of his files, Germanius passed over a few pieces of parchment. "It was an Anchor. A thing to tie a supernatural entity to a person. Usually, a person receives an Anchor as part of a Bargain, but they are also seen in cases of possession, as well."

She shuffled through the papers, eyes narrowing as she studied graphs and charts, only half-way understanding what they said. "So, what was it? Possession? I do not remember making any sort of Bargain."

"Cordelia is still studying the beetle, but he theorizes that someone cast something on you. It could have been through a gift or something you ate. As for how long you may have been influenced…” Germanius shrugged. "It's nearly impossible to tell."

Grunting, Nadia tossed the papers aside. "And the Worms? Do we know anything new!?"

A very dark grin pulled at Germanius's lips, baring his teeth. "Oh, Cordelia is currently...interrogating a captive. He should be able to tell us more in a few hours."

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Cordelia sat at a simple but sturdy wooden table, across from a bound Cultist in a spare dank and drab room in the dungeon. It was the one he left alive during the raid. To be honest, he had forgotten about him, but it seems one of the others had dragged him out before the house went boom.

Hearing a groan, he straightened up. Sitting ramrod straight, his folded hands together on the table in front of him. He watched as the Cultist moved and shifted, wiggling as they tried to move their bound arms. It took longer than Cordelia would have thought for the man to come to, leaving the Principia with a feeling that this man would have little to tell him.

"Wha...what's going on? Where am I?" Damn, but he sounded young. Cordelia would peg him as being nearly Tybalt's age.

Just some young, dumb man.

But not young enough to not know right from wrong. "Rise and shine, boy. I have some questions for you; about you and your friends. Answer, and you may just get some leniency in your sentence." A lie.

Cordelia could see the Cultist's lips twist in a sneer, his face still shadowed by his hood. "Tch, you don't scare me, old man. Look at you. You look like some, some scholar," he spat. The youngster's bravado left him at the low chuckle his comment got him, and a chill ran up his spine at the shadowed look he got.

"Oh, the follies of youth." Standing, Cordelia took a few slow, measured steps around the table, one hand coming up to pet the still-hooded head of his prey. The quiver the Cultist gave made something sit up, deep inside Cordelia. "You were a bad, bad boy, weren't you? Running around with such a group as you did."

"Heh, yeah? You jealous, old- ARGH!!"
"Hmmm," Cordelia tilted his head as he looked down, the hood of the Cultist robe and several brown hairs clenched in his fist from when he ripped back the covering. "Just as I expected. Young, stupid but not too stupid, and full of SHIT." Huffing, he pushed the Cultists head to the side sharply as he walked back to his chair. Throwing himself into it, he dug into his robes, pulling out a cigar case. Pulling one out, he snipped off the end before lighting it. Holding it between his lips, he inhaled, the glowing tip blazing. Holding in the perfumed smoke, he then exhaled, blowing it all into the Cultist's face. He grinned before setting the cigar back into his mouth, gripping it with his molars as he pushed it to the side. "So, what do you know?"

"What's this? Sounds like an interrogation from some knock-off penny dreadful. You'll have to do better than that!" The Cultist cocky grin disappeared and he gulped as Cordelia's grin turned into something more animalistic.

"I was waiting for you to say that." Bouncing to his feet, Cordelia twirled away his over robe as he walked to a side table pushed to the far back corner of the room. Settling the robe onto a stand, he was left in a close-cut sleeveless vest, showing long arms packed with wiry muscle. He could hear the cultist gulp as he turned, having scooped up a rolled canvas case. Walking back, he tossed the case onto the table with a negligent twist of the wrist. A heavy, metallic clunk was heard as it impacted the wood before skidding a few inches. Sitting back down, Cordelia untied the canvass ties before rolling it open with a flourish. Gleaming metal instruments shone in the light of the candelabra hung around the room.

The Cultist blinked, wide brown eyes darting between Cordelia and the case. He gulped, before pasting on a shaky grin. "What-, what're you going to do, huh? Clean my teeth?" He shrieked as a large cleaver embedded itself into the table in front of him, Cordelia's hand still wrapped around the handle.

"Here's how it's going to go: I ask you a question, and you answer. If you lie or refuse me, I start chopping. We'll start at the fingers. I'm partial to the pinkies."

The Cultist went pale. "You-, you wouldn't!"

"Oh, I would. And I AM." Pulling back the cleaver, Cordelia leaned in. "Now, who is your leader?"

"FUCK YOU!"

Cordelia sighed, standing back up. "They're always defiant, until the first chop. Oh well." Coming back to the Cultist side, he set aside the clever before unt wing one of the Cultist's arms. A brief wrestling match ensued before Cordelia got a good grip. Holding tight to the other's wrist, he slammed the arm down onto the table, pressing the hand palm-down. Squeezing to just this side of breaking, the Cultist had no choice but to spread his hand open, lest it becomes more painful.

Cordelia picked back up the clever, raising and lowering it as he took aim. "Now, I'm only going to ask one. More. Time." He squeezed the Cultist's wrist again, not stopping until he could hear and feel bones start grinding. "Who. Is. Your. Leader?"

The Cultist spat in his face.

Wiping the saliva away from his cheek, Cordelia grinned. "Don't say I didn't warn you." Raising the clever, he brought it down.

*SNAP!* **THUNK!*
The Cultist screamed in anguish, voice high and sounding like a horse at a glue-rendering butchery, blood jetting from the stump that used to be his pinkie. The detached digit rolled off to the side, twitching and spasming as it lost its connection to the nervous system.

"You wanna try that again?" Sniveling was his answer. "Who leads you?"

The Cultist hiccuped a few times, snorting as tears and mucus ran down his face. "Olhn! His name is Olhn," he squealed.

Cordelia grinned. "Now we're getting somewhere."

***

Covered in blood, Cordelia lit up another cigar, sighing as he sat down and kicked his feet up onto the bloody table. He folded his hands behind his head, puffing away as he looked at the fresh corpse across from him.

_Stupid fucking kid._ The Cultist was still upright, if only because he was tied to his chair. His eyes were wide and unseeing, his head lolling to the side. Dried tears and mucus caked his face, and vomit was crusted on his chin and chest, the pain of his torture at times causing him to throw up. On the table, the other three fingers and thumb rested, detached from his hand. Said hand was also detached from his arm, and his arm was severed at the elbow. Pooled around the base of his chair was a large puddle of blood.

"Pft. Dumbass. Should have just told me and saved yourself all the trouble." The door opened, and Cordelia turned, grinning. "Hey there, Gemmy!"

Germanius grunted, sidestepping blood spatter as he walked in. He wrinkled his nose, not able to understand how Cordelia can just lounge around while utterly covered in blood. Germanius would be itching like crazy and looking for the nearest shower. Coming to a stop next to his uncle, he looked at the state of the Cultist and table. "So, what do we now know?"

Cordelia closed his eyes briefly, letting out a long breath as he did so. "Nearly a third of the Noble families and about a fifth of the merchant class have somebody somehow affiliated with the Worm Cult." He grunted as Germanius hissed. "Same. I've got the info doodled down over there," he gestured with his fingers over to the far table. "But, the head of the Cult is some buster named Olhn. Prew is also often at his side, but what her actual role is was not known by this lowlife," he kicked the legs of the Cultist, hard enough to topple the body and its chair to the floor.

Germanius picked up the sheaves of parchment Cordelia had pointed to, frowning at the smears of blood he saw on them. "Heh, Nadia is not going to like this."

"Hmph. Just means that you can show off to Nadia that you'd be a viable partner. Take on most of the load, and you _maaaaay_ get an invite to her bedchamber."

"Don't be so crass."

***

Mercedes and Melchior whined and whimpered happily as a giggling Belial scrubbed them down. The boy shrieked when one of the dogs turned and slobbered all over his face, nearly toppling over and out of the tub.

While Belial was busy exploring some of the gardens with his brother, Tybalt, the two excited dogs ended up running into a mud puddle. He ended up joining them as well, and Tybalt decreed
that none of them would get dessert until they got squeaky clean.

Rinsing off, Belial ended up chasing them around the bathroom, the dogs only stopping long enough to shake off sheets of water. It took him quite some time to get them rubbed down, and he ended up leaving them looking like cotton balls after he dried them.

Volta found them sunning on the little porch connected to his room. She brightened upon seeing him, genuinely delighting in the nice young man. His having quite the appetite certainly helped!

"Little Bel, little Bel, would you like to join me for some tea and biscuits?" Seeing his cute young face light up and bounce to his feet helped her cement her decision.

"Of course, Miss Volta!"

"Oh, you're such a dear! Oh, and can you tell either of your uncles that I would like to speak with them? It's nothing bad, but it is a bit boring."

***

Tubor did NOT like that rock. No, siree, he did not.

After going over it with a fine-toothed comb, Cordelia had passed the wardstone from Aoife's home over to the Necromancer, pulling his hair out over the fact that he couldn't figure out what it actually was. And Tubor was getting ready to join him.

It looked like a wardstone, it acted like a wardstone...but it felt like more than a wardstone.

Which is fucking stupid.

He drummed his fingers on his work table, an ashtray full of cigarillo butts next to him. He's been puffing away on them since this morning, trying to puzzle-out just why this rock felt off. At this point, he's getting ready to break out the wine.

_Dear Mespherius, but he's turning into his brother._

He's tested it with everything he has: Diagramma's, detection and identification spells, light refraction...he even chipped off a piece of the grey, crystal-y rock and dissolved it in various acids, thinking it may be just the type of stone 'flavoring' the magic that still, even now, clung to it.

Nothing. It's just a hunk of pure, uncut gypsum.

"Fuck me. That's in, I'm going in."

Picking up the wardstone, Tubor held it tightly in his hands. He closed his eyes and evened his breathing, bringing a bit of his magic to the fore in preparation of his 'diving' into the stone to fully investigate it. He 'nudged' the savory, almost coppery-tasting magic clinging to it-

-and froze, tumbling backward onto the hard stone floor. As the man lay there, consciousness a million miles and a world away, the wardstone let out a satisfied feeling.

***

Germanius pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He shifted, setting his shoulders more evenly against the wall he was leaning against. He could vaguely hear Cordelia muttering as he examined the Necromancer currently laid out on the floor, and the argumentative murmurs of Asra and Lucille just outside the room.
This city is cursed, he thought. Too much is happening too fast, especially after the near-month of nothing. There has to be a conspiracy against him, some plot to make him lose his mind. First Aoife's house, then Nadia's expulsion, then the Cultist's interrogation and what that revealed, and now this.

"Cordelia, can you tell us anything?" While he hopes its something that can be easily solved, he doubts it, as well.

Cordelia stood with a snort from his squat. "Yes and no."

"...AND!?"

Swinging part of his black scholar's robe over his shoulder, Cordelia sneered at his nephew. "Patience is a virtue, but we all know how spottily you clung to that! No," he walked over to Tubor's workbench, flipping through his papers with a hum. "It turns out, there is far more to that wardstone Marty and I picked up than we initially thought. Currently, Tubor is in some sort of trance, and we can't do anything until he's cut loose." He could feel the sigh Germanius let out.

"Do you think Siobhan's and Portia's presence will help?" After all, it IS Aoife's wardstone, and they ARE her descendants.

"I...don't want to chance it. For now, just leave Tubor as it. Don't touch him, don't move him; nothing. I don't want to interrupt whatever's happening unless his health starts being affected."

***

Spooning up a bite from a cup of soup, Nadia looked over the report that Germanius gave her.

The bundle of papers he gave her was thicker than she expected, and that had both worried AND relieved her. So much information meant a lot of things (most probably bad) were happening, but it also meant that they now had enough information to actually act.

Cordelia and Germanius were very thorough in their work. Her stomach rolled when she read the fully-documented 'interrogation' that Cordelia undertook, and she had nearly been sick when she read just how MANY of her own citizens were in this disgusting Cult. The only relief she had felt was at reading Germanius's recommended courses of action.

Although, his proposal of contacting the Emperor left her feeling, apprehensive.

Setting the reports down, she took up her spoon again. Her stomach still couldn't handle much, despite her being ravenously hungry. She theorizes that her little Anchor had affected her more than just mentally, and her body was trying to make up for it, even though her gut felt sore from pushing that thing out. Portia was a doll and had made a batch of simple but filling split-pea soup, a sprinkling of smoked ham bulking it up.

As she took in another spoonful, she froze.

Vlastomil!

***

Tubor woke up, head pounding and feeling like it was stuffed full of wool. He blinked, eyes watering at the bright, white light, that was blazing around him. Grunting, he pushed himself up with one arm as he shielded his eyes with the other. Once vertical, he blinked in confusion.

On all sides, an endless world of white extended. No matter which direction he looked, white
nothing existed.

Pure.

Unadulterated.

White.

It would be enough to drive anyone mad. He didn't even cast a shadow. Standing up, he turned in a circle. Curious, he stomped a foot. While it made a sound, it didn't echo. Jumping yielded no different a result. Next, he yelled.

"Aye, shut yer gob, ye grea' twat!"

Spinning, Tubor spotted his critic. Standing behind him was a woman. Tall, but not obscenely so (which is more than what he could say about Ty and his family), she looked to be in her 30's. Her hair was a blazing, true red, with two locks at her temple bleached white. The strands were captured in a series of plaits and braids, the longest (and thickest) of which hit her waist. Her complexion was ruddy, like that of someone who lived in the outdoors, and fierce, lilac eyes peered at him from a tattooed face, the designs of knots and whorls done in green and gold. Combined with her fierce warrior's garb, she looked like a Pictish Queen on the eve of battle.

"And who the hell are you?" Tubor usually has much better manners than this, especially when supernatural beings are concerned.

But she started it.

She sneered. "Children. Pha! No re'spect for dae eldars! Feh!" She shrugged, resettling the cloak pinned at her shoulder, then she put her hands on her girded hips. "But, is best t'lead by example. Tae names Aoife ó Foghladh, and you," she pointed at Tubor, "need tae take a mes'age back for me!"

***

Tubor shot up into a sitting position, gasping. His abrupt motion startled everyone who had gathered around the bed he had been moved to, causing Asra to jump into Lucille's lap as she shrieked, and making the two Principia twitch hard. Cordelia ended up throwing the vial of something he had been holding at the wall while Germanius had to hold back from throwing a punch.

"Hell's Fire, boy! Give me a heart attack, why don't ya," Germanius grumbled as he rubbed his chest.

Tubor coughed, the sound dry and harsh. Once he started, he couldn't stop, and soon he was doubled-over. Feet scrambled as the others came to his side, thumping his back and pushing his hair aside. Someone shoved a glass of water into his hand. He drank it down like a man who had been lost in the desert.

After several long minutes, Tubor settled. He laid back with a sigh, stopping when something dug into his back. Grunting, he dug behind himself, glaring at Aoife's soulstone.

He doesn't know how, but the thing felt smug.

Bitch.
Grunting, he tossed it at Asra. "Say 'hello' to Aoife." He smirked at the utter pandemonium his proclamation wrought.

***

Germanius, and by extension Cordelia, did not sleep well. Yesterday had been a long day. An interrogation, the revelation of just how far the Worm Cult's influence has spread, Tubor's collapse...and Aoife's CONTINUED existence.

Tubor's theory that Aoife was still alive had been half-correct. After her death, her soul had not moved on. Instead, it had been bound to this world, but it was done in such a way that it wasn't necromantic. Tubor affirmed that there was not any sort of death magic that he could sense around her soul, or, at least, not of a type that he's ever encountered.

And he's ADAMANT that it is not death magic binding her. He swore up and down to Germanius and Cordelia that she's been bound by a god, a bargain having been struck and that this had been part of her payment.

"Aye, a fav'or has been owed t'me an' me family. One that's still up fer collection. I've been hearin' t'ings, an' it looks like it may be FINALLY be used!

As fer who owes it? Feh, 'm not tellin'!

Germanius knows that such a thing is not beyond a god. Great and Gentle Rapture, but the Umbra have untold stories and tales about the Dark Father Himself intervening, plucking from the Wall a newly dead acolyte and re-birthing them. Several members of the Hedonistic Priesthood have documented cases of reincarnation amongst their own ranks.

But, to just, hang out? For centuries!? Stuck in a hunk of rock? The thought of such a thing leaves him unsettled. When one dies, you either enter Rapture, reincarnated, or were devoured by Hedonism or one of his children (a fate meted out to only the most heinous of souls). Not being able to do ANY of that is disturbing.

He doesn't want to tangle with a god who is willing to do that.

***

Germanius wanted to kill Cordelia. He felt way too done-up for a simple breakfast meeting with Nadia, and from how she had her brow quirked, he definitely looked it.

_Fucking Cordelia._

Little Portia had visited them not long after they woke, a request from Nadia for a meeting folded in her pocket. Making arrangements to meet in an hour, Cordelia had decided that now was the time to help his nephew 'hook-up' with the Countess.

_Cue a montage of said asexual man, who's never dated anyone, let alone felt any sort of ATTRACTION to ANYONE, chasing a beleaguered Germanius into the tub and scrubbing him to within an inch of his life. Germanius swears he could hear theatrical comedy music playing in the background._

Then, after getting scrubbed and trimmed and perfumed, Cordelia had the audacity to go through his clothing, criticizing it all before shoving at Germanius an outfit that was WILDLY inappropriate for the time of day and meeting it was being worn to.
"So," Nadia stretched the syllable out as she doctored up her cup of breakfast chai. "What are you trying to tell me, Germanius?" She hid her smirk behind her cup as she sipped.

Germanius let out an exasperated, drawn-out sigh. "Cordelia happened. Thinks I should find a new partner, or wife or whatever. Old fart." The silver asshole gave him a jaunty thumbs-up after he had literally kicked an overly formally-dressed Germanius out of his room. Fucker.

Germanius melted a bit at the tinkling laugh Nadia let out. "And you indulged him!? Such an accommodating nephew you are!"

"Pfft! Trying to stop Cordelia when he gets going is like seeing a real-life demonstration of the question 'what happens when an unstoppable force hits an immovable object?'. It's best to just smile and nod."

She let out an unladylike snort. "While you do clean-up well, I'm afraid Professor Cordelia's efforts are wasted. But, please, tell him he did a good job. If he ever decides to retire, he could easily join the Palace Wardrobe as a Dresser."

"I'll be sure to pass it along," Germanius said archly, and they both knew he wouldn't. He doesn't want to encourage the old fogey.

***

Seeing Cordelia droop in disappointment when he came back from their meeting with a few files felt like a bit of a kick to the butt. While Germanius does appreciate his uncle's efforts, he also knows that nothing will happen between himself and Nadia, and not just because she isn't attracted to him. Both are essentially wedded to their positions, and the only way they would have been able to marry was if one had stepped down from their office.

And Germanius knows that such a thing would only lead to misery. Both love what they do too much, and even if one DID step down, they would be unhappy and grow to resent the other.

"So, Nadia recommends speaking with Vlastomil," Germanius tossed the files onto a table. He then started stripping off his cape and outer vest, slinging them onto a nearby loveseat.

"Why?"

"He likes, no, LOVES worms. The number of times he's bothered Nadia about making a worm sanctuary and the like are apparently innumerable." Sliding off his boots, Germanius threw himself onto the couch, stretching like a cat with a loud, satisfied sigh. "Thing is, he's a bit of a bitch and only really did what Lucio said. Trying to get Vlastomil to do anything is like pulling teeth."

Cordelia sucked air between his teeth. "And...how is Lucio doing? I haven't heard anything since Nadia's exorcism-gone-wrong."

"Pfffffffff! He's still here. Pretty much bound to the Palace, I reckon'. Nah," Germanius flopped his hand, "he's off being pouty. I can feel him 'floating about', but what Nadia had said during the exorcism cut him. When I went to his wing, he threw a tantrum, bitching about...something." What, however, was beyond him.

"Hmnnnnmmm..."
Germanius squinted his one good eye suspiciously at Cordelia. "Okay, old man. I know that tone." His eyebrows climbed up when Cordelia let out a chuckle that wouldn't be too uncharacteristic of a naughty child planning on trouble. "The fuck is going on in that squirrely brain of yours?"

Cordelia giggled, really alarming Germanius. "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies!"

"...yeah, now I REALLY don't want to know."

***

"Um, Mr. Cordelia, sir? Is, I mean, is everything alright," Portia asked in concern, hands on her knees as she bent over, peering into the hole that Cordelia had been/is digging in the on-grounds cemetery. The old(er) man had churned up a surprising amount of soil in a short amount of time, and Portia is seriously considering asking the man to help her dig a new well.

With a surprised yet guilty look on his face said man jumped, nearly dropping his shovel as his head jerked up. "PORTIA! I, uh, didn't hear you!" She giggled as he looked about them shiftily. "You, didn't tell anyone about my grave robbing yet...did you?"

"GRAVE ROBBING," she squeaked in alarm.

"Fuck!" Throwing the shovel aside, he pawed at the layer of soil at his feet. Seconds later, his nails dug into soft wood. Punching through it, his hand wiggled inside the coffin, before pulling out a femur. Hopping out of the pit (and nearly taking out Portia in the process), he squatted, pushing the whole pile of dirt back into the grave before taking off at a sprint. "NO TIME TO EXPLAIN YOU SAW NOTHING!"

***

"What was that? You need a heart? Whatever the fuck for," Lucille blinked up at the dirt-covered Principia. "And how the fuck did you get in my room!? You're getting dust everywhere! Do you know how DIFFICULT it is to wash Drakarian silk taffeta!?"

"Uh, sorry," Cordelia mumbled bashfully as he shifted from side to side. Sheets of fine, silty soil drifted from his shoulders from his movements. "But, I'm doing an, uh, experiment! And I need a fresh heart. Little Asra and Rus told me that the Circle takes care of its own business, so I figured-"

"Do you even HAVE a Necromancy license?" If he does, she'll eat her silk undies. But she doubts it.

"...maybeeee?"

She squinted hard at him. "You know what, I don't care anymore. Go talk to Gilda. Her people usually hold onto our criminals."

***

"Hey there, hot stuff," Gilda cackled as Cordelia approached her outside of the entrance to Underworld. "Finally gonna let me go for a ride?" She barked in glee at the sneer he tossed her.

"No. No, I'm not. Lucille said you can get me a fresh human heart?"

She whistled. "Damn. You joining Tubor's merry band of corpsefuckers?"
"Vesuvia forbids the use of harvested human body parts for rituals, wards, spellcasting, or necromancy unless a special dispensation has been granted by the Count/ess. Whole or partial bodies however, are exempt from this rule so long as the purpose of the magic is to commune with the departed to settle matters of estate, murder, crime in general, and other related issues, after which the body is to be disposed of in the manner befitting the previous owners beliefs, unless a matter of public health forbids it."

"You, uh, get up to some pretty sketchy shit, huh?" Yeah, Gilda could have used somebody like him 20 years ago. Would have saved her crew a whole bunch of trouble and money.

"I know nothing. Now, can ya do it?"

"...gimmie, like, an hour. I'll have it delivered to Asra's shop."

***

~Silver friend!~

Asra looked up from the shop's ledger, hearing Faust's greeting before the bells over the shop door jingled. His eyebrows disappeared into his hairline when he saw the state of Cordelia. "'Delia!? What on EARTH has happened to you?"

"Nothing!"

That was a little TOO fast.

"So...what sort of hijinks are you up to?" He now thinks he knows where Ty gets it from.

"I, uh," Cordelia shifted from one foot to the other. "I may or may not be an unlicensed practitioner who is possibly in the market for materials that are commonly used in some, but not ALL, necromantic rituals that CAN return a soul to a golem, but that is definitely NOT what I will be doing!"

Yep. This is where Ty gets it from. "Then I'm sure I can help you get a hold of the materials that you are NOT buying for a ritual that is NOT happening. For NOT a lot of money." Hey, a man's gotta eat and pay the rent. If Cordelia doesn't want to get snitched on, he needs to pay up.

Cordelia looked at an innocently smiling Asra. "You're lucky you're cute," he huffed, ignoring Asra's snicker as he shifted, running a hand through his dirty hair. "Fine. How much am I 'not' paying you?"

His heart sunk, and his wallet whimpered, at the dark smile Asra gave him.

***

'Don't bother me, I'm doing some sketchy shit.'

Germanius snorted into his tea before leaning back into his chair. He was currently out on the porch, having been banished from his room by Cordelia.

Once he got tossed, he decided to invite Bel and Miss Volta for a bit of a nip. He hasn't really been able to spend as much time with Bel as he's wanted to, lately, and he would also like to thank Volta for her kindness towards the boy.

He went still when he heard a loud thump, a lot of cursing, and a...bleat(?) from behind his room's door. He'll admit, he's curious as to what exactly Cordelia is up to, but he's also smart enough
to know that plausible deniability is a very powerful thing to have.

After a few more thuds and a crash, Cordelia stuck his head out the door. He was panting a bit, and his cheeks were flushed. "Hey, uh, think you can make yourself scarce?"

Germanius sighed before letting out a chuckle. "Sure, old man." He set his teacup down on its saucer before placing them on his tea tray. "Just leave a sock on the door, yeah?"

"...I don't get it."

"Um, you know? In university? When your roommate-, ugh, you know what? I forgot who I was talking to. Forget it." Picking up his tray, Germanius walked down the porch steps before gliding along the sweet-smelling grass.

"Germanius? Gemmy!? WHAT DOES THE SOCK MEAN!?" Cordelia huffed at the lazy wave and snort he got. "Hmph! Whatever. I got more important things to do."

Letting the door close behind him, Cordelia surveyed the complex Diagramma Nervosia drawn onto the wooden floor with a loose grind of something. All he has to do now is place the heart, feathers, femur, and nightshade in the right spots, and he's good to go.

"Alright, Lucio," he eyed the trussed-up ghost laying in the corner. "Only an hour longer and you'll be right as rain!"

Lucio just bleated in fear.

***

In a physical body for the first time in years, Lucio stood on shaky legs. He stumbled slightly as he got upright, not unlike a newborn colt. Breathing hard (in a mix of wonder and sheer happiness), he first took one step, then another. His head was down, watching himself intently, unable to believe what was happening.

Swaying as he crossed the Diagramma's boundaries, he gave out a short laugh. It was soon followed by more, and soon he was laughing in hysterical delight.

"Well, you seem to be in one piece."

Stopping, Lucio twisted to look behind him, uncaring of his nudity. Behind him was Cordelia, on the other side of the still-glowing circle. Until now, Lucio hadn't actually met the man, only knowing of him through Germanius's comments. Finally meeting the man was a little...intimidating. Doubly so while Lucio was both unclothed AND without his prosthetic.

Covering the stump where his other arm used to be, Lucio twisted a bit more, trying to shield his folly from the other. "Ha! As though the Devil himself could keep me down." He tossed his hair, the blond locks drooping into his face without his usual fixer. "While I do admit to being quite, foolish, in my younger years, I would have at some poi-"

"Please, spare me the dramatics," Cordelia cut him off with a huff and roll of his eyes. "I already have Julian to contend with. Now, c'mere. I need to do a quick exam to make sure everything materialized properly."

"I hardly think that's necessary!" Lucio stepped back one step before catching himself. "After all, I'm standing here-"
“If you think I give a flying fuck about the arm, I'm hardly in a position to mock you. Now, get over here.”

Lucio sneered. “You dar tell me what to do? I am STILL the Count of Vesuvia!”

“If we're going to get into a pissing contest over our respective pedigrees, I've got you beaten by a mile. I can name three High Queens, two Warlord Princes, one Conqueror, AND an Empress.”

Oh. Okay then. All that leaves Lucio in the dust, but he still doesn't want the other to get a closeup of his handicap.

Cordelia sighed. “Fine, if it'll make you feel better.” He flicked aside his scholar's cloak before bending over, undoing the laces to his boots. He leaned against the wall as he slipped them off, the heavy footwear thumping loudly in the chamber as they dropped to the floor.

Lucio's head tilted to the side, puzzled. Cordelia has some weird lookin' feet…

Pulling off some type of oversock, Cordelia straightened before clicking closer. He pulled his trousers up over his knees, showing curved metal spades in the place of feet.

Seeing that was like a punch to Lucio's gut. “What!? How?”

“Determination. I refused to die, refused to let this,” Cordelia slapped a muscled thigh just above where the prosthetic was attached, “keep me from living. I wanted to continue both my lab work and going out into the field. So, I created this. I wanted to be able to run, walk, jump, the whole shebang.

I wasn't going to let such a simple matter of me not having legs from the knee down stop me. I may have needed to reinvent prosthetic design from the ground up but, eh. By the time I die, I'll probably have to do it again for a new arm. I have a bad habit of blowing up my equipment.”

***

"Uncle Cordelia," Germanius asked with a smile that wouldn't melt butter, "just how is Lucio alive and standing in front of me?"

Cordelia snorted in derision as he continued brushing out the younger blond's hair. Said man was perched on a stool, dressed in a pair of simple cotton trousers and a linen shirt. The sleeve of the left arm was folded-up and pinned neatly, and Lucio had his elbow resting on his folded-up legs, chin propped on his fist as he pouted.

"*A-HEM!* Uncle Cordelia…?" Germanius swears to Hedonism, but he'll kill Cordelia himself if he has to pay out another several million drakes in bribes due to said man's shenanigans.

He has not forgotten the Telestra Incident.

Sighing, Cordelia tossed the brush aside, thumping Lucio on the head as he started grumbling. "Well, I must admit, a bit of a ritual gone wrong. All I was trying to do was a simple repair ritual. How was I supposed to know that I would trip and drop all of my other ingredients, that were supposed to be for completely separate projects, mind you, in just the right spots for my easy-peasy ritual to turn into some sort of faux resurrection?"

Germanius shot his uncle a Look. "And I suppose that it's just a coincidence that you were carrying the exact items and quantities needed to do such a thing? And that there just happened to be a Diagramma already drawn out? And it just so happened to be the one that is super easy to turn
from a *Restructuretica* to a *Nervosia* with a simple smudge?"

"I KNOW, right!? Golly gee willikers, but that is quite the train of coincidences!"

"...eh, I'll allow it."

"I'll admit, I've been celebrated for my skullduggery," Lucio murmured, "but this? This is bullshitting made an art form!" He bounced to his feet, nearly eating carpet as a result of not being used to being in a human body. "How do you do it?"

"Lying through your teeth is a time-honored tradition of House Principia. We have actual awards and competitions." Cordelia is very proud of his talent and has all of his trophies on display back home.

"My, my, my! I thought Tiberius was full of surprises, but this is like the sweet frosting on top of a delightful cake," stumbling over to a nearby chair, Lucio slumped into it. "Tell me more! It's been years since we last had a proper talk and, I'll sadly admit, I ended-up scaring the man off the one time he popped into my wing," he ended with a pout.

*That ass was still as big and round as ever. One cannot blame him for wanting a feel.*

"...wait," Germanius said slowly. "Rus...was here!? Before you're burning!? Why wasn't I aware of this," he said exasperatedly, throwing an arm wide.

"Uh, Gemmy? He was supposed to set-up and head the Vesuvian Chapter of the Citadel Guildhall. How did you forget?" And Germanius likes to call Cordelia old.

Lucio loudly cleared his throat. "As I was saying, it's been *some time* since we had a chance to chat. Would you *kindly* update this poor, bereft man on the going's on of an old flame?" A set of (unmade) eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline as the two Principia dashed around the room, dragging heavy chairs over to Lucio before plopping into them, leaning forward in anticipation.

"A captive audience! So lovely to have after all this time! It reminds me of-"

"Can it, goat boy. We just want dirt on Russ."

Cordelia smacked his *rude* nephew upside the head. "MANNERS!" He turned back to Lucio, "sorry about that. It's just, Rus's memory has been shot to shit, and trying to find out what lead up to *whatever* caused it is, well, difficult to say the least." He sighed before grinning. "That, and we just want some new blackmail! So, tell us, o great Count, just what sort of *shenanigans* did the two of you get up to?"

Leaning back into his chair with a smirk, Lucio made himself comfortable. "Oh, we got 'up to' quite a bit, my good friend! QUITE a bit. With Noddy, too! But," he wrinkled his nose, "can you dispose of the heart? Vesuvia seems to be going through a heatwave, and it's starting to stink up the place."
Of Sneaking and Scheaming

People shuffled by the cloaked beggar quickly, eyes forward. The beggar was wedged into a corner where two buildings met, caught under the blazing sun. His weak, feeble voice could barely be heard, and dirty fingers dipped out from under a torn sleeve to pluck at skirts and trousers.

"OY YOU! FUCK OFF!" A booted foot struck out, a guard kicking at the beggar that people have been bitching about all day.

"Please sir! Can you spare a copper? A bite to eat? My poor wife-" the beggar let out a pained shriek as a heavy foot stepped down on filthy fingers, grinding.

The guard grinned down gleefully, twisting the heel of his boot into the soft flesh of the hand. "No. Now go on, get!" With a whimper the beggar skittered back on hands and knees, his hunched form hobbling away down the street before turning a corner.

Spitting, the guard grunted. Hiking up his sagging trousers under his overflowing belly, he trotted back over to his post, goosing a girl as he did so. With another grunt, he fell into his chair, ignoring the creak of abused wood.

Just another day in Saturnalia.

***

After turning the corner, the hunched beggar stood up straight and tall, hissing as he flexed his damaged hand. He could hear and feel as things popped back into alignment, and had to cover his throat briefly as a pale green light flared. Huffing, he pulled his cloak closer around him, shifting his shoulders as he walked further and further away from the town center and into the slums. Houses went from marble to brick and mortar to wood and wash, and progressively became more and more rundown. Soon, he was entering Old Saturnalia.

This section of the city felt old. Only a few blocks wide in either direction, only the most destitute of the destitute lived here. No house was whole, most missing walls and/or roofs. Crime was rampant, a warning against any merchant wanting to set-up shop.

Twisting and turning down crooked streets and alleyways, the beggar entered a dilapidated house. It was a nice house, at one point, made of red brick, wood, and plaster. It would have been perfect to raise a family in. Now, all that was left was a burnt-out husk, with a half-collapsed roof and a missing wall.

Carefully walking up the creaky stairs, the man ducked and weaved around piles of rubble and fallen beams. Going up the second set of stairs revealed what was left of an attic. Over in the half that still had a roof was a makeshift bed, several traveling bags, a small camping stove, and two Standing Hounds.

"Hey girls! Did you miss me?"

Tails wagging in greeting, the two dogs walked over, whining for pets. Taking a few minutes to praise and pet them, the beggar then removed his cloak, revealing a tall and lanky frame. Fingers going through the cloak, he soon pulled out a folded paper. Opening it revealed a 'WANTED!' poster, with his hand-drawn portrait. Stamped under the (badly) rendered image was the name 'Julian Devorak' and a sum of 1,000 gold for his capture.
"A thousand gold? Is that all I'm worth," he asked one of the dogs, who only gave him a disinterested yawn. "And they still can't get my nose right..." he sighed as he refolded the parchment. "At least Vesuvia has a bounty of 25,000 gold on my head. They at LEAST make it worth the hassle, Saturnalia could learn a thing or two." Walking over to the section of missing wall, he leaned against a downed beam, eye squinting as he looked out at the city. "Then again, 1,000 gold can go far, here."

It was Day Three after Ty had been captured. After fleeing the scene, Julian had hid out in a crawlspace under a shop for a few hours. Once night had properly fallen, he had crept back to the inn he and Ty had been staying in. Another generous bribe had seen the return of their bags, but Mazel and Tov were still nowhere to be seen. It was only after he had left (after scaring the literal piss out of the innkeeper) that they had turned up. Once he had found a place to bed down at, he started planning.

Where is Ty, and why is he being kept? Those two questions NEED to be answered if he's going to do anything. Dressing as a beggar, he had wandered around and hung out in highly trafficked areas, hoping to hear any news. The day after everything went down, all anybody could talk about was the fight. Many of the common rabble were outright gleeful, whispering with excitement and approval about Ty's prowess and ferocity.

Julian had felt nauseous and unclean. What he had thought was water had actually been cerebral fluid splashing him.

Day two was more of the same, but he had also picked-up more of the local news. Count Morghauss had been bleeding the city dry, and had been doing so for a few years. Taxes on the middle-and-lower classes are the highest they have ever been, with the Court and other Nobles spending the funds like water. Lavish parties, opulent food, luxurious furs and silks...the city is on the verge of a breakdown. Already, trade has dried-up, and what food that hasn't been bought by the Palace is fought over by the rest.

And the Count is getting ready to raise taxes AGAIN, so he could re-arm his army and guards.

And what did Ty mean by, 'I'm expensive'? Julian can only think it may be related to his pedigree: his father is the brother of a Jarl, his mother the previous High Priestess of Hedonism (whose power was on par with the Umbrian High Queen!), and several titled Warlords and Queens. Having someone like that under lock and key could fetch a pretty ransom. He would actually hazard to say that Ty could easily be traded back for several thousand, no, several hundred thousand, gold.

But, Ty's Ostracized. And Serafina stated that the High Queen did that to protect the apparently resurrected man from mob justice. Would she even be able to pay for his ransom back, without setting too many people off? After all, the common Umbra and Principia don't know about the whole 'coming back to life' thing. If one of the higher-ups let something like THAT slip at the wrong time...

Politics makes his head hurt.

He sighed. He'll need to try some of the bars later tonight. It's amazing what one can learn in the local dives.

***

Well, that explains a lot.

Sitting on a crate behind The Winking Wolf, Julian scribbled in a little booklet he had snagged, balanced on a pulled-up knee. He had already filled up a fair few pages with his chicken scratch, and
he made a mental note to see about getting a few more sticks of graphite. He squinted, the low torchlight and faint starshine being just enough to light his surroundings.

Countess Hildebrandt Von Eckenmeier *supposedly* died shortly before Lucio did, and that's when things started going downhill for Saturnalia. The aerodrome was cancelled, the funds that she had earmarked for that going towards a **massive** spa (that only Morghauss and his favored few could use). Then, Morghauss started charging a 'gate tax', where anyone who wanted to enter or leave the city had to pay a fee (which had pissed-off Ty, sending the man into paroxysms about trade). Shortly after that, funds for education and infrastructure started to get diverted, then public wellness programs, and so on.

As it stands, the city is a shithole, but the Palace has two new wings, Morghauss has several sets of gilded dragon armor, a sprawling spa used by about one hundred people, and tonnes of expensive portraits and statues dedicated to him.

Oh, and an entire corridor in the Palace dedicated to his closet.

Julian had thought Ty had been exaggerating when he said that the Counts of the Morghauss line were stupid and spoiled, but apparently it was all a massive understatement. Lucio wasn't *bad*, per se, in fact he was a walking dumpster fire, but holy jumping shitballs he was leagues better than this tancy!

And it all started happening shortly after the Morghausser passed. Sounds like she hadn't died so much as been assassinated. The woman hadn't been dead longer than a week before the aerodrome (which had been about 30-percent complete) was shuttered. If that doesn't say 'murder', he'll eat crow.

Snapping his booklet shut, he neatly tucked it into his cloak. He'll try to get a few hours of shuteye before going back out. Tomorrow is the weekly bazaar, and the few merchants who still come here will be setting up shop for the weekend. Hopefully, he'll be able to get more info.

***

The daughter of Morghauss and the Manajay, Princess Iren von Eckenmeier ein Morghauss, has been of marriageable age for the past two years, and has no offers.

Her bride price is too large, and she brings little to the table.

Ty is potentially worth hundreds of thousands and receives a stipend along with his vast personal wealth.

Wealth that supposedly rivals what the coffers of Saturnalia currently hold.

Morghauss will try to force a marriage between his daughter and Ty, to get Ty's money, and through him, House Principia's funds.

*Julian feels sick.*

He continued eating the simple steamed bun that he had purchased from a Seong merchant. The man had been a well of information, gladly answering as many of Julian's questions as he could when the redhead had placed his order in Mang-woh.

Apparently, Princess Iren has had no offers for her hand. She's going to turn 18 in a few months, and she's been on the market since her 15th birthday. However, the bride price Morghauss is requiring is just not worth it. Iren is pretty average in all aspects, aside from her looks, and looks a
good ruler doesn't make. She would have been considered a better prospect before her mother, the Manajay, died, but she's apparently gotten worse.

Capturing Ty is the best chance Morghauss has of marrying her off and pulling in some coin. Julian had nearly choked on his pork bun when Chi Xhao (the stall merchant, and purveyor of some of the best buns Julians ever had!) had *very* flippantly mentioned how wealthy Ty was, and independently at that.

Ty hadn't been joking when he said he could raise an army and take Vesuvia for his own. From how he lives, he's downright thrifty! Even before tossing in House Principia monies, Ty's own wealth rivals that of most towns. If the rumors the merchant told him are even remotely true, Ty's little nest has *millions* of little gold eggs in it!

It, really puts into perspective how ridiculous Julian was to have a heart attack over that deluxe Plague Doctors suit that Ty got him. 5,000 was a literal drop in the bucket, all things considered. Now he feels like a ninny.

He'll need to find out what else Chi knows, either about Ty, where he's being kept, or anything more of the city's situation. The sooner they can get outta here, the better it'll be for Julian's heart. He doesn't know how many more shocks the ol' ticker can take.

***

"Eh! Eh, Agnes! Agnes! Didja hear?"

"Wha? Speak up, girlie! I ain't be hearing too good!"

"I said, 'DIDJA HEAR'!"

"Woah, quiet down there! No need t'get loud!"

Peering up and out of a sewer drainage grate, Julian zeroed in on the two squabbling old women. Under the square that the bazaar takes place in is an old section of sewer, one that hasn't seen use for months due to the collapsing infrastructure. Getting in was easy, but finding a good spot to listen at was not. It took him quite some time to find this section, and there were only three curbside drainage grates to choose from. This was his first choice, and so far, he hasn't really learned anything new.

*Looks like his luck is about to change…*

"Eh, I heard that there was another breakout! Done quick this mornin'!"

"What?"

"I SAID THERE WAS ANOTHER BREAKOUT!"

"There's another breakfast!? Where? We need to go and get some!"

"Oooohhhhh, breakfast..."

Watching the two old biddies trundle off, Julian thought. If Saturnalia is built like most of the old, big cities, then that means that the prison is under the Palace, part of the dungeon. And if what that old woman said was true, there's been multiple prison escapes, and in a relatively short period of time. This could be his ticket into the Palace.

Now he just needs to get more info on the dungeon.
Ugh, how did he used to do this? Only getting a few hours of shut-eye every few days? He feels like he's about to die.

Ty has spoiled him.

He stumbled up the stairs, one of his feet dragging on a step. Catching himself, he sighed before continuing up.

Another two days of sneaking about and clandestine listening gave him another break: the Captain of the Guard likes to spend his Friday nights at The Winking Wolf, threatening the bartender for free drinks and leering at the wenches. If he's liquored up enough, Julian may be able to get some info from him.

But first, sleep. He could do with some doggie cuddles.

The sun was setting as Julian waffled about his hidey-hole, reorganizing and repacking stuff. He'll be hitting the bar in a few hours, but he's going to have to move camp. Staying in one spot for too long is a bad idea, and he should have moved a few days ago. He already has a few spots in mind, so he'll make his decision on where to go after he gets to the bar.

Stuffing his dirty clothes into a spare mesh bag, he pulled the drawstring taut. Hefting it, he tossed it into the open trunk just off to the side. His bedroll and two smaller bags quickly disappeared inside, as well. Once he was certain that nothing else was out, he closed the trunk lid and cautiously poked the rune Ty had etched into the wood around the clasp. He jumped with a squeak as the rune glowed, before the heavy trunk shrunk down to the size of a thimble. Once it stopped, he tiptoed closer, a hand darting out to bat at the little thing before he hopped back. He did this a few more times before one of the dogs grumbled, prompting him to gingerly pick up the trunk by the simple cord that had been threaded through one of the handles on the side. With a flick of his wrist, the 'necklace' was settled around his neck and tucked under his shirt.

Spinning his cloak around his shoulders, he kissed each dog's muzzle before making his way downtown, walking fast. He needs to grab a spot at the bar proper if he's going to do this right.

Lady Luck must surely be smiling down upon him! The Captain was already two-and-a-half out of three sheets to the wind and was loudly bitching about anything and everything. Nobody wanted to sit next to him, and, so as not to raise suspicion, Julian grabbed a chair at a rickety little table just behind and off to the side of the lush. It was a prime listening spot.

And listen, Julian did!

He doesn't know if the Captain had already unloaded about the breakout or what, but now he was going on about their 'newest guest' at the Palace. Apparently, Ty is putting up one unholy stink about the situation, destroying property and scaring the pants off of the servants.

He had even told Morghauss, to his face(!), that he was 'a blight upon the face of humanity'!

After hearing that and having a chuckle, Julian started wondering why Ty wouldn't just bust a move. Clearly the man isn't under some duress, after all, he's ripping the place apart, literally. It was as he was deciding to move, sit next to the Captain and buy him a strong drink, that he heard a
statement that made his blood run cold.

"Soooo, yuh, Bastion's got t'arsehole like- THE FUCK!?"

Tossing a generous handful of coins on the table, Julian booked it. Running into several people and tables and apologising as he fled, his body shook and his heart pounded as he dashed down the quiet, nearly-empty streets. He doesn't remember what twists and turns he took as he fled that name, but he came back to himself wedged in a corner of what appears to be an old, abandoned cellar. The ceiling door was still open, showing a sliver of naked sky where a roof should be.

Sliding down onto his ass, his breath quickened. His chest felt tight and heavy like a great weight was sitting on it, and his heart was beating a mile a minute. When he went to grab at his chest, his fingers wouldn't stretch and lay flat, instead, they curled into a rictus of a claw. Soon, his breathing had turned into hyperventilating and black spots started dancing in his vision.

Then everything went black.

***

Mazel and Tov found him sprawled on dusty stone, keeled over onto his side with an arm stretched out. They whined as they climbed down the steep basement steps, concernedly whimpering before licking at his face. It took a few minutes for Julian to come to, and when one of the girls shoved herself under an arm, he grunted. With a bit of teamwork, both dogs soon had him pushed back up into a sitting position.

His head pounded like a little clockwork gremlin was using his brain as a drum. Breathing felt...strained, like the one time he had nearly drowned at sea. He also felt hot and cold, and the world was fuzzy.

His brain supplied the word: panic attack. Toss in his rubbery legs and he won't be getting anything else done tonight.

Fingers fumbling, he pulled his necklace off, setting the shrunken trunk on the ground. Enlarging it, he struggled to grasp his bedroll, Tov having to tug it out for him. Once she rolled it out, he rolled onto it, uncaring of the grime he was rubbing into his clothes. Pulling the covers up, he could hear Mazel tug closed the basements trap door. He was out like a light before they could even curl around him.

***

He was chain-smoking, getting ready to start his fourth cigarette. While he squatted just to the side of the tumble-down house he had spent the night in, as still as a reed, his mind was a universe away.

He thought he was over Bastion. Correction, he is. Just, terrified of the man. It took him a few years to understand that what that man had done to him was wrong-

- Wrong wrong wrong on so many levels-

-and he knows that he still hasn't come to complete terms about it. He should probably see a shrink about it, but the thought of baring it all to a STRANGER is unsettling.

But, if Bastion is here, he'll HAVE to get over it. The man is a master manipulator, and while Julian doesn't think Ty is mentally weak, Bastion is a master of mind games on top of being a massive sadist. Who knows what that, that cur is saying to Ty.
This changes everything about Julian's plan. Simply breaking into the Palace via the prison is no longer an option. Bastion is smart, and will no doubt have already taken into consideration any weak points between the Palace and prison. Julian wouldn't put it past the man to let the prison breaks continue just so he can have the 'fun' of recapturing the escapees.

*Fuck. I need a drink.*

***

**So. What do I know?**

Opening his notebook, Julian dug out a graphite stick. He leaned back against Tov and propped the notebook on Mazel's back from her spot sprawling across his lap. They were currently bedding down in the far corner of the cellar he had found the day before, with his bedroll and a few thick blankets spread across the stone to keep the chill away.

First things first: Ty is being held captive in the Palace. Morghauss will most likely try to force a marriage between him and the Princess, but ransoming Ty back to House Principia is also not out of the question. More likely than not, Morghauss will try ransom first, marriage second.

Point the second: Bastion is in the employ of Morghauss. Julian's old flame (and ex-superior officer) will no doubt be watching things closely, and may even now be playing mind games with Ty. He'll also have a lot of security between any points of contact between the Palace and prison.

Point three: despite the odds, Julian's going to have to bust Ty out. Their mission is too important for them to just be snatched up.

*And Julian really wants to get back at Bastion, even though he's still terrified of the man.*

...he can't do it alone. Or without more information. How did the breakout happen? Was the same route used for the previous ones? What is Bastion's position within the Court? He used to be a lieutenant colonel in the Corolinian Army and was this close to being promoted to colonel before, whatever the fuck happened before Thunder Gorge, happened.

*While his memory is fuzzy, after Thunder Gorge, Bastion just wasn't there.* He didn't die, in fact Julian remembers seeing the man stalking the battlefield after their victory, but upon breaking camp they had a new commander, with no mention of what happened to Bastion. He had tried to do some digging, but the General of the Corolinian Army had quietly told him to leave the matter be.

*What the fuck did Bastion do!?*

Huffing, Julian shook his head before returning to his notes. Dwelling on the past won't help him now.

From what he's heard, there must be some sort of resistance group in the city. For how long Morghauss has been being an unmitigated asshole, it is inevitable that people have grouped together. Whether or not they've been successful in their efforts is a moot point, but the disenfranchised know things that many law-abiding citizens won't. It's just a matter of FINDING them.

Mazel whined before wiggling, and Tov let out a huff. Shaking himself, Julian remembered it was dinnertime for the girls. Getting to his hands and knees, he crawled over to the open trunk, trying to find the bag that Ty said had dog-safe food for the girls. After a bit of fumbling and muttering, long fingers found it. Pulling out two large covered dishes (while his brain screamed that such large clay containers shouldn't be in such a small bag!), he soon had two happy dogs digging in-
-who then proceeded to stare him down.

"What?" Mazel sneezed as Tov yawned at him, both just standing next to their still-full dishes. "Are you still hungry? Ty said we had to be careful with how much and when you ate. I can give you more later!" Mazel wandered over to the trunk, sticking her head in and snuffling. She pulled back with a satisfied chuff and another bag clenched between her teeth. Seconds later, she had it open and her head stuck in it, tail wagging.

"What are you-"

"*rrrrrrrrrrrrruff!*" She jerked her head out, a parchment-wrapped package in her mouth. Bouncing, she shoved it into Julian's chest, knocking the man over. Opening it, he saw it was a few fillets of smoked, dried fish. "Oh." He had forgotten that they were social eaters. "But I'm not-"

His stomach let out an unholy howl, and he swears that Tov gave him an I told you so look. Knowing to count his losses, Julian broke off a piece of fish (salmon) and popped it into his mouth. After chewing and swallowing, he fell upon his meal with a ravenous appetite.

Guess he was hungry.

***

There is apparently NO resistance group in the city.

Which doesn't make a lick of sense? Logically, there should be, even if it's just a group of people who get together to bitch about the situation.

But there isn't.

Nothing.

Nada.

Zilch.

Is he just not digging deep enough? With how the Guard treat everybody, it wouldn't surprise him that any serious group would be far underground. After all, most successful resistance groups start off being very discreet before they become publicly active. Just walking around the streets and wailing your grievances for all and sundry to hear without having enough people in your corner to back you up is just stupid. A lone wolf won't achieve much--

-oh!

***

"Here you go, sir. That will be five coppers." The stall girl set a paper-wrapped package down in front of the guard.

"Feh." He swiped it, turning to walk away.

"Sir? Sir?! You still need to-" she gasped as he turned, brandishing a baton. He shook the metal rod in her face.

"I don't have to do anything! In fact, you should be paying me to buy this garbage! I'm the reason you are even able to sleep at-ACK!" A fist flew out, clipping jiggle jowls as the guard ranted. A thick and meaty thump followed, making the man stumble and fall back, dropping his lunch.
The (small) market crowd stopped, watching the tall, cloaked stranger who had struck out.

"You're a dead man," the guard wailed from the ground, clutching a puffy cheek. "I'll get you for that!" He leaped to his feet, readying his baton. He ran at his assailant, just to get tripped. He fell with a loud thump.

"Ma'am," the stranger said, opening the moneybag he had clandestinely swiped from the guard's belt. Opening it, he shook out a few silver pieces. "For the trouble he put you through."

"HOW DARE YOU! I SHOULDN'T HAVE TO PAY FOR SUCH SLOP! I'M THE ONE THING STANDING BETWEEN THE PEOPLE OF THIS CITY AND UTTER ANARCHY!"

"Anarchy? Ha!" The cloaked figure spun, flourishing a pointed finger accusingly at the enraged guard. "It's a fine day where those who should deliver and enforce the law, disregard it for their own gains. Disgusting!" Many in the growing crowd gasped at the stranger's brazenness.

"Why you!" Bellowing, the guard charged again, murder in his eyes. How dare he be disrespected! He is a GUARD, for Vana's sake! Asking to pay for his lunch, when he puts his life on the line every day for these ungrateful swine! Why he outta- *THUD!*"

"Hmph. What a disappointment." Laid out on the cobble was the guard, trousers around his ankles. The stranger tucked his dagger away, having palmed it to neatly slice the guards belt as he had barreled past. "Oh well," he tossed the trailing edge of his cloak across his shoulder, before raising a hand high. "Is this what has Saturnalia cowering in fear? This pig in guards clothing? PAH! Tell me, are you men, or mice!?" Twisting on his foot, the stranger shoved into the crowd before darting down a side street.

***

The next day, reports started coming into the Captain of the Guard. Some fucker was going around, disrespecting his subordinates. Doing things like slicing belts, punching, tripping, swiping moneybags, using shorter guards as friggin armrests, and the most heinous of crimes:

**Lollygagging.**

Lollygagging means loitering. Loitering means being unproductive. Being unproductive means spare time. And spare time breeds sedition. The ONLY reason that things had been able to go on for as long as they have is because the common rabble hasn't been allowed enough time to talk and thus organize.

After all, a resistance group can't form if they don't have the time to do so.

Glarthir grunted. During the course of six hours, he has eighty(!) reports of separate incidents on his desk. Things from simple disrespect to physical assault and theft of his guard's personal funds.

And a broken sword!

This guy came out of nowhere! And what makes it worse, people are starting to talk. They are watching this 'Stranger' easily take on and put down up to three guards at a time, showing just how inept the guards are at anything.

And the fucker is just giving away the wallets he's stealing! Every encounter he has, he somehow snags even the most secure of monies, and is just...giving them to people! The man must be a magician. How else can Glarthir explain this guy stripping a pair of (and he'll admit, filthy)
underwear off of a guard while the guard still had his trousers ON!?

For the sake of the status quo, this guy needs to go.

***

Looking over the edge of a rooftop, Julian smirked. It's been two days since he decided to raise hell, and already it's started to snowball.

Guards, who just a few days ago thought it was okay to literally steal from their citizens are now mincing about, staring in fear at the shopkeepers and stock girls who now openly brandish clubs and the like. Already, he's seen one little slip of a girl swipe at a guard who tried to walk away without paying for his new boots. The look of sheer, righteous anger on her face, and the utter terror on his, was like a modern version of a goddess striking a sinner down.

How delicious.

He needs to kick it up a notch. More gossip about Ty whispered into his ears, and at the breakneck speed the other is going through the Palace's furniture and glassware, Julian is going to quickly be left in the dust.

But, that will have to wait. He's finally heard a rumor about the resistance group he KNEW had to exist. The one possible location for meeting them is near the entrance to the sewers on the city's northeast side.

Why is it always the sewers?

Oh well. Nothing for it, now. He'll try to get some shuteye before making his way over.

***

The rumor was TRUE! YES!

Slinking over to the northeastern wall, Julian spied a group of three just off of a stone utility hut set against the wall. Staying in the shadows, he tugged the hood of his cloak down as he slowly came closer and closer, keeping out of sight. He wants to make sure that these are the people he wants to talk to. He may have greatly stirred the pot, but if he's going to bust-out Ty, he NEEDS backup.

"-ity's going nuts! This is the most unrest we've had in years!" A man's voice, older. It was hard to see in the dim light coming from the torch set in a bracket by the side of the door, but the man looked to be dressed similar to one of the produce sellers.

"Yeah, and? Face it, the guy's a loose cannon. Nobody knows who he is, let alone knows why he's doing it. I ain't working with some crazy head!" Another man, this one distinctly younger, and punkish. Most likely one of the many jobless youths in the city, the taxes were so high that the different businesses can't employ needed personnel, thus leaving an entire generation adrift.

"Shut up, you two." A woman's voice cut through the men's squabbling. "Face it, he's got the touch. He's done more in a few days than we've done in a year. We NEED him. Now we just have to find him."

Knowing an opportunity when he sees one, Julian stepped into the light, throwing back his hood with a flourish. "You called?"
The two men jumped back, the younger of the two pulling out a knife. The lone woman, who couldn't be older than thirty, just stared him down.

"Who are you!? How did you find us!? What business-" the punk's interrogation was cut off at a gesture from the woman.

"Calm down, Puck. I think we know who this is." She took a few steps to the forefront. "You're the one stirring up all this trouble. My question to you is, why?"

Julian stood up straight, arms folded and shoulders back, with a roguish grin tugging at his lips. "Me? Why? Why that's simple: my partner was abducted by Morghauss, and from what I heard, wants to marry his daughter to Ty, or ransom Ty back to his House." The grin disappeared from his face, a frown tinged with anger replacing it. "The thing, hm, is. Is that we are on an important mission that needs to be done ASAP. Ty taking a, ha, extended vacation at this point is detrimental."

"Pfh. Ha, and what sort of mission is sooooooo important that going around, stirring up trouble without care, is warranted? Hmmmmm," Puck mocked him.

"Worms."

The two still-unnamed persons hissed, the older man jerking back. Puck just blinked at him before snorting. "Yeah, and? I see those every time it rains, that doesn't gyahhhhhh!"

The woman had Puck's ear twisted up between her fingers. "No, you idiot. Not THAT worm," she hissed. "The Cult of Worms! Do you know nothing!?"

"Uh, I'm Dale," the produce seller awkwardly told Julian as they both watched Puck get read the riot act. "The boy's Puck, and she's Dina. Now, what's this about Worms?"

Nodding, Julian took a few steps closer. "Indeed. The Worm Cult is back and already took root in Vesuvia. Ty and I are on our way to the lands of the Painted People, who may have a solution to our issue."

"Ya kill 'em! That's ho- ooooow Dina!?"

"If that was all it took," Dina hissed into Puck's ear, "then they wouldn't be on a quest, would they?" With a last twist of sensitive flesh, she shoved Puck away from her. Ignoring his whimpers, she stepped closer to Julian. "I take it you need to bust this 'Ty' out, right?"

"Yes," Julian nodded. "From my, uh, recon work, I heard about the jailbreaks. Is the castle old enough that it sits on top of the jail?"

"Originally, yes. But the connection was sealed off years ago, back when I was a young boy."

"Why's that," Dina asked Dale.

Dale sighed. "An assassin used the jail to get into the Palace, making an attempt on the then-Count." Someone cursed in dismay, making Dale blush. "Now, there's just the prison entrance. And that's guarded 24/7. The only reason the breakouts were able to happen was because the prisoners bum-rushed the under-armed guards."

Julian hummed. That does put a damper on things. "Can I meet one? An escapee? If I ask the right questions, we, uh, may get more info."

Dina shook her head. "I couldn't point one out to ya. Most fled the city, for obvious reasons."
"Shit. "Can you still put out word? Some may have not left yet if they're trying to bring their families. It's at least worth a shot."

"I'll see what I can do," Dale pipped up. "Out of the three of us, I see the most people. Give me a couple of days to ask around."

Julian smiled, his eye crinkling. "Splendid! I'll meet you back here in a few days."

Agreeing to a time, the group broke up. As he walked away, Julian could feel eyes burning a hole into his back. Peering over his shoulder, he spied Puck glaring at him. Something about it set Julian on edge.

He doesn't trust the lad, but he does trust Dina and Dale. Here's hoping he won't have to interact with the punk again. He makes Julian want to grind his teeth.

"Why hello! Fancy meeting you here."

Dina jumped, looking behind her as a cloaked Julian ambled up to her side. "How can a man as big as you be so sneaky?" A quiet 'craw?' signaled the presence of a raven snuggled up against his neck, in the hood of his cloak.

"Pure talent, m'lady." Julian leaned against the pillar to their side, getting comfortable. They were currently on one of the many open mezzanines that surrounded the sunken main square, dozens of feet up above the (now-dry) fountain. A crier was standing on a rickety wooden platform erected above and in front said fountain, reading out a reward for Julian's capture. "Although, it would be nice if the reward was higher. A measly 2,000 gold? Ha! My bounty in Gresh-na-Mar is four times that!"

"...what did you do!?" Gresh-na-Mar is an infamous port, home to the worst swashbucklers and mafia bosses this side of the raging Gerder river. Money, there, both flows like water and is kept tight to the bosom. For someone to be willing to shell-out for a bounty, let alone one for 8,000...

Julian must have done something bad.

He blushed. "Well, uh," he coughed into his fist, embarrassment flowing off of him in waves. "There was a bit of a, lets say, language barrier. I maaaaay have accidentally led a woman to believe that marriage was in the works. It was all a misunderstanding, I swear," his hands fluttered and windmilled as Dina looked at him incredulously. "Truly, it was! I would have never led someone on in such a manner!"

"So she wants you dead!?"

"Well, um. No. Not her. Her father." Dina could feel his mortification. "He, um, came in as I was trying to comfort her after the, uh, realization. He, uh, got the wrong impression and I had to jump out the window."

Great Vana. "And her father is.....?"

"...Don Angelo d'Capofino?"

"How are you still alive?" At least she knows he can somewhat take care of himself. Don Angelo rarely has anyone give him the slip.
"I've been told I'm quite the slippery man." No kidding. He must be made of soap. "But, enough about me! What caught your eye?" Seeing her shrug a shoulder at the crier, he hummed. "I see…"

"Here," Julian plucked up Malak from his shoulder, dropping the squawking ball of feathers into Dina's hands. "Hold onto my morals. I need to do something sketchy." Ignoring her questioning gasp, he pelted down the boulevard that connects the mezzanines, cloak snapping in the breeze. Dodging around shoppers and disgruntled townsfolk, he soon came to a set of wide stone stairs going down a level and into the plaza. With a hop, he was soon sliding down the smooth marble balustrade cutting down the middle, people leaping away from his gangly legs as he zoomed past. Coming to the end, he gave a little kick, flipping into a cartwheel before running off down the plaza center. Coming up on the platform, he plowed into an unsteady leg, hitting the whole thing hard enough to send it tilting into a slide. With a thunderous crack, the platform pancaked, stirring up a large plume of dust and cries from the crowd. By the time it cleared, Julian was nowhere to be seen.

Dina just stood there, a disgruntled Malak wab'ing in her grasp. "He, really knows how to stir things up, huh," she asked the bird.

"Wab."

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The sun was close to setting, telling Julian that his meeting time was coming close. Slipping his charmed trunk over his neck, he did one more scan of the basement he had been using for the last few days. Seeing nothing left, he nodded. Giving the girls a few scritches of the ears, he left.

The streets were fairly deserted, with only a few people hurrying as they tried to get indoors before the curfew. He himself picked up the pace, hunching a bit as he pulled his hood down and cloak tighter around himself.

He was meeting Dina, Dale, and Puck down an old, disused alleyway that ended at the back of a warehouse wall. It was closer to the southwestern side of the city, and just a mile or so from the Palace. Hopefully, they can pool their resources together, and Julian may be able to meet a few other resistance members.

*It's a bit weird that they don't have more.*

His footsteps echoed as he passed the alley entrance, and his nose wrinkled a bit at the musty smell. Good for clandestine meetings, bad for one's personal hygiene.

Reaching the end, he leaned against the rotting wood of the warehouse, nearly falling over as the wood buckled. Curious, he pressed a gloved finger into the rotten material, frowning at how it bent to his touch. *This thing could fall down at any time.* He made a mental note, and he'll have to ask Dina if any squatters use the building.

"THERE HE IS!"

Jumping, Julian spun. Standing at the end of the alley was Puck, pointing at him. With him was a large group of guards, and Julian could see the bound and gagged forms of Dina and Dale in the rabble.

*Traitor!*

Several guards started advancing, with one smacking the end of his blackjack into the opposite hand. "Well, now. No place for you to go. I'd ask ya to come quietly, but, I hope you don't." A few others chuckled sinisterly.
"HA! That's what you think!"

Jumping backward, Julian slammed into and through the rotting warehouse wall, spinning on one set of toes before dashing away. His arms and legs started pumping as he dashed through the large, empty space he now found himself in. Behind him, he could hear the guards curse in surprise before making chase.

Hitting the warehouse doors, he had to shove hard to break through the rusting latch keeping them closed. As the doors started to give, the wet sound of rotting wood coming apart came with it. In seconds, one of the doors came clear off the hinge. The building groaned as he ran before the loud whine of wood, glass and metal sliding could be heard. As Julian turned a corner, he could hear the deafening crash of the building collapse.

He ran pell-mell down more streets, turning haphazardly any time he saw another group of guards. Puck must have helped in the planning of this, the guards were placed a bit too precisely for this to be just on them.

Finally, after nearly an hour of running, Julian’s luck ran out. He was in a little commons area, surrounded by row houses, and all the exits were blocked off by rows of guards going up to three deep. Each looked bloodthirsty as they held out swords, daggers, clubs, and other weapons.

Sighing in disappointment, Julian put his hands up. "Alright, you caught me! You've earned it!"

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*RRRRRRNG K-THUNK*

*RRRRRRNG K-THUNK*

*RRRRRRNG K-THUNK*

Standing in an elevator, two burly guards on either side of him, Julian felt vaguely nauseous. Upon his capture, he had been tackled, with some bastard clipping him around the head with something. His ears ringing, he was dragged to the prison housed under the Palace and booked in record time. As he was dragged further inside, more guards took potshots, and soon his nose was bleeding profusely, and his unpatched eye was swelling for the punch it got.

At the far back of the prison's upper level was a simple, rickety elevator. The engine powering it was loud, and at regular intervals let out a loud *RRRRRRNG K-THUNK* as they went down. Each sound was also accompanied by a horrid, gut-wrenching lurch. The elevator had no sides; it was a simple metal frame suspended from a cable. The shaft they went down was of bare, chiseled stone that was only a few inches larger than the elevator itself.

They went... pretty deep. Counting mentally and doing a bit of mental gymnastics, Julian figured that they were deeper than most of the sewers.

And they kept going.

He squinted as bright light hit his eye. Blinking, he did a double-take, causing one of the guards to cackle.

That...was a pretty fucking big cavern. And it was crawling with people. The prison itself was housed in a massive cave, with individual cells set up in both natural and man-made alcoves. A few tunnels could be seen, leading off to who knows where. The cells lined the cave wall for three levels,
with rickety wooden and metal walkways and stairs connecting it all. In the center of the cave was a large bonfire, which seemed to be the primary source of light. And the people-

-there was a large towns-worth in here!

*NNNNNNG CRSSSSSHHH* Julian swayed as the elevator came to an abrupt stop. Peering over, he could see that they were still a good twenty or so feet from the ground. He could see faces looking up at them, and he noticed with shock that these people were looking up from inside the ground. They had carved out a place to live from the very rock that others tread on.

"What is- whhhhHHHHHHAAAAAA!"

"ENJOY THE TRIP DOWN! GYHA HA HA!"

As the air buffeted his face, Julian's eye watered. The place where the guard had shoved him burned, and he opened his mouth to let out a scream-

THUMP!

End Notes

If y'all'er interested, you can hit me up on tumblr. My profile is classlesstulip.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!